

**London School of Economics and Political Science**

**CHILDREN AND THE BENEFITS OF GENDER EQUALITY:  
NEGOTIATING TRADITIONAL AND MODERN GENDER  
EXPECTATIONS IN A MEXICAN VILLAGE**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology  
of the London School of Economics  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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Mami i tati

## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

The transformation of traditional gender ideology has been actively promoted in Mexican society over recent decades. While adults' renegotiations of traditional ideals and their efforts to forge modern relations have received significant ethnographic attention, little is known about how children in Mexico engage with the contradictions inherent in the coexistence of old and new expectations. This thesis, based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork, explores children's readiness to resist gender divisions and embrace gender equality in the Mexican village of Metztitlán in the state of Hidalgo. The research focused on the, often contradictory, information that was made available to children at home, in the neighbourhood and in the school setting and on how children, aged between six and eleven, negotiated expectations that concerned aggressive behaviour, toy use and the division of labour. The thesis asks whether children regarded gender divisions as problematic and, if they did, whether this translated into readiness to resist traditional expectations through everyday interactions. It pays particular attention to how different kinds of audiences both influenced and were influenced by children's resistance to gender divisions. The finding is that in domains, such as toy use or the division of labour, in which egalitarian alternatives to traditional expectations were available (e.g. through schooling), most girls and boys, in conversations with the anthropologist, expressed their allegiance to gender equality. However, children did not put these attitudes to work through interactions with peers and adults unless they found personally meaningful advantages in egalitarian arrangements. When they recognised tangible benefits of equality, they not only showed readiness to resist traditional divisions themselves but also to encourage adults to do the same.

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## Maps

The village of Metztitlán highlighted on the map of Mexico



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## The state of Hidalgo



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## The municipality and the village of Metztitlán



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## Introduction

*Equality between women and men implies the elimination of all forms of discrimination in any sphere of life, resulting from belonging to either sex.*

Mexican General Law on Equality Between Women and Men, Article 6 (SRE, 2006)

The 2006 General Law on Equality Between Women and Men came as the culmination of decades of struggle for gender equality in Mexico. I arrived in the village of Metztitlán in 2008, at the end of a decade which saw an unprecedented boost to the officially endorsed efforts to challenge male dominance. Despite the widely recognised appeal of egalitarian gender arrangements among the local population, deep-seated beliefs about inherent differences between women and men and about the legitimacy of gender divisions continued to pervade villagers' daily experiences. I often witnessed situations which testified to the tensions underlying the coexistence of contradictory gender expectations.

On one occasion, Araceli, a nine-year-old girl, and Álvaro, her eight-year-old brother, were playing with dolls on the kitchen table. Their father Óscar was about to return home from working in the fields and their mother Elena was preparing a meal. The children were enacting a role play involving mother, father and two daughters. 'I want to work,' Araceli's doll, who represented the mother, informed her husband at one point. 'You cannot work! Women don't work,' Álvaro firmly declared, holding the male doll. 'You go to work, the children go to school and I stay here all alone and I get bored. All my friends work,' she protested. Álvaro picked up one of the 'daughter' dolls and, imitating the voice of a little girl, whispered in the ear of the doll who acted as her sister, 'I want my mum to work and to buy me lots of sweets.' Araceli's character did not respond as she was distracted by the start of her favourite TV show, left the dolls on the table and sat on the floor in front of the TV set. Elena and I looked at each other. We both knew that her children's playful exchange reflected their family situation. The woman smiled and concluded, 'Children. They understand everything.' Although Álvaro looked disappointed that his sister no longer wanted to play, he was perhaps comforted

by the fact that he would in any case have had to stop playing with his sister's toys before his father arrived. He occasionally played dolls with Araceli in front of their mother but his father did not like this because he believed that dolls were 'women's things' (*cosas de mujeres*).

While numerous anthropological accounts show how Mexican adults negotiate the coexistence of traditional and modern gender expectations (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Hubbell, 1993; Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Howell, 1999; Carrillo, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Castañeda and Zavella, 2003), there is surprisingly little ethnographic evidence of how children experience the emerging gender relations (Levinson, 2001). Most authors have been interested in, as Gutmann put it, the creative efforts through which adults cope with 'the gender relations they have inherited from past generations while simultaneously striving to fashion new approaches as best they can' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 10). I am concerned with how children in Metztitlán engage with the gender relations they have 'inherited from past generations' and with the 'new approaches' their parents, teachers, relatives and neighbours strive to fashion but also how children themselves tailor their own 'new approaches.'

Given the complexity of the transformation of dominant expectations and the salience of the role of younger generations in this social process, understanding the prospects of changing gender ideologies is impossible without gaining insight into the ways children engage with different gender arrangements. But the significance of children's views about gender does not merely concern their role as 'future adults' who are expected to enact the change. In this thesis, I am primarily interested in children as active participants in the construction and interpretation of their current social lives and the lives of those around them. I will explore children's attitudes towards the same question that caused the disagreement between Araceli's and Álvaro's parents: should there be a division between men's jobs and women's jobs, boys' toys and girls' toys or, more generally, male and female activities, objects and behaviours? My ethnographic account will show how the importance of challenging these divisions was transmitted through the educational agenda to children living in a deeply gendered but steadily changing sociocultural setting, and how girls and boys, aged from six to eleven, navigated the contradictions in the social expectations they were exposed to. I was especially concerned with understanding whether children regarded traditional divisions

as problematic and, if they did, whether this translated into readiness to resist traditional expectations through everyday interactions. I will seek to demonstrate that the sentence 'I want my mum to work and to buy me lots of sweets,' which was uttered by Álvaro's character during pretend play, reveals much more than the child's sweet tooth. It suggests that children may be ready to resist traditional gender norms if they find personally meaningful, tangible advantages in egalitarian arrangements.

### **Setting the scene: Metztitlán**

The village of Metztitlán (Nahuatl for the Place of the Moon) is the administrative centre (*cabecera municipal*) of the municipality of Metztitlán, in the State of Hidalgo. It is located in the valley of the same name, at 1,312 m above sea level, in the Sierra Madre Oriental mountains, some 180 km to the northeast of Mexico City and 81 km from Pachuca, the capital of Hidalgo. According to the 2010 national census, the population of the municipality is 21,623, of which 3,125 inhabitants live in my field site (INEGI, 2010). While there are a few indigenous, Náhuatl-speaking communities in the surrounding mountains, the population of the *cabecera municipal* are Spanish-speaking *mestizos*<sup>1</sup>. There is a small community of Evangelicals, popularly called *cristianos*, but the great majority of the villagers are Catholic. The most important festivities are Christmas, the day of the patron saint of Mexico the Virgin of Guadalupe (*Virgen de Guadalupe*) on December 12 and the Day of the Dead (*Día de muertos*) on October 31 and November 1, celebrated across Mexico, and local celebrations dedicated to the patron saint of Metztitlán the Virgin of the Refuge (*Virgen del Refugio*) on July 4 and the patron saint of farmers San Isidro on May 15.

Steep, cobbled streets stretch from the central *plaza* downhill towards the residential areas adjacent to agricultural fields and the bus station and uphill towards the church overlooking the village and the valley. The *plaza*, surrounded by recently renovated, colourful buildings, houses the municipality hall and a few small, rarely visited hotels. Yet, throughout the week, the centre of the village appears to be the area around the bus station. This is the terminal for all the buses and taxis departing and arriving from Mexico City and the state capital Pachuca, and the departure point of taxis

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<sup>1</sup> The term *mestizo* refers to persons of mixed European and Indian descent.

and vans for local transportation. Consequently, the road is surrounded by several shops, internet cafes, food stalls and street vendors. The proximity of the primary and secondary schools contributes to a sense of relative busyness in an otherwise calm village.

Villagers are aware that the historical prominence of Metztitlán was far greater than its current status suggests. Metztitlán was the capital of an independent political entity (*señorío* in the colonial terminology) and one of only four, along with Tlaxcalla, Tututepec and Yopitzinco, that had never been conquered by the Aztec empire in spite of being surrounded by the imperial territory (Smith, 1996). Although Metztitlán was much smaller than Tenochtitlán and its army less numerous, its main advantage was its geographic position. As Hassig (1995) explains, the mountainous sides of a relatively narrow valley limited both attackers' room for manoeuvre and the number of combatants. Thus, Metztitlán often served as a refuge for dissident nobles fleeing the Valley of Mexico (Smith, 1996).

With the advent of the Spaniards, Gonzalo de Sandoval conquered the *señorío* of Metztitlán in 1522 and the Augustinian order began its evangelisation around 1536 (PDM, 2009; Ballesteros, 2000). The material legacy of this period is reflected in the presence of three architectural sites. The *Comunidad* convent is one of the oldest structures built by the Augustinians in Mexico and is nowadays used as a prison. The so-called *Tercena*, currently abandoned, is an example of sixteenth-century civic architecture. Finally, the most emblematic of these buildings is the impressive Augustinian church of the *Santos Reyes* (The Three Kings) which, despite its turbulent history, marked by earthquakes, fire, expropriation laws and an early re-siting due to flooding, continues to overlook the village and to serve its original purpose.

The presence of the Venados river and its outlet into the Lake of Metztitlán coupled with specific geological factors contributes to the great fertility of the Valley of Metztitlán. However, the same factors that favour agricultural production in the valley also provoke recurrent floods, which are one the major problems in the area (Osborn, 1973: 218). Rainy season in Metztitlán lasts from July to October. Until the recent completion of a new bridge, the village occasionally remained isolated for days due to the overflow of the river and the lake. Inhabitants are still awaiting a solution to prevent the disastrous effects of floods on agricultural production. During my fieldwork, many

villagers recalled the 1999 flooding as the most intense they had experienced and vividly related the damage it caused to their houses, shops and fields. At the same time, Metztitlán struggles with water shortages. Households receive running water but the supply is provided only every third day. These restrictions compel villagers to store water in tanks, which is often insufficient to meet the daily needs of a family. Piped water is not used for drinking.

Among numerous agricultural products, the most important are corn, potatoes, beans, green beans, pumpkin, green chili peppers, tomatoes and courgettes. In the municipality of Metztitlán, 77.6% of land is privately owned, 16.9% is *ejido*<sup>2</sup> land and 4.5% held communally (INEGI, 2007). The area of most landholdings falls between 2 and 20 hectares. Those who are employed in agriculture are landholders, permanent workers or seasonal labourers. The municipality is well known for its agricultural production and a large percentage of the population of the village depends either directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood. Villagers are also involved in commercial activities, public services and transportation: they own or work in shops (e.g. grocery, clothes, furniture, accessories, shoes, flowers, toys, CDs, pharmacies, hairdressing, etc) and restaurants, work as teachers, nurses, administrative clerks, builders, taxi drivers and housewives. The village also has a health centre, two preschools and one nursery, one primary, one secondary and one high school, a small library, a theatre, bank, adult education office, a teachers' centre, and a petrol station. An open-air market (*tianguis*) is set up on Sundays within a five-minute walk from the bus station.

The flooding in 1999 had a severe impact on the livelihood of the people of Metztitlán, as indicated by the fact that migration to the United States and Mexico City reached 10.5% of the economically active population of Metztitlán that year (CONANP, 2003). Nonetheless, Metztitlán is classified as a region with a low level of international migration (Serrano Avilés, 2006: 56). Villagers share the perception that life in the *cabecera municipal* is more comfortable and that they are better off than most inhabitants of the other communities scattered across the municipality. Apart from a

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<sup>2</sup> The *ejido* system was implemented through land reform that resulted from the Mexican Revolution. An *ejido* is a parcel of land designated by the government to a group of peasants. Holdings of this land were granted to individual members of the community (*ejidatarios*). Landholding rights were inalienable and reverted to the community if the recipient gave it up or died without heirs (Wilkie, 1973: 192). The reform of the Article 27 in 1991 permitted the sale of *ejidal* land.

certain number of economically severely disadvantaged households and an even smaller group of wealthy families, the majority of people are said to be ‘neither rich nor poor’. Lifestyles do not differ drastically as most people usually attend the same social events, purchase their goods at the same shops and rarely have a chance to travel much further than Pachuca. There are significant differences in housing, not in building materials, which are predominantly cement, concrete and blocks, but in size and the efforts villagers make over the appearance of their dwellings. Some families live in two rooms, others share two floors. Some buildings remain unfinished for many years and their front yards are used for storing building materials; others are colourfully painted and their gardens are tended with utmost care. But, while a combination of these characteristics often reveals the owners’ economic condition, these are not always predictably correlated.

**Table of services and amenities in households across the village:**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Households with electricity                  | 97% |
| -----running water                           | 97% |
| -----electricity, running water and drainage | 92% |
| -----fridge                                  | 78% |
| -----washing machine                         | 48% |
| -----television set                          | 92% |
| -----computer                                | 21% |
| -----cell phone                              | 64% |
| -----internet                                | 11% |

National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) 2010 Census in the village of Metztitlán

Even the presence of assets such as computers or recent models of video game consoles which are not easily accessible is not necessarily a reliable indicator of differences in economic status. Some villagers can afford these products but, in many cases, they represent gifts from relatives working in the United States, part of an exchange deal or, ultimately sacrifices the family has chosen to make, usually for the sake of the children, in spite of the continuous struggle to meet basic needs. These factors apparently contribute to obscuring the external markers of economic differences between people. But villagers are accurately informed about their neighbours’ sources

of income and their actual economic situation and they are aware that, while few families are exempt from financial hardship, this hardship is not equally burdensome for all those who are ‘neither rich nor poor.’

The number of occupants in a household averages 3.67 (INEGI, 2010). In most households I visited regularly, parents and their children lived in the close vicinity of either maternal or paternal grandparents, aunts or uncles. In some cases, a widowed grandmother or a grandfather lived within the same house. Villagers often depicted children as the most important members of the household and assured me that, whatever they did, they did it for their children’s well-being. They claimed that the distribution of economic resources within a household was based on the prioritisation of the basic needs of its youngest members. In the village, the average number of children per woman is 2.39. There are 360 children, 201 females and 159 males, between the ages of six and eleven. Only 2 girls and 5 boys of these ages do not attend school (INEGI, 2010). The streets fill with children between 7.30 and 9.00 am when they go to pre-school and school, the youngest ones commonly accompanied by their mothers, and between 12 and 2.30 pm on their way back home. Some of them stop to buy sweets from street vendors or to browse toys at small shops but they usually do not dally for long. Most children younger than twelve years of age spend the rest of the day at home, watching television, studying or playing inside the house or in the front yard, or visit their mothers at work.

Out of 1,253 inhabitants who are classified as ‘economically active’, 63% are men and 37% women, while out of 1,172 ‘economically inactive’ people, 27% are men and 73% women. On average, men spend 8.46 years in schooling and women 7.95 (INEGI, 2010). Most of the women and men I interacted with regularly had completed secondary education (nine years) or high school (twelve years). The women I spent most time with engaged in commercial, teaching or administrative activities or were housewives. Men were farmworkers, sellers, teachers, drivers, builders or worked in administration. Women’s working arrangements in Metztitlán usually involve less separation from children than men’s. The women who work at shops or restaurants and whose children attend primary school can usually spend the whole afternoon with their children in the workplace. After classes, girls and boys often come to the shop or restaurant, do homework with their mothers, play with the neighbours or just sit on the

stairs and watch passers-by. If they become bored and the house is not too far, they go home to watch television or play. If the shop and the home are in the same building, children of all ages come and go freely. This usually occurs when parents own the shop and both of them are engaged in the family business. Some of these shops are equipped with television and children often spend hours watching their favourite shows or soap operas in the company of their parents. But, even if men work at the same shops as their wives, their tasks often include delivery of merchandise and require continuous movement.

In certain institutions, women who work as administrative assistants may briefly interrupt their activities in order to pick up younger children from school or pre-school and bring them to the office. Children are provided with pencils and paper or seated in front of computers while waiting for another family member to pick them up or for the mother herself to take them home at 3 or 4 pm. Primary school teachers finish work at 1.30 or 2 pm and, since their children usually attend the same school, they are able to meet them at work. However, while women usually return home immediately after finishing work and dedicate themselves to children and housework, as they proudly emphasise, men are frequently engaged in a range of activities that take them away from home for hours. A male teacher or office worker can, for instance, come home from work, eat lunch and then go out with his relatives or friends in pursuit of different commercial activities, e.g. reselling technical goods and cars or other social goals, such as visiting or hanging out with male friends. Fathers' absences from home also derive from the nature and working hours of their primary jobs, especially in construction, transportation and agriculture (women are also employed in agricultural jobs but men predominate).

During the day children spend most of the time with their mothers, but in the evening, families are usually reunited in front of their favourite soap operas, movies and other TV shows. Children look forward to Sundays when their regular weekly activities suddenly turn more dynamic. In the morning, parents usually take them to market where they walk together around stalls that serve different kinds of dishes and sell a wide variety of articles, from fresh vegetables and fruit to music CDs, movies, toys, makeup, clothes and shoes. Irrespective of whether their parents accede to requests for food or any other item, girls and boys are happy to become immersed in the busy atmosphere of

the market place, check out the prices of items they found appealing and exchange information about the latest offers with their friends. On Sunday evenings, many families head from different parts of the village, and some of them directly from Mass, towards the central *plaza*, where villagers who throughout the week engage in other activities, such as teaching or administrative work, set up food stalls. They offer tasty Mexican specialties, hot dogs, hamburgers and sweets. Children run around the plaza while their parents sit on benches or walk chatting with neighbours. Girls and boys eagerly anticipate the annual festivities such as the Carnival, the village's patronal festival, the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the pre-Christmas celebrations (*posadas*) because, on these occasions, religious celebrations are followed by lively social gatherings, involving fireworks, music, acting performances, funfairs and food stalls at the central *plaza* or in front of the church.

### **Doing research with children in Metztitlán**

I carried out fieldwork in Metztitlán between November 2008 and February 2010. I arrived in the village thanks to Elisenda, an older woman whom I met through friends from Pachuca few days after I landed in Mexico. She offered me accommodation in the house where she lived alone. She was a retired, single mother whose daughter, a successful career woman, lived with her family in the state capital. I readily accepted this arrangement but I was doubtful about whether I should stay with Elisenda throughout my fieldwork or try to rent a room in a household with children. I quickly realised that the lack of children in Elisenda's household was not necessarily a drawback. Her house was surrounded by houses where I could have easy and continuous access to numerous families with children. The kindness and openness of my neighbours made it possible for me to spend as much time with them as I wished, while the availability of separate accommodation only a few metres away allowed me not to abuse their hospitality. Moreover, due to her insatiable curiosity, sharpness and talkativeness, my landlady was an extraordinary commentator on her social reality.

Elisenda first introduced me to her relatives who lived next door. Through them, I began to establish contacts with other neighbours. Although I was interested in meeting people of all ages, my research objectives primarily concerned children. Among

adults, I intended to engage most intensely with the parents of my main informants in order to contextualise children's ideas, feelings and narratives. I expected that the idea of an adult stranger hanging out with children would not appeal to all parents so I proposed to some of my closest neighbours that I teach English to their children, and I explained that, by doing so, we could all get to know one another. Speaking English was a highly valued skill in the village and both children and their parents were excited about the prospect of free lessons. For the next couple of months, a group of about ten children gathered after school hours three times a week in my neighbour's front yard. This proved to be a useful strategy. It helped me gain the trust of my pupils and their parents and, at the same time, by word of mouth I gained access to many other villagers.

In ethnographic fieldwork, ethical concerns are closely linked to the application of the anthropologist's methodological tools, since failure to adequately address the ethical dilemmas which may arise from the interactions with potential or actual informants could not only thwart one's plan to conduct ethically-informed research, but endanger the research itself. The most salient ethical issues I identified during my stay in Metztitlán concerned: dealing with adults' anxiety over a stranger's access to their children; obtaining children's consent to participate in my research; building a non-hierarchical relationship with children used to viewing adults as in a position of authority; and complying with the local gender expectations concerning cross-gender relationships.

Many months into my fieldwork, some women I had become good friends with confessed that they were suspicious when they first heard of my presence in the village and worried that I might steal their children. I could understand parents' concerns and greatly appreciated their eventual trust, as I wondered whether I myself would have been even remotely so generous with a researcher interested in my life and the life of my, at that time still unborn, child as they had been with me. Although I learnt about adults' anxiety once their doubts had already been dispelled, I had anticipated this kind of tensions and sought to alleviate them as much as possible. I readily responded to both adults' and children's questions about my personal circumstances, showed them pictures of my family and videos of my home country on the internet. One of the rules I set for myself, despite the fact that no parent had made that kind of request, was that I would avoid inviting children to my house. In this way, I sought to keep our interactions as

transparent as possible. Since the children of the ages I worked with usually stayed at home after school, the only way to interact with them in the afternoon was by visiting their homes. I waited until our relationships were consolidated before I felt confident enough to ask the parents of my closest informants for permission to take a walk with the children to the central *plaza* or to the church. These opportunities allowed me to appreciate to what extent the parents' presence within the same room or within the household affected the information I elicited in the domestic setting.

But I was aware that gaining access to children did not simply involve adults allowing me into their homes. It was clear that whether I would be able to conduct research in a particular household or not depended upon whether both children and adults would show interest in my project. In the initial phase of fieldwork, I met children through the contacts with their parents and none of those girls and boys refused to contribute to my research. However, when, at a later stage, I attempted to establish contacts with the parents of some children with whom I interacted intensely in school and who enthusiastically invited me to meet their families, a couple of them did not seem keen on allowing me into their homes or maintaining contact with me. Although 'they never expressly formulated their lack of interest or, perhaps, trust, they remained reserved and appeared uncomfortable so I stopped visiting them after a few encounters and continued to engage with their children in the school setting.

Seeking to understand children's everyday experiences as closely as possible, I was keen to gain access to all the social spaces they inhabited. After I explained to the principal that I intended to observe and interview children and teachers in order to learn what children were taught about gender and how they negotiated gender relations, he generously welcomed me to the school without reservations or specific requests. I explained to children that I aimed to explore how they 'make friends, what games they play, what they talk about, how they have fun, what makes them angry or sad,' so I would be able to write 'a book about the lives of girls and boys in Metztitlán.' When I started visiting the school, many teachers and the principal referred to me as '*maestra*' (teacher). They were unaware of the teaching activities I had conducted among my close neighbours so this label did not derive from that experience. They simply seemed to believe that this was the easiest way to help children make sense of an outsider adult's continuous presence in the classroom and in the school playground. The legitimacy of

attaching this title to me was further reinforced by the fact that the staff and I agreed that I would occasionally assist them during the regular English language sessions planned for the fifth- and sixth-graders. This was a rather informal assignment and I was free to manage the frequency of my participation in accordance with my research duties. On the one hand, I was happy to see the excitement this arrangement provoked in many children as some of them ran after me across the school playground reminding me when they were scheduled to have an English class or urging me to come to teach them more often. On the other hand, during the first few weeks I was concerned that the label 'teacher,' my engagement in the classroom and my close contact with the teachers might put my research position at risk. I feared that in the eyes of the children I might become excessively associated and, eventually, identified with the teachers, which would have threatened the kind of relationship I aspired to develop with them as a researcher.

In order to avoid this, I only occasionally gave classes and, when I did, I selected activities which stimulated learning through games and other forms of entertainment. Even more importantly, I hoped that the way I interacted with them outside the classroom would lead them to perceive me as a trustworthy interlocutor to whom they could freely express their thoughts and feelings. A few weeks later, I felt relieved to observe that the children treated me equally irrespective of whether I taught their class English or not, and to notice that they had started to call me 'Zorana.' Children appeared to be intrigued by the fact that an adult actively sought out their opinions and seriously engaged with their comments. I explained to them that there were neither 'right' nor 'wrong' answers to my questions and that whatever they had to say was valuable and might prove to be important for my research. They suddenly realised that the roles most of them were accustomed to in their relationships with adults switched and many of them enjoyed being in the position where they were the ones who *knew* and the adult the one who was eager to *learn*.

Children seemed to show their appreciation of this arrangement by granting me a special status. While in front of their teachers boys and girls were careful not to hit, push or insult one another, in front of me they freely engaged in this kind of behaviour. When a newcomer once expressed his concern that I might tell the teacher that they were shouting in the classroom while she was away, another boy harshly responded: 'No! She is not like that!' But my status did not differ only from that of the teachers.

When a child whispered in my ear that she would tell me something confidential once 'the adults' left the room or a boy pulled me to one side and explained that he did not want 'the women' to hear him, I felt confident that they, at least in part, downplayed the relevance of my age and gender. I had equal access to both boys and girls and interacted as intensely and frequently with one sex as with the other. However, I was occasionally reminded that this apparently special status did not imply that I was perceived as one of the children. 'Zorana, come to separate them!' someone would shout during a break, urging me to stop a fight that was becoming too serious.

At the same time, my gender proved to be quite salient in my relationships with adults. Compliance with the local dynamics of cross-gender relationships gave rise to the fact that, although I often talked to men, women were my main adult informants. In this way, I built stronger and more intimate relationships with women, I knew much more about their ideas, feelings and experiences and I collected more information about children through mothers than through fathers. But there was another issue prompted by this differential access to men and women. I was aware of the possibility that villagers' perceptions of my sociocultural background might have led them to produce in my presence the kinds of gender narratives which were compatible with the ideals they anticipated I could identify with more easily. I was not surprised to find that the more I interacted with an informant, the less I felt the threat of this bias and the less I had a sense that anyone was trying to 'impress me' (see Hirsch, 2003: 160). Consequently, since I had far less contact with men than with women, I was concerned that this might skew the information I obtained from them. Seeking to learn how children's parents negotiated their gender relations, one of the themes that most vividly captured my attention was how they dealt with the division of labour.

When exploring adults' occupational roles, for example, I could not be sure whether it was a simple coincidence that I had never come across a man who claimed that a woman should not contribute to the economic provision of the family and should limit herself to her traditional role of mother and housewife, or whether some men intentionally downplayed their traditional views in front of me. In my male informants' testimonies, the attitudes that were seen as less socially desirable according to the newly promoted ideal of gender equality always appeared to be 'somewhere else': either in my informant's personal past (e.g. 'I used to be like that but I have changed') or in other

men (e.g. ‘There are men like that but I am not one of them.’) However, as I will stress in Chapter Two, I came to recognise that the impact of the differences in the relationships I maintained with women and men and in their perceptions of me should not be interpreted in terms of whether their testimonies were equally genuine. Instead, they should serve to acknowledge the importance of using, as Hirsch put it, ‘a more appropriate critical lens’ for making sense of their words (2003: 160).

This thesis will pay particular attention to villagers’ concerns about the exposure of their acts to the public gaze. I was expressly told, on various occasions, that people in the village trusted me because I did not go around recounting what others told me. I am aware that some villagers understand English and that they are interested in reading this dissertation. Seeking to meet my informants’ expectation that other villagers will not become familiar with their accounts and experiences, I have changed the names of all the persons I refer to in this thesis and modified certain information that might render them easily identifiable while attempting not to distort the family circumstances that the reader may find relevant for contextualising their behaviour.

The fieldwork was based on participant observation. The specific methodological tools I used depended on the kind of relationship I had with particular informants. The possibility to spend time with children in their homes and at the school contributed to defining three groups of child informants. The first consisted of seventeen main informants with whom I interacted at the school and whose families I regularly visited and had a close relationship with. With them I elicited information by observing and participating in their daily routines at home and through interviews, short essays, drawings, role play, puppets, reactions to hypothetical scenarios, child-led photographs and tape-recording and activities with visual materials. In the second group were eight children with whom I interacted at the school and whose families I occasionally visited. In this case, I mostly relied upon participant observation and more frequently upon interviews, role play, reactions to hypothetical scenarios, and activities with picture cards; I was able to observe their behaviour more regularly in the school setting than at their homes. The third group was made up of an unspecified number of primary school pupils whom I observed in the school playground and in the classrooms and with whom I held individual and group interviews, and administered questionnaires.

I usually spent more time in my main informants’ homes than in my landlady’s

house. We talked, watched *telenovelas*, played football with their fathers, prepared and ate meals, did homework, danced at family *fiestas*, attended family friends' birthdays and baptisms, or went out to buy sweets or take a walk. Their mothers and I frequently met on our own and they shared their most intimate secrets with me. I could easily contextualise the references these children made to their families because I was informed about their family affairs and had access even to details the children were unaware of. I had direct knowledge of the family arrangements of the second group of informants but it was not as detailed or intimate as in the case of my main informants. With regard to access to information about children's family background and current situation, the third group of informants was inevitably heterogeneous. I knew little about many of the children whom I randomly talked to on some occasion in the school playground, but had a chance to learn something about them through comments made by their peers, teachers or neighbours.

In the school setting, I observed children in classes and in the school playground. There were approximately 450 pupils in the school, with three classes per grade and an average of 25 pupils per class. In each grade, I regularly visited one of the three classes (e.g. IIIa, IIIb, IIIc; my choice was usually based on the presence of my main informants or my relationship with the teacher) and occasionally other classes. During the break, I would sit on the staircase writing my notes or recording with a camera, walk around the playground or eat at the canteen with children and teachers. Surrounded by hundreds of children, I usually did not need to search for interlocutors. Boys and girls of different ages spontaneously approached me with different kinds of inquiries or comments. I often used these unplanned encounters to relate children's remarks to my research questions. While on some occasions I spent my time at the school engaging in informal conversations with a wide range of children, on others I had a carefully designed research plan for a particular day, which might involve semi-structured or structured individual or group interviews with specific pupils. Teachers were exceptionally cooperative. When I wanted to interview all the students from one class individually or small groups of children from different grades or classes, teachers let me know which time of the day would be most convenient and allowed me to take children out of the class for brief conversations. This was very useful as it gave me an opportunity to obtain some more systematic data through a large sample of individual interviews across the

same and different ages, which would have been difficult to accomplish during the break. In addition, these out-of-class conversations enabled me to observe the dynamics of the discussion groups I formed taking into account the peculiarities of the personal background of each of the participants.

Whether we interacted in a domestic or school context, there were significant differences in the way children responded to my inquiries. Not all of them had the same attention span, were equally talkative or showed the same interest in my questions. However, the absence of time constraints and a more relaxed atmosphere at home stimulated even the most reserved ones to actively engage with my project and provide valuable insights. While at the school I mostly observed children's interactions (and occasionally participated in their games and classes) and interviewed them, at home I elicited the information I was interested in through a wider range of activities. Children experimented with my research tools by using my camera or my voice recorder to take pictures of their family members and to interview one another or even me. At my request or their own initiative, they improvised TV or radio shows and acted out role plays simulating *telenovelas*. They drew what I proposed or gave me drawings they had made on their own initiative. They wrote short essays about the topics I suggested, such as friendship, family, happiness or sadness, or ones they freely chose. I designed activities with picture cards and asked them to respond to questions and make comments related to the pictures. I presented them with hypothetical scenarios and encouraged them to think about them and make choices about the preferred or expected outcomes. Since leaving my field site, I have kept in touch with many children and adults through phone conversations and texts, social networks and Skype.

The benefits of long-term participant observation were of central importance for accomplishing my research goals since I was not only interested in children's attitudes towards traditional and egalitarian gender arrangements but, even more importantly, in how these translated into action through their daily encounters. This methodological approach allowed me to observe children's everyday interactions with peers and adults and to appreciate how the presence of their family members, friends or neighbours influenced what they said and did. Building intimate relationships with children and their parents over one year also made it possible for me to contextualise their behaviour by recognising how particular actions related to what I knew about their life experiences

or about their preferences, interests and priorities. Even when I did not have the opportunity to witness certain interactions, the relationship we had come to develop seemed to encourage them to share with me details of some intimate exchanges between, for example, mothers and children that provided invaluable insights into children's readiness to resist traditional gender expectations.

### **Outline of the thesis**

Chapter One will put into historical perspective the ongoing disputes over traditional and modern gender ideals<sup>3</sup>. I will show that the construction of Mexican national identity has been intertwined with the concept of modernity and that the reform of gender ideology has played an important role in the process of modernisation of Mexican society. I will pay particular attention to how the most recent educational reforms countered a long-standing tradition of gender essentialism, deeply rooted in both state policies and popular narratives. In Chapter Two, I will introduce my main conceptual tools and through a review of ethnographic literature show how, by putting these instruments to work, this thesis contributes to the research about gender relations among Mexicans, gender relations among children and gender relations among Mexican children.

The following six chapters focus on the perspectives and experiences of the villagers of Metztitlán which I came to identify as most salient to their understanding of gender relations. These are structured as three thematic units: differences between girls and boys in displaying and coping with aggressive behaviour; use of toys and the division of labour. Each of these thematic units is divided into two chapters. The three main Chapters Four, Six and Eight focus on children, while the chapters preceding each of them deal with the information that is made available to children through adults at home and at school. The distinction between main chapters and their introductory chapters reflects the fact that I do not seek to understand the same issues through the

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<sup>3</sup> The terms 'modern' and 'traditional' must 'be read in quotation marks' although I will leave them out in order to simplify the text (García Canelini, 1993: 27). García Canelini rightly remarks that the traditional 'comes into being through opposition to *modernity*' (1993: 27). But I would add that the same goes for the modern as the two concepts are mutually constitutive.

lens of adults, on the one hand, and children, on the other. While my primary goal is to explore how children in Metztitlán negotiated gender relations and how some of them came to resist traditional expectations, paying attention to adults allows me to contextualise and more fully understand children's experiences. This structure is not based on the traditional accounts of socialisation which 'positioned children as the relatively passive recipients rather than the initiators of social action' (James and James, 2012: 74) but on the acknowledgement that children are social actors who simultaneously influence and are influenced by their social environment.

In Chapters Three and Four, by examining villagers' expectations related to displaying and coping with aggression, I will show that, in the absence of alternative discourses about 'rough and tough' boys and 'calm and delicate' girls, children were supportive of the enforcement of this traditionally upheld distinction. In spite of this, those who felt uncomfortable with the constraints and injustices this differentiation gave rise to occasionally resisted traditional norms. The main difference between the issues I deal with in Chapters Three and Four and the rest of the thesis is that, in Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, I address gender divisions that were actively contested through the promotion of egalitarian alternatives. In Chapters Five and Six, I will show that, in the face of the coexistence of traditional and modern ideals about the use of toys, many children expressed their support for gender equality. However, these attitudes were not put to work through resistance to traditional divisions in everyday interactions with peers and adults unless children found personally meaningful advantages in egalitarian arrangements. In Chapters Seven and Eight, I will explore the ambiguities underlying traditional and modern ideals about the division of labour and show that tangible advantages of change could drive children not only to resist traditional expectations about the allocation of tasks in which they were engaged themselves but also to encourage adults to resist their own traditional arrangements. In all the ethnographic chapters, I will be careful to point out the relevance of those to whom these challenges to traditional expectations were exposed or from whom they were hidden, and examine how different kinds of audiences affected and were affected by the acts of resistance.

## Chapter One

### **Gender and modernity in Mexico**

In this chapter, by briefly examining how academic debates have contributed to understanding the processes of changing gender relations, I set the scene for a historical overview of the ways in which Mexican society has engaged with gender in its quest for modernity. Different accounts reveal that disputes over women's status in Mexico, from the late colonial period until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shared a common basis: both those who defended and those who contested the legitimacy of efforts to change women's conditions assumed the existence of essential differences between the sexes. Throughout this period, the discrepancies between what were seen as modern and traditional gender roles stemmed from different interpretations of these presumably natural predispositions. The educational agenda reveals that the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a shift from the officially endorsed promotion of gender essentialism towards de-essentialisation of gender. This review, which shows how these ideas have been advocated, enforced, questioned, resisted and discussed in Mexico, will give me valuable insights into the evolution of the ambiguities and contradictions in gender expectations and arrangements that riddled the social reality of children in Metztitlán, and which I will explore in Chapters Three-Eight.

### **Change and changeability**

In the climate of intense civil rights activism, the idea that politics and knowledge were closely intertwined (Di Leonardo, 1991: 3) became increasingly influential in academic debates in the West. Inspired by this conviction, feminist scholars sought to contribute to dismantling gender inequalities by challenging the idea that psychological, behavioural and social distinctions between men and women were biologically determined. Across a wide range of social disciplines, the term 'gender' was adopted in

an effort to ‘free our thinking from the constrictions of naturalness and biological inevitability attached to the concept of sex’ (Marx Ferree et al., 1999: 4; De Barbieri, 1992) and avoid the conflation of the biological (sex) with the socially constructed (gender). The interest in cross-cultural research and its reliance on long-term ethnographic fieldwork rendered anthropology particularly well equipped for supporting the feminist cause by demonstrating the variability of gender roles and, consequently, by exposing their changeability.

Feminist anthropologists denounced the muteness of women, both as ethnographers and informants, and the ‘male bias’ underlying anthropological accounts (Ardener, 1972; Reiter, 1975), and argued for rethinking the conceptual tools and analytical frameworks of the discipline (Moore, 1988: 4). Scholars set out to account for the origins of what they recognised as the universality of women’s subordination and, since they dismissed the idea that gender inequalities were biologically determined, they sought to identify their social roots. Ortner claimed that, in every culture, women are symbolically associated with nature and men with culture. This had important implications because, as she noted, culture as universally seen as superior to nature as it is under most circumstances able to control, transcend and exploit natural conditions (Ortner, 1974: 73). She was careful to stress that women are not actually closer to nature but that they are merely ‘seen as closer to nature’ and attributed this perception primarily to the ‘body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone’ (1974: 73). According to Ortner, a woman’s physiology involves her in the process of natural creation ‘from within her own being’ (1974: 77), places her within the domestic arena as a homemaker and caregiver and through the combination of these two determines her different psychic structure (1974: 73-74; see also Chodorow, 1974).

Rosaldo proposed another dichotomy. She linked the cultural meanings attached to men and women to the structural organisation of their activities. She claimed that men are universally identified with the public and women with the domestic sphere and that the former is perceived as dominating over the latter. Similarly to Ortner, she invoked the importance of women’s ‘nurturant capacities’ (1974: 24) for the construction of this opposition. While Ortner’s and Rosaldo’s proposals provided a powerful analytical framework for future research, their arguments were strongly challenged on various grounds. Anthropologists used ethnographic evidence from

diverse sociocultural settings to demonstrate that these dichotomies and their associations with women and men are historically and culturally far more variable than Ortner and Rosaldo suggested (Reiter, 1975; Leacock, 1978; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980; Strathern 1981, 1984; Harris, 1980; Rosaldo, 1980; Harris and Young, 1981; Collier and Rosaldo, 1981; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Moore, 1988; Di Leonardo, 1991). They also criticised the efforts made in other disciplines to articulate the universal identification of women with the domestic sphere through the distinction between ‘reproduction’ and ‘production’ (Harris and Young, 1981; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987). As Collier and Yanagisako argued, ‘nature/culture’, ‘domestic/public’ and ‘reproduction/production’ are ‘variations of an analytical dichotomy’ that takes for granted what needs to be explained (1987: 20). Rosaldo herself admitted a few years after formulating her initial contention that looking for presumably given differences between women and men obscures how these differences are actually created through gender relations in specific contexts (1980: 401).

Seeking to understand how these relations are negotiated and transformed over time, anthropologists have exposed the social constructedness of concepts such as ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘kinship’, ‘family’ or ‘motherhood’ (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Moore, 1988; Martin, 1991; Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995; Weston, 1997) but have also questioned ethnocentric definitions of agency, resistance and change (Di Leonardo, 1991; Mahmood, 2011). By exploring the impact of social, economic and political transformations, they have shown how men and women renegotiate their relations while making sense of contradictions inherent in the coexistence of different meanings, expectations and arrangements and responding to the demands of their changing social realities (Ong, 1987; Ginsburg and Tsing, 1992; Clark, 1999; Gutmann, 2006 [1996], 1998, 2003; Hirsch, 2003). It has been demonstrated how through resistance to traditional gender ideals people become enmeshed in new power relations (Abu Lughod, 1990) and how gender intersects with class, ethnic and racial distinctions and serves as a powerful vehicle for articulating social change (Sacks, 1989; Stoler, 2002; Goddard, 2000).

In Rubin’s most widely cited essay, where she argues that sex/gender systems are ‘products of historical human activity’, she admits that she dreams of an ‘androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant

to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love' (Rubin, 1975: 102). Ortner argues that societies should aspire to aligning both men and women with culture and suggested that this was possible only by simultaneously changing social institutions and cultural beliefs. Rosaldo suggests that egalitarian relations can be fostered universally through the minimisation of the public/domestic divide and its dissociation from sexual ascriptions (1974: 42). Yet anthropologists have shown more interest in collecting ethnographic evidence and analytically engaging with the ways people in specific contexts comply with, enforce, resist and subvert gender divisions and inequalities relevant to their everyday experiences than in theorising about the ultimate goals of an abstract, universally valid, project of gender reform. At the same time, influential sociologists have paid significant attention to discussing whether, in order to dismantle gender inequalities, people need to strive for dismantling gender differentiation overall.

Lorber claims that people are divided in two groups and made to be different in emotions, attitudes and behaviour from the earliest age through socialisation and peer pressure and through gendered work and family roles in adulthood and that this very division into two categories undergirds the persistence of gender inequalities (2000: 82). She advocates the strategy of 'degendering' and sets 'the long-term goal of doing away with binary gender divisions altogether' (2000: 79) as she believes that genuine equality between men and women can be achieved only through 'nongendered society' (1986), 'genderless restructuring' (1986), 'the end of gender' (2000) or 'a world without gender' (2005). Connell agrees that 'to argue that the current gender order should be changed is to claim that it does more harm than good' (2009: 143) but she does not support the idea that 'gender harm' is unavoidable (Connell, 2009: 144). Connell recognises that the harm of the current gender order is primarily in 'the system of inequality in which women and girls are exploited, discredited and made vulnerable to abuse and attack' and that men themselves are harmed because they 'would be safer not fighting, would be healthier without competitive stress, and would have a better life with improved relations with women and children' (2009: 143). But she also notes that

*if gender in these respects is harmful, it is in other respects a source of pleasure, creativity and other things we greatly value. Gender organises*

*our sexual relationships, which are sources of personal delight and growth, and our relations with children, which are sources of cultural delight and growth. Gender is integral to the cultural riches of most regions in the world, from Noh plays to reggae and hiphop. It is difficult to imagine Shakespeare's plays, Homer's Iliad, Joyce's Ulysses, Rumi's poetry, the Ramayana, or Bergman's films, without gender. The joys, tensions and complications of gender relations are among the most potent sources of cultural creation.* (2009: 143)

While Connell admits that in many practical situations (for instance, those affected by anti-discrimination laws) 'degendering' is an efficient tactic, she argues for 'gender democratisation' rather than 'gender abolition' because this strategy allows for the preservation of what she defines as 'gender good' (2009: 146). She explains that gender democratisation 'connects the logic of gender reform with the ideals and practices of democratic struggle in other spheres of life' (2009: 146). Lorber and Connell disagree over the advantages of preserving gender. Yet, like feminist anthropologists, they challenge the idea of essential differences between men and women. This standpoint contrasts with the arguments advanced by various feminist thinkers who embrace the concept of female essence to demonstrate its potential to transform a male-dominated gender order (Rich, 1986; Daly, 1990). Gender difference or women-centred feminist theories reject liberal and Marxist feminists' bid for equality based on the universality of *human* nature (Beasley, 2005) and seek to reappropriate the concept of female nature or female essence 'in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes' (Alcoff, 1988: 408). However, it has been argued that merely reinterpreting what was traditionally seen as female essence in affirmative terms is problematic as it ignores the possibility that the presumed female attributes actually represent a response to oppressive and restrictive historical conditions rather than inherent inclinations (Alcoff, 1988; Amorós, 1994).

In a controversial article about gender in Latin America, Stevens explores the empowering potential of the contested notion of *marianismo*<sup>4</sup> and defines this 'cult of

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<sup>4</sup>*Marianismo* is a term coined in social sciences to refer to the idealisation of female virtues associated with the Virgin Mary among Catholics in Latin America.

feminine spiritual superiority', grounded in motherhood, as 'the other face of machismo' and 'female chauvinism' (1973: 100). In contrast to gender difference theorists, she sees gender essentialism as an obstacle to breaking away from the patriarchal regime as she attributes women's conformity with traditional arrangements to the sense of empowerment women derived from what they perceived as female essence. In his article 'What comes after patriarchy?', Stern refers to the emerging gender arrangements that continue to be grounded in essentialist beliefs as 'the transition from a patriarchal regime of hierarchical complementarity, to a regime of discriminatory and stigmatized competition among the genders' (Stern, 1998: 61).

Over recent decades, various Mexican intellectuals have called for the change of patriarchal ideals by challenging the long-standing legacy of essentialist thinking about gender. While Lagarde rejects the vision of femininity as natural and timeless, she stresses that all women 'share the same historical condition' (1990: 34-35) and that this 'same historical condition' should inspire the emergence of 'sorority' among women, which coupled with 'solidarity' between women and men, should aspire to change the patriarchal gender order (Lagarde, 2012: 34). 'The essence of femininity does not exist' (1988: 260), the famous Mexican writer and feminist Rosario Castellanos argues in a provocatively entitled article 'Self-sacrifice is a mad virtue' (*La abnegación: una virtud loca*), first published in 1971. While questioning the validity of the most salient local attribute of female essence, she goes on to suggest that Mexican women should not complain about gender inequalities because they themselves are to blame for not taking advantage of the legal provisions that grant equal status to women and men (Castellanos, 1988: 263). Although Lamas does not share Castellanos's conviction that gender inequalities persist primarily because women 'refuse to accept' egalitarian legal provisions, she also argues that the idea of men and women should be '*deseencializada*' (de-essentialised) (1995: 62).

The call for de-essentialisation of gender has been gaining increasing relevance over the last few decades in the international agenda but it has been strongly disputed by studies, conducted mainly in the field of cognitive science, which seek to demonstrate that the differences between men and women are 'more than genitalia-deep' (Pinker, 2003: 184). In support of this claim, Pinker notes that in 'all cultures' men, for example, hold more control of the public domain than women, are more prone to violence and

more likely to trade favours for sex (2003: 345). Baron-Cohen argues that the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy and the male brain for understanding and building systems (2003: 1). The resurgence of scholarly interest in essential differences between men and women has provoked great upheaval both in academic circles and in the media, so Baron-Cohen and Hammer are eager to clarify their position:

*The sexes differ biologically. This much is uncontroversial. But the statement “the sexes differ psychologically” has weathered considerable controversy. This is without doubt because the scientific question (“do the sexes differ psychologically?”) has been repeatedly confused with the political question (“should the sexes be treated as equals?”). We are clearly in favour of the two sexes being treated as equals as regards their political rights, but we wish to separate this from the scientific question, which is an empirical issue. After decades of research in this area, some sex differences at the psychological level are repeatedly found. Small but significant statistical differences persist on specific psychological tests, between males and females. Note in advance that these differences are not true of every male or female. Far from it. The differences only emerge when group means are compared. (1997: 3)*

Along the same lines, Pinker argues that equality is ‘not the empirical claim that all groups of humans are interchangeable; it is the moral principle that individuals should not be judged or constrained by the average properties of their group’ (2003: 340). The conclusions of these inquiries not only challenge the call for de-essentialisation of gender but also undermine the legitimacy of framing the debate about the abolition and preservation of gender, which I referred to above, as an ideological issue. The arguments of these cognitive scientists seem to suggest that the preservation of gender is not a matter of preserving ‘cultural riches’ (Connell, 2009: 143) but a biologically determined inevitability.

In spite of these authors’ efforts to show that the notion of essential gender differences is not at odds with the ideal of equality, these kinds of claims have been

harshly criticised (Segal 1999; Greene, 2004; Walter, 2010; Fine, 2010). The opposition to the idea that gender differences are biologically determined is primarily grounded in the argument that this contention justifies the status quo by legitimising gender stereotypes (Fine, 2010) and by telling us that ‘genes and hormones inexorably drive us towards traditional sex roles’ (Walter, 2010: 14). Greene warns us that, although writers such as Pinker and Baron-Cohen, in contrast to the ‘unabashed sexism of 19th and 20th centuries’, couch their pronouncements on males and females in terms of differences rather than deficiencies, this is merely a strategy that serves to disguise the sexism of their claims (2004: 434). She urges feminists to engage with these new variants of biological thinking so they could contribute to dismantling its outworn premises, used in the service of ‘regressive ideologies’ (2004: 434). And while feminists define those who seek to demonstrate the existence of essential differences as ‘new sexists dusting off old theories’ (Walter, 27/04/2010), Baron-Cohen refers to the contention that differences between men and women are wholly culturally constructed as an ‘old idea’ (2003: 15).

The essentialism found in Mexican popular narratives and historical records of state policies represents a double threat to the de-essentialisation promoted by many contemporary intellectuals if compared to the essentialism Pinker refers to. The popular idea of essences concerns not only ‘average’ but also ‘ideal properties’ of a particular group so it inevitably involves the moral principle that individuals *should* be judged or constrained by the properties of their group. In spite of numerous efforts to redefine local expectations about male and female attributes, duties and privileges through state initiatives, this conflation of beliefs about what men and women are like and what they should be like persists.

### **History, state and gender essentialism**

Since gender is a fundamental category of social organisation and a means for structuring social relations (Molyneux, 2000: 38), it is not surprising that both differences between sexes and the impact of these differences are carefully defined and strictly regulated not only through local moralities but also through state policies. Molyneux defines the state as ‘a set of coercive and administrative institutions that have as their object the exercise of various forms of power’ (2000: 37). However, as Varley

notes, rather than institutions, theorists increasingly emphasise ‘practice and discourse’ (2000: 238). The state can be seen as ‘a diverse set of discursive arenas’ (Pringle and Watson, 1992: 70) through which different social groups with varying degrees of power struggle to promote their policy agendas (Vaughan, 2000: 195). Gleaning from the colonial records, scholars argue that the colonial state in Latin America was concerned with preserving and reproducing ‘gender and ethnic inequalities as part of the system of rule’ (Molyneux, 2000: 39). Putting to work these mechanisms was justified through ‘discursive arenas’ which invoked the notion of inherent differences between men and women or, as some authors put it, differences between male and female essence or nature.

In his study of gender in late colonial Mexico, Stern explains that women were seen as prone to moral inconstancy which easily fit in with the conviction that they could not be autonomous social actors but that they needed to be controlled and disciplined by men (1997: 115). Nevertheless, in spite of the 19th century liberals’ depictions of the colonial period in Latin America as Dark Ages for women (Arrom, 1985), modern historians refer to this idea as ‘the myth of women without rights’ and claim that, although male prerogatives in the colonial society were pervasive, women’s legal subordination has been overstated (Dore, 2000: 10-11). Historical accounts from Mexico have shown that, far from being discouraged, women in the late colonial period were urged to contribute to bringing about social change (Arrom, 1985). But, while Bourbon officials promoted women’s education because they considered female cooperation fundamental to the prosperity of the colonies, they had never aspired to equate the status of men and women. Indeed, the ideal of social reform, developed under the influence of the Enlightenment, was inspired by the acknowledgement of the inevitability of differences as it demanded the transformation of values instilled in future generations by exalting the civic function of motherhood (Arrom, 1985; Stern 1997). Enlightened reformers opposed the conservative conviction that women were not capable of learning but they still considered that female education should be limited to enhancing their propensities to become ‘responsible mothers, thrifty housewives, and useful companions for men’ (Arrom, 1985: 16; Boyer, 2001).

The idealisation of motherhood is grounded in the cult of the Mexican patron saint, Virgin of Guadalupe. According to the myth, in 1531, ten years after the Spanish

Conquest of Tenochtitlán, the Virgin appeared to a Christianised Indian called Juan Diego and addressed him in Náhuatl (Wolf, 1958: 34). The Virgin of Guadalupe represents a new incarnation of the pre-Hispanic deity Tonantzin and her appearance is interpreted as bringing comfort to the Indians after a period of total disruption through the idea of maternal love and care (Poole, 1995: 5). Alonso explains that, since colonial times, the Virgin has become a symbol of 'the ideal type of femininity' (1995: 137). She notes that this ideal implies that a woman embodies a paradox of being both virgin and mother and argues that motherhood is seen as the fulfilment of female 'nature' while the lack of maternal instincts and virtues as a sign of a 'denaturalised woman' (*mujer desnaturalizada*) (Alonso, 1995: 85).

The centrality of the maternal role to female identity reinforced the association of women with the household. Although after Independence in 1821 the position of women did not change as much as reformers hoped and their participation in extra-domestic activities was more limited than that of their counterparts in Western Europe and the United States, Arrom claims that women gained new respect, including self-respect, which contributed to the improvement of their social position (1985: 266). Even so, women's status was still marked by the insistence on their otherness within a male-dominated society. Chassen-López found that, in 19th-century Mexico, women were reputed to be 'more religious, spiritually and morally superior, family and community oriented, not to mention irrational, childlike, dependent, and close to nature' (2008: 420). These beliefs sustained the structures of patriarchal rule which remained mostly unchallenged until the late 19th century (Molyneux, 2000). Researchers have shown how, as a series of civil wars and foreign invasions followed War of Independence, women were compelled to fend for themselves independently of men (Wasserman, 2000) but also how their role in the warfare was trivialised and men's entitlement to the rewards of conflict intensified (Mallon, 1995). Historians agree that, while industrialisation and urbanisation opened up new opportunities for women, political, legal, economic and social inequalities persisted (Chassen-López, 1994; Fowler-Salamini, 1994; Wasserman, 2000; Molyneux, 2000) and even widened as a result of large-scale privatisation of land and the secularisation of society (Mallon, 1994, 1995; Kanter, 1995, 2008; Dore, 2000).

The perceived relaxation of public morals during the socioeconomic

transformation of the country under the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) provoked heightened concerns about the social order. Reforming gender relations was, once again, seen as instrumental to conducting a moral reform of society (French, 1992: 529). In the light of historical accounts about the influence of the Enlightenment on colonial society (Arrom, 1985; Stern, 1997; Boyer, 2001), it becomes clear that the bourgeois ideal of ‘educated mothers and guardian angels of the home’ represented the renewal of the aspirations of enlightened reformers rather than ‘a new cult of female domesticity’ (French, 1992: 529). Similarly, the foundation of women’s movements in the late 19th century Latin America was not so much about the emergence of unprecedented ideas as it was about organising and lending group support to the efforts that had been previously articulated through individual initiatives (Díaz, 2004; Chassen-López, 2008; González Jiménez, 2009). The term ‘feminism’ emerged by the end of the 19th and became of common usage at the beginning of the 20th century in journals dedicated to the intellectual elite in Mexico City. In these circles, feminist ideas were seen as an expression of the liberal thought which called for dignifying woman’s role as wife and mother and expanding her individual autonomy through access to secular and rational education (Cano, 1996: 345). However, Foppa and De Aguilar note that, at the turn of the century, Mexican women were not familiar with feminist language (1979: 192).

The Mexican Revolution marked a milestone in the mobilisation of women. They actively participated in the Revolution from the outset as organisers, nurses, spies, journalists and soldiers (Deutsch, 1991). The feminist movement received official backing at the first feminist national congress held in Yucatán in 1916 (Deutsch, 1991: 263). The birth of the suffragist movement after the congress (Foppa and De Aguilar, 1979: 193) represented only one of the currents within ‘multiple feminisms’ in Mexico, which shared the goal of improving women’s status (Schell, 2007: 206). Efforts by these organisations to promote women’s agenda in the post-revolutionary period relied upon the idea of ‘revolution’s debt to women’ for their contribution in and out of the battlefield (Olcott, 2005; Fernández Aceves, 2006a). However, while most authors admit that post-revolutionary governments implemented various reforms that were intended to reduce gender inequalities (Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan, 1994; Vaughan, 1997; Olcott, 2005; Vaughan and Lewis, 2006), they often seek to explain how the revolution, perceived as a ‘masculine affair’ (Molyneux, 2000: 51), not only did not

immediately benefit women but that ‘the revolutionary obsession with virility’ reinforced machismo (Varley, 2000: 239; O’Malley, 1986) and that women became the ‘living testimony of one injustice of the revolution’ (Reséndez Fuentes, 1995: 553). Patriarchy was not contested (Fernández Aceves, 2006b) but it was ‘modernised’ (Vaughan, 2000, 2006; Varley, 2000).

### **Modernisation, machismo and women’s rights**

Rabinow argues that, considering the diversity in the usage of the word ‘modernity’, it makes little sense to even venture to formulate some abstract definition of this concept. Instead, he suggests that it is more productive to explore how the term has been understood and put to work by those who have used it (Rabinow, 1995: 9). The historical accounts I have referred to in the previous section of this chapter reveal that the strivings for the transformation of Mexican society have appeared recurrently in public discourses since the colonial period and that the vision of social reform often involved proposals about redefining gender expectations. Yet it has been widely recognised that the 20th century witnessed unprecedented changes in many respects. In the post-revolutionary period, Mexico engaged in the process of modernisation which resulted in the industrialisation of its economy, intensification of migratory flows from rural to urban areas and expansion of health and educational services (LeVine et al, 1991: 461). In order to embark on this project, a society devastated by revolutionary turmoil (1910-1920) was in need of a unifying identity, which emerged, partly as an official construct, partly as a popular narrative, in the 1920s through the concept of *lo mexicano* or *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) (Joseph et al, 2001: 7; see Hewes, 1954 for a review of Mexican national character studies; see Bartra, 2007 for an edited volume of essays, written between the early and the late 20th century, seeking to reconstruct the ‘Anatomy of the Mexican’). As Bartra notes, ‘the culture of modern man requires myths: it inherits them, it re-creates them, it invents them. One of them is the myth of the primordial man, which fortifies national culture and at the same time serves as a contrast in order to stimulate modernity and progress in the nation’ (Bartra, 2000: 19).

Mexican intellectuals and officials dismissed the positivist ideas underlying the agenda of the pre-revolutionary dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, which viewed society as

an organism that complied with the universal laws of evolution (Andersen, 2009: 119). The intellectual elite of the Porfirian regime, known as *Científicos* (Scientists), ‘despised indigenous Mexican culture’ (Andersen, 2009: 119) and sought to emulate the European and North American economic and cultural models without taking into account the specificities of Mexico (Raat, 1968: 15). The aspiration to transform Mexico’s ‘culturally, economically, and racially disparate peoples into a culturally cohesive, politically stable postrevolutionary nation’ gave rise to the reappraisal of ‘Indianness’ (López, 2002: 295). Although there were some efforts to celebrate the living Indian cultures and to develop a more pluralistic identity that could accommodate Indians, whites and mestizos (López, 2002), the most entrenched discourses identified the Mexican with the mestizo (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992: 281).

While both the construction of nationality as an instrument for modernisation and the recognition of the mestizo as an important figure within the national landscape began with Independence<sup>5</sup>, these processes culminated after the revolution (Lomnitz-Adler, 1996: 59; 2001: 52). Lomnitz-Adler cites the intention of post-revolutionary president Lázaro Cárdenas ‘not to Indianise Mexico but to transform Indians into Mexicans’ which was to be achieved primarily by transforming agrarian classes into ‘lay, modern citizenry’ (1996: 59). Cárdenas, defined as ‘republic’s most radical president’, sought to improve the conditions of the lower classes, especially the Indians, through education, redistribution of land, collective farms (*ejidos*), limitations on foreign investments and an increase in state-run enterprise (Koppes, 1982: 65). Vaughan vividly recounts how the officials relied upon the expansion of public education in carrying out its ambitious endeavour of turning a so-called feudal society into a secular and modern nation by ‘de-alcoholising, sanitising, and defanaticising Mexicans’ (1997: 4). These reforms could not go unchallenged and one of the best known examples of protest against the official vision of modernity was the resistance to post-revolutionary anticlericalism which resulted in the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929) (Becker, 1995).

Post-revolutionary governments maintained the goal to attain the same level of development as the United States and Europe. However, it was claimed that this project, which was meant to engage and benefit not only the elites but all sectors of Mexican

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<sup>5</sup> Chance notes that the ‘first symbol of national identity to arise after independence was the creole’ (1979: 165). *Criollos* were descendants of Spaniards born in the New World.

society, was not to be grounded in the mere imitation of external models. Moreover, modernisation was expected to enable Mexico to defend itself from foreign hegemony (Brading, 1988: 77), which particularly concerned its relations with the United States. Gutmann reminds us that the annexation of two-fifths of the Mexican nation to the United States in 1848 and reiterated US economic and military incursions into Mexico since then played an important role in the evolution of this tumultuous relationship (2006 [1996]: 227). The fact that Cárdenas in 1938 nationalised foreign-owned oil wells was seen by many people as the assertion of the Mexican nation's role on the world stage and celebrated with a six-hour parade through Mexico City (Vaughan, 1997: 46). It represented a boost for economic self-determination that was regarded as equally important as political independence (Koppes, 1982: 65). Although the efforts of the US administration to ensure the readmission of private investments in the Mexican oil industry were not fruitful, the two countries never ceased to maintain intense relations.

Moreno notes that, in the post-revolutionary period Mexican and American political leaders, corporate executives, and advertising agents represented Mexico's race toward modern industrial capitalism as the key to 'material prosperity, upward mobility, democracy, happiness and self-realisation' but stresses that the Revolution compelled them to articulate this enterprise through 'popular nationalist and revolutionary rhetoric' (2003: 3). Yet the impact of the United States on the lives of Mexicans went far beyond the commercial success of American products and was often referred to as 'cultural invasion' (Carrillo, 1999: 225) or 'Americanisation' (Monsiváis, 1989, 1990). It has been claimed that this Americanisation, initially associated with the middle class, quickly extended to the whole of Mexican society as it was promoted through the media and film industry and through migration flows (Monsiváis, 1989: 94). While the official discourses depicted modernisation as an effort to strengthen Mexico and protect it from foreign, primarily US, hegemony, the fact that the United States was widely seen as 'the centre of modernity' (Monsiváis, 1989: 89) influenced not only the relationship between the two countries but also conceptions of Mexico's involvement in the modernity project itself. In late 1980s, the famous Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsiváis wrote about the ambiguities of this process by observing that Mexican society is simultaneously Americanised and de-Americanised, 'it wants to be modern and fails,

wants to hang on to tradition but is unable<sup>6</sup> (1989: 84).

In the aftermath of the student movement of 1968 and the massacre of Tlatelolco, revisionist historiography challenged then prevailing assessments of the Mexican Revolution and argued that, instead of the promised benefits of modernisation, post-revolutionary governments actually created a centralised, single-party state that sacrificed social welfare and democracy for the sake of capitalist growth (Vaughan, 1999: 270). But, independently of how the legacy of the Mexican Revolution is evaluated, the political and socioeconomic processes the revolutionary upheaval set in motion have undoubtedly shaped gender relations in important ways. For centuries, the quest for the modernisation of Mexico translated into proposals that, in one way or another, involved gender ideals. However, it was not until the post-revolutionary period when it became evident that the ‘modernisation of patriarchy’ was vital to development (Vaughan, 2006: 28). Although the reform promoted more egalitarian gender relations and acknowledged the importance of women as active participants in the construction of the nation (Vaughan, 1997: 99), it was not inspired by the striving to end male privilege or female subordination and it assigned to women the tasks related to the health and education of the nation, which corresponded to traditional female roles (Vaughan, 2006: 28).

Patriarchy was not reinforced only through the conception of men’s and women’s contributions to the modernisation of the nation but also through the very construction of national symbols. The main ideologists of Mexican nationalism promoted the vision of the mestizo as the product of a Spanish father and an indigenous mother, which captured the imagination of the most emblematic thinkers and artists, such as Samuel Ramos, Octavio Paz and Diego Rivera (Lomnitz-Adler, 2001: 53). Lomnitz-Adler notes that this ‘identification of the European with the male and the feminisation of the Indian fit well with the formulation of a nationalism that was at once modernising and protectionist’ (2001: 53). Gender served to make sense both of the encounter between the Spaniards and the Indians and of the response of Indian men and women to the Spanish invasion. Paz couches the distinction between men and women within the idiom of ‘openness’ and ‘closedness.’ Yet he does not interpret these notions in simply biological, universalistic terms but historicises them in the Mexican context

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<sup>6</sup> Translation from Krainauskas in the introduction to ‘Mexican postcards’ (Monsiváis, 1997: xvii).

by invoking the Spanish Conquest. An indigenous woman, La Malinche, was the interpreter and mistress to the *conquistador* Hernán Cortés, who later abandoned her. In this way, she came to represent the Indian women who were ‘fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards’ (Paz, 1985 [1961]: 86). Paz notes that ‘when he repudiates La Malinche – the Mexican Eve, as she was represented by José Clemente Orozco in his mural in the National Preparatory School – the Mexican breaks his tie with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude’ (1985 [1961]: 87). La Malinche turned into a symbol of betrayal and she embodies ‘the *open*, the chingado, to our *closed*, stoic and impassive Indians’ (Paz, 1985 [1961]: 86) (italics added)<sup>7</sup>. These ‘stoic and impassive Indians’ are represented by an ‘antagonistic and complementary’ figure to La Malinche, the young Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc, who fought against the Spaniards and was eventually tortured and killed.

But the status of La Malinche is not contrasted only to the male figures of Cortés, on the one hand, and Cuauhtémoc, on the other. The *Chingada*, ‘the violated Mother’, also stands in opposition to Guadalupe, who is the Virgin Mother (1985 [1961]: 85). The Virgin of Guadalupe is widely recognised as a figure that syncretises Aztec with Christian symbols and represents a truly Mexican national identity (Martin, 1990: 473). In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla declared his independence movement in the name of Guadalupe (Conover, 2011: 276) and Mexicans struggled for independence from Spain under her banner (Lafaye, 1987). However, although La Malinche and Guadalupe represent powerfully oppositional moral symbols, Paz insists that these female figures share an important feature: ‘Both of them are passive figures. Guadalupe is pure receptivity, and the benefits she bestows are of the same order: she consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions. The Chingada is even more passive. Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust’ (1985 [1961]: 85)<sup>8</sup>.

The reinterpretation of the drama of the Conquest through the lens of gender was

<sup>7</sup> See Bartra, 2012 [1987] for the discrepancies between what the historical records reveal about La Malinche and the place she occupies in this mythologised narrative of the construction of the Mexican nation.

<sup>8</sup> See Martin, 1990 for the criticism of Paz’s interpretation as ‘male-centred’ and for an alternative reading of La Malinche and Guadalupe as symbols of power derived from motherhood rather than passivity. See also Melhuus, 1992: 260 for a problematisation of simultaneously using Paz’s text as evidence of the existence of a particular cultural logic and criticising his interpretations.

used as an idiom for articulating the ambiguities underlying the construction of the Mexican nation. But, at the same time, it inspired reflections about the psychology of Mexican people. According to Freudian theories, the mestizo, born from an act of violence committed by a Spanish man against an Indian woman, as a consequence of his Oedipal complex, hates and envies his Spanish father and despises his Indian mother (Paredes, 1971: 17). Paredes remarks that this invocation of the frustration derived from the Conquest was an extravagant attempt to account for the origins of machismo (1971: 35). Paz explains that

*the macho represents the masculine pole of life. The phrase “I am your father” has no paternal flavour and is not said in order to protect or to guide another, but rather to impose on one’s superiority, that is, to humiliate. Its real meaning is no different from that of the verb chingar and its derivatives. The macho is the gran chingón. One word sums up the aggressiveness, insensitivity and invulnerability and other attributes of the macho: power. It is force without the discipline of any notion of order: arbitrary power, the will without reins and without a set course.*  
(1985 [1961]: 81)

During the same period, Oscar Lewis was one of the most widely quoted sources of anthropological knowledge about Mexican gender relations. As Gutmann rightly noticed, a few sentences from Lewis’s famous ethnography about the life of a working-class family in Mexico City ‘The children of Sánchez’ were repeatedly used to lend support to the identification of Mexican masculinity with machismo both in academic and popular narratives (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 232). But being macho is not only about superiority and humiliation. It is an ambiguous concept. Paz recognises that the macho is ‘capable of guarding both himself and whatever has been confided to him’ and that he demonstrates stoicism in the face of danger, accepts defeat with dignity and can be ‘resigned and patient and long-suffering’ (1985 [1961]: 31). Melhuus draws attention to the fact that one of the protagonists of Lewis’s ethnography, Jesús Sánchez, simultaneously conforms to and subverts the ‘stereotypical macho image’ and describes him as

*a macho, with all the positive and negative connotations of this term: a respected and honoured man, who in many ways has sacrificed his life, through work, for his children; a womaniser, whose virility is not in doubt, as he begets many children with several women; a man who is control – and proves it – by recourse to violence if necessary; a man who provides, and in return, expects submission and service; a man who cannot display his feelings and therefore cuts his access to the very children around whom his life revolves.* (Melhuus, 1997: 49)

While the identification of machismo with Mexican culture has been widely accepted (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 27), Paredes claims that ‘the fundamental attitudes on which machismo is based (...) are almost universal’ (1971: 35). He draws a parallel between the celebration of manliness that gained strength in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s against the backdrop of the growing sense of nationalism and what happened in Mexico with the Revolution and observes that ‘there is no evidence that machismo (in the exaggerated forms that have been studied and condemned in Mexicans) even existed in Mexico before the Revolution. Available evidence suggests that it is a phenomenon dating from the 1930s to the present, that is to say, after the Revolution’ (Paredes, 1971: 36). It has been argued that machismo was institutionalised in the decades between 1930 and 1950 (Carrillo, 2002: 25).

The cinema and later television and radio made an important contribution to ‘the inventing and imagining’ of the national identity but also to the popularisation of the ‘ethos of machismo’ (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 228). The golden age of the Mexican cinema (late 1930s-late 1950s) has been defined as key to the constitution of Mexico’s identity as nationalist and popular but at the same time modern and urban (Millán, 2007: 420). Gutmann notes that, although during this period there were female leads in Mexican movies, manly actors embodied the ‘restless and explosive potential of the emerging Mexican nation’ (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 228). The Mexican man was represented as ‘untamed, generous, cruel, womanising, romantic, obscene, at one with family and friends, subjugated and restless’ while the Mexican woman was ‘obedient, seductive, resigned, obliging, devoted to her own and slave to her husband, to her lover,

to her children, and to her essential failure' (Monsiváis cited in Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 228).

However, this period witnessed not only the institutionalisation and popularisation of machismo but also an unprecedented mobilisation in the battle for women's rights and significant achievements, such as legalisation of divorce, equal custodial rights over children, the right to own and manage property, the right to participate in legal suits and contracts for women, labour legislation recognising women as workers (Vaughan, 2006: 22). Post-revolutionary governments encountered well-organised women's movements (Olcott, 2010: 26). Olcott claims that, although Cárdenas supported suffragists and maintained good relationships with leading communist women, he was concerned about the disruptive potential of these groups. Conservative commentators referred to suffragists as '*marimachos* ('dykes' or tomboys of uncertain sexuality)' and expressed the preoccupation that feminists might precipitate social disorder by subverting traditional gender roles (Olcott, 2002: 114). The Mexican Catholic Women's Union (UFCM) lamented that ““modernity” drove women out of churches and homes and into factories and brothels' (Olcott, 2005: 104). At the same time, government officials were also interested in attracting women away from Catholic organisations and from fascist movements that violently opposed antireligious public education. Cardenismo blurred the boundaries between state and civil society (Olcott, 2002: 107) and established *Ligas Femeniles de Lucha Social* (Women's Leagues for Social Struggle), which were expected to appeal to both progressive and conservative women (Olcott, 2002: 114). While, by insisting on the importance of women's role in the reproductive labour force, these organisations contributed to maintaining the divide between the public and private spheres, they also undermined this distinction by promoting women's production cooperatives, access to land and credit, and state-subsidised child care (Olcott, 2002: 110).

Despite these efforts, conservative forces hindered the concession of political rights to women and it was not until 1953 that they were allowed to vote. Buck suggests that this delay was a result of the lack of political will rather than women's inactivity or weakness as, in the period between 1917 and 1953, they put the issue of vote on the table over and over again (2007: 77). Yet not only those who disapproved of granting equal rights to men and women continued to view them as essentially different beings. It

has been argued that Latin American feminism evolved in a cultural context which, under the influence of Catholicism, showed little enthusiasm for ‘equality feminism’ (Molyneux, 2000). Studies of the evolution of feminist agenda in Latin America throughout the 20th century reveal that those who contested women’s exclusion from the public arena claimed that men and women had the same intellectual capacities and deserved equal educational opportunities but, at the same time, sought to revalidate what they viewed as inherently female traits. Although some scholars point out that feminist activists struggled among themselves over the definitions of femininity and the grounds for claiming full citizenship for women (Olcott, 2005), most of them note that women across Latin America primarily framed their participation in public life in terms of their superior morality (Safa, 1990; Cano, 1996; Molyneux, 2000; Mitchell and Schell, 2007) and strategically invoked the ideal of ‘civic maternalism’ (Molyneux, 2000) to claim their public role as ‘*supermadres*’ (Chaney, 1979; Bejarano, 2002; Schwindt-Bayer, 2006), ‘community caretakers’ (Schell, 2006) or ‘citizen-mothers’ (Olcott, 2005).

Although the recognition of women’s right to vote, accomplished through the reform of the Article 34 of Mexican Constitution, was a culmination of many decades of feminist militancy, it finally occurred in a period that witnessed a decay of the women’s movement, which lasted until the beginning of the 1970s (Cano, 1996: 354). The resurgence of feminist activism was strongly influenced by the women’s liberation movement in the United States. Mexican activists, many of whom had participated in the student movement in 1968, were predominantly middle-class, university-educated women of leftist orientation, who carefully followed the changes that were taking place to the north of the Mexican border. Cano reports that the Women’s Strike for Equality, organised in San Francisco in 1970 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of political equality between women and men, received broad coverage in the Mexican press and made a considerable impact (1996: 354).

However, the renewed struggle for women’s rights marked a clear shift in the issues it focused on. Feminists denounced the fact that formal provisions that guaranteed political equality did not automatically translate into the elimination of multiple discriminatory practices which women had to face in their everyday experiences. Mexican feminists were inspired by the US and European movements

which, under the slogan ‘the personal is political’, were primarily concerned with criticising double moral standards related to sexuality and the oppression derived from the feminisation of domestic work and childcare. Yet the Mexicans paid less attention to the internal organisation of the household since, due to their social background, many feminist activists had domestic workers to take care of their housework and child rearing (Lamas, 2011: 16). Their demands centred on the use of contraceptives, abortion, ending sexual violence and the right to free sexual choice (Lamas, 2011: 17; Cano, 1996: 356).

Although at the beginning of the 1970s very few people were interested in feminism (Cano, 1996: 354-355), the feminist agenda increasingly gained prominence and in the 1980s the so-called ‘popular feminism’ began to address the needs of women from more diverse social backgrounds (Cano, 1996: 357-358). The majority of Mexican feminist groups refused to participate in the UN World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in 1975, since they considered it an attempt at governmental manipulation, and met at an isolated ‘counter conference’ (Lamas, 2011: 18). Yet the UN event and the declaration of the International Women’s Year led the Mexican government to implement various legal reforms aimed at the elimination of inequalities, such as the abrogation of the provision that required a husband’s written consent to a married woman’s access to paid labour (Cano, 1996: 355). Ideas about the emancipation of women were promoted through the foundation of associations (e.g. *Coalición de mujeres feministas, Frente Nacional por la Liberación y los Derechos de las Mujeres*), publications (e.g. *Fem, Doble Jornada. Suplemento mensual de La jornada, Debate feminista*) and academic programmes (e.g. *Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género* (PUEG) at UNAM, *Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer* (PIEM) at Colegio de México) and organisation of events (e.g. *Encuentros Nacionales Feministas, IV Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe en Taxco, Guerrero, in 1987*).

These initiatives cannot be separated from the fact that they occurred in the midst of intense socioeconomic changes. Scholarship has shown great interest in how industrial development, urbanisation and migration to the United States resulted in transformations in family life and gender relations, such as changes in fertility patterns, internal organisation of the households, women’s access to the workforce and their

participation in political action (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1991; Mummert, 1988; Wong and LeVine, 1992; LeVine, 1993; González de la Rocha, 1994, 2001; García and De Oliveira, 1994, 2006; Pauli, 2008; Ariza and D'Aubeterre, 2009). The introduction of a new population policy in 1974 contributed to a sharp decline in fertility rates. This policy recognised the right to choose the number of children people wanted to have and to plan when to have them. It also promoted the dissemination of information about contraceptive methods and access to family planning services (Tuirán et al., 2009: 453). These changes had great impact on women's lives since, as Tuirán and his colleagues from the Mexican National Population Council report, in 1973-1976 a woman invested 22.2 years of her life in the care of almost six children until the last one turned six years of age (a 3.9 year average per child), while in 1995-1997 these numbers decreased to 14.8 years and fewer than three children (a 5.6 year average per child) (2009: 446).

Women's participation in the workforce increased in the second half of the 20th century and this tendency particularly intensified during the economic crisis of the 1980s, marked by 'falling oil prices, mounting interest payments on the foreign debt and the nationalisation of the private banks' (Chant, 1994: 204). Harsh austerity programmes put Mexican men and women under pressure to develop a range of survival strategies, which mainly consisted in cutting down on expenses and sending more family members into the job market (Chant, 1994: 206). At the same time, it has been noted that women accepted lower wages and that employers often hired them in order to minimise labour costs (Chant, 1994). It is estimated that the number of women working outside the home climbed from 28% in 1980 to 34% in 1989. However, not all women were equally likely to take part in this trend. The increase among married mothers was less significant than among childless, single women and all the factors to which this trend was attributed were grounded in the traditional gender ideology: the centrality of motherhood to the conception of the female role, husbands' reluctance to accept their wives' employment and lower educational levels of older women (Chant, 1994: 208; Benería and Roldán, 1987; LeVine, 1993).

Changes in gender arrangements have been simultaneously associated with feminism and modernity. In the introduction to the edited volume 'Feminist perspectives on Mexican women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (*Miradas feministas sobre las mexicanas del siglo XX*), the famous Mexican feminist and anthropologist Marta Lamas claims that

‘the impact of feminism, along with that of modernity, on the patterns of everyday lives of young women is already irreversible’ (2007: 15). While some celebrated these changes, others despised them. In popular narratives, ‘being modern was equated with being liberal, whereas being traditional was equated with being conservative’ (Carrillo, 2007: 75). Carrillo observes deep tensions between those who promoted changes related to gender and sexuality and those who sought to prevent them (2007: 75). The former believed that the transformation of gender and sexuality ideals contributed to modernising Mexico and, in this way, strengthened its position in the international arena. The latter saw it as evidence of Mexico’s submission to the cultural hegemony of the United States and a ‘threat to Mexican morality and customs’ (Carrillo, 2007: 86).

At different moments, legislators were differently influenced by these forces. Tarrés admits that over the last few decades important achievements have been made in the field of legal reform aimed at gender equality but she stresses that these provisions are not fulfilled not only due to the lack of political will but also because ‘gender relations are rooted in the culture and in the material life of societies and comply with a logic we cannot fully grasp’ (2002: 134)<sup>9</sup>. The persistence of gender essentialism seems to shape this cultural logic in important ways. In her analysis of the public policies concerning women’s presence in the workforce, Tepichin found that ensuring egalitarian participation of men and women in the labour market by simply incorporating more women into the workforce is impossible because the dominant gender hierarchy determines the sectors and the jobs appropriate for women and men in accordance with the characteristics traditionally attributed to different sexes (2010: 34). Sánchez Olvera claims that patriarchal culture, under the influence of Catholic fundamentalism, promotes ‘the role of mother-wife as an essential female value’ (2006: 33) and that this idea affects the public arena, political life and the media. Sánchez Bringas and her colleagues note that many public policies targeting women rest upon traditional gender ideology (Sánchez Bringas et al, 2004).

Molyneux examines the anti-poverty, cash transfer programme *Progresita/Oportunidades*, established in Mexico in 1997 and later extended across the region, and notes that, in such initiatives, the achievement of the programme objectives was primarily channelled through the participation of mothers (2006: 439). The main

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<sup>9</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

goals of this project were to foster children's school attendance, nutrition and health, while secondary outcomes were expanding mothers' skills, empowerment, civic participation, strengthening community ties and gender equality (Molyneux, 2006: 434). However, Molyneux concludes that it is questionable to what extent the programme's dependence on mothers as primary caregivers and the marginalisation of fathers' parental role, rather than empowering women, actually contributes to 're-traditionalising' gender relations (2006: 440).

When comparing the reforms undertaken in Mexico in the early and late 20th century, Craske found that, in both cases, the state used the status of women to promote itself as modern and progressive (2005: 79). She notes that the main difference between these two periods was that, while revolutionaries fostered an inward looking, economically protectionist and corporatist regime, the new vision of Mexican society rested upon neoliberal reform and aimed to open up the economy (Craske, 2005: 130). Yet she admits that, although women gained important rights in both periods, the 'romanticised imagery of self-sacrificing mother was mobilised to underpin change: women were expected both to change and remain the same' (Craske, 2005: 116).

These observations testify to the incisiveness of the claim that 'one of the characteristics of modernity is a pluralism of contradictory convictions' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 22 drawing on Habermas). Amid the tensions of these contradictory convictions arises the 'impulse for cultural creativity' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 22) which often results in 'cultural hybridity' (García-Canclini, 1990). These contradictions will be in evidence throughout the ethnographic account presented in this thesis. However, even though social actors themselves often recognise the intricacies and the 'hybridity' of their gender identities, they readily distinguish between what they see as modern and traditional and many of them like to think of themselves as 'plainly modern' (Carrillo, 2002: 27) or traditional or, at least, as more inclined towards one of these ideological orientations (Gutmann, 2006 [1996], Hirsch, 2003). This is an important point for this thesis as I will seek to understand not only how the contradictions underlying modern and traditional ideals coexist in people's daily experiences but also how they are placed in confrontation and how they come to prevail over each other.

## **Educational reform and de-essentialisation of gender**

In seeking to understand how children negotiate gender relations, it is useful to examine how the educational agenda engages with the idea of gender differences and in what ways it participates in the transformation of gender ideology. As I have mentioned above, post-revolutionary governments paid great attention to the expansion of public education and one of the goals they proclaimed was the ‘modernisation of patriarchy’ (Vaughan, 2006: 28). Hernández Zamora defines this period in the development of the national educational system as one of institutionalisation (1920-1940) and notes that it was followed by decades of rapid growth and differentiation (1940-1980) and a period of stagnation (1980s) (1993: 19). By the end of the 1980s ‘modernisation’ (*modernización*) was the buzzword again and the Education Modernisation Programme (*Programa de Modernización Educativa*) (1989-1994) was put in motion. The reform was aimed at improving the quality of education by focusing on decentralising the cumbersome educational apparatus, on changing the curriculum and on introducing new approaches to the provision of teachers’ education, supervision and incentives (Tatto, 1999; Loyo, 2002). In response to the changing economic, social and political reality across the world, the educational system in Mexico was expected to prepare the population to participate effectively in the emerging market economy or, as the National Agreement for the Modernisation of Basic Education (*Acuerdo Nacional para la Modernización de la Educación Básica*) announced, to prepare it ‘for development, freedom and justice’ (SEP, 1992). The reformers expressly articulated their awareness that attaining this goal required not only quality of education but ‘quality with equity’ (*calidad con equidad*) (Martínez Rizo, 2001; Zorrilla Fierro, 2002; Grindle, 2004; Zorrilla Fierro and Barba Casillas, 2008). However, neither the proclaimed objectives of the reform spanning over the 14 pages of this Agreement nor the 85 articles of the General Education Law (*Ley General de Educación*) passed in 1993, contained any explicit reference to gender.

Although the reformers did not expressly establish the transformation of gender ideology as one of their main concerns, this period of structural changes is often seen as one of the crucial moments in the construction of a modern educational agenda and, concomitantly, in the struggle for gender equality through schooling (Parga Romero,

2008; for a review of gender equality policies in Latin America in the 1990s see Cortina and Stromquist, 2000). In the last decade of the 20th century, the transformation of dominant gender relations in Mexico became one of the priorities of the state and, at the beginning of the 21st century, this ideological orientation was confirmed by passing the General Law for the Equality between Women and Men (*Ley General para la Igualdad entre Mujeres y Hombres*) in 2006, the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence (*Ley General sobre el Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia*) in 2007 and by signing, that same year, the National Agreement for Equality between Women and Men (*Acuerdo Nacional para la Igualdad entre Mujeres y Hombres*).

The publication of a wide range of documents about gender equality and education ensued. The insistence of the General Education Law on equality of 'all inhabitants of the country' was apparently perceived as too vague and insufficiently empowering. Therefore, the alterations to the original version of the text concerned, among other issues, more specific references to gendered social realities (e.g. 'it will fight against ignorance and its causes and effects, servitude, fanaticism, prejudices, formation of stereotypes, discrimination and violence, especially against women, girls and boys' (Art. 8, LGE, 2009 [1993])) instead of 'it will fight against ignorance and its effects, servitude, fanaticism and prejudices' (Art. 8, LGE, 1993) and the elimination of masculine forms used as gender-neutral ('to educate women and men to have a sense of social solidarity' (Art. 2, LGE, 2009 [1993])) instead of 'to educate a man to have a sense of social solidarity' (Art. 2, LGE, 1993)).

But how is rendering these categories more salient meant to reduce gender differences? As Stromquist explains, in order to achieve the long-term goal of minimising categorical differentiation between men and women, in the short term it is important to insist on the visibility of this dichotomy as it exposes the level of inequality men and women are facing (Stromquist, 2006: 378). While official publications insist on this linguistic distinction (e.g. by eliminating the gender-neutral usage of 'man' and replacing it with 'man and woman'), they seek to minimise the contents of its categories by disputing the claim that there are any essential, socially relevant differences between men and women. The authors of these texts define the belief in essential differences between women and men as the idea that 'female characteristics should be only in the

bodies of women and the masculine only in the bodies of men, which means that they cannot be indistinguishably in men and women' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 20). Dismantling this deep-seated essentialist legacy was placed at the heart of the most recent educational efforts to modernise gender ideology in Mexico. While the label 'modern' and the references to 'modernisation' were not used as commonly as in the past educational reforms, the challenge to the traditional gender ideology was unambiguous.

In the past, 'modernisation' concerned renegotiating the expectations of essentially different beings. Its aspiration was to diminish rather than eradicate the relevance of sex membership to access to people, activities, objects and spaces. But, wary of the risks of reinventing 'new experiences of subordination', the creators of the most recent educational reforms question not only the legitimacy of holding different expectations about how men and women should behave and judging them accordingly but also of assuming that men and women intrinsically differ in their psychological and behavioural predispositions. Hence, this agenda does not stop at problematizing the conflation between 'average' and 'ideal' properties and goes on to challenge the validity of these very concepts in the construction of gender identities. Instead of embracing the idea of essential gender differences, the educational agenda has committed itself to treating men and women alike as human beings.

The authors of official publications seek to provide analytical tools for combating gender inequalities in Mexico and, while they insist on the idea of difference, they clarify that the only distinctive features they recognise between men and women are their anatomical and physiological traits. After centuries of state policies grounded in gender essentialism, the reform of the educational agenda reveals a shift towards 'de-essentialising' gender differences. It is argued that 'naturalising' or 'biologising' the attributes traditionally associated with men or women is 'worrysome and dangerous' as it represents 'pure sexism and discrimination' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003). The promotion of the idea that women and men are not inherently different translates into questioning the inevitability of divisions in the activities and objects they engage with. Children, their parents and teachers are reminded that the construction of modern identities is at odds with outdated distinctions between male and female jobs, toys, colours or sports. Any differences in this kind of predisposition or preference are

embraced as long as they are seen as individual rather than gender characteristics.

The authors of these texts emphasise that the development of their arguments is grounded in theoretical writings and empirical research conducted within ‘gender studies, feminism and women’s social movements’ by psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists, and they cite numerous Mexican and foreign scholars (e.g. Oakley, 1972; Lamas, 1986, 1995; Bem, 1993; Scott, 1996; Parga Romero, 2004). Their contentions rest upon literature that is set up within the epistemological binary framework of nature/culture and sex/gender, which has been appropriated to argue for the primacy of culture/gender over nature/sex in a range of debates in Europe and the United States for decades (Haraway, 1991). This approach ignores the theories that suggest that both ‘biology and culture are historically and culturally variable concepts, as are relations between them’ (Moore, 1994: 12; Butler, 1990) and represents sex as ‘natural’ (*natural*) and ‘unchangeable’ (*no cambia*) and gender as ‘sociocultural’ (*sociocultural*) and ‘changeable’ (*puede cambiar*) (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 15).

The educational agenda promotes the idea that ‘*los hombres y las mujeres son iguales*’ (men and women are equal/the same) and continually stress the importance of ‘*equidad de género*’ (gender equity). The adjective ‘*igual*’ lends itself to different interpretations: ‘same, identical’, on the one hand, and ‘equal’, on the other. According to the Collins Spanish-English dictionary, the noun ‘*igualdad*’, derived from the adjective ‘*igual*’ and predominantly employed in some other Spanish-speaking countries, such as Spain, to denote gender equality (*igualdad de género*), means ‘1) equality, 2) sameness, 3) uniformity.’ The meaning of the term ‘*equidad*’, on the other hand, is ‘equity, fairness.’ Although textbooks and local teachers usually referred to ‘*equidad de género*’ and rarely used the phrase ‘*igualdad de género*’, state-sponsored publications about gender cite both terms and carefully engage with drawing distinctions between these concepts. Their theoretical elaboration was made available online to parents, teachers and the general public and transmitted through booklets and seminars to teachers by facilitators who were sent to schools within programmes launched by different state institutions (e.g. the Secretary of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP), Integral Family Development (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, DIF)). The officially endorsed definitions of these notions suggested that *equidad de género* and *igualdad de género* are ‘related but it is not

correct to replace one with the other since *igualdad* is a superior value that invokes the legal status of women and the principle of nondiscrimination based on sexual difference. Therefore, *equidad* is a measure primarily aimed at making up for the historical and social deficiencies caused by gender inequalities' (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 103). These formulations revealed the interpretation of *igualdad* as a social aspiration to equal status that could be achieved only through the practice of *equidad*<sup>10</sup>.

The emphasis that the official policies placed on promoting *equidad* through the educational agenda revealed that the role of children was seen as vital for the transformation of traditional gender ideology. The importance of instilling egalitarian values in children was not represented only as a matter of preparing generations of future adults for their forthcoming participation in Mexican society but also as an effort to eradicate discrimination and violence from their childhood experiences. In the following chapter, I will suggest that, by paying more attention to the social lives of children, anthropological research may gain important insights into the process of changing gender relations among Mexicans.

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<sup>10</sup> In this thesis, I did not find it useful to use both English terms 'gender equality' and 'gender equity.' The local usage of the term *equidad* and the children's, parents' and teachers' interpretations of the idea that 'men and women are *iguales*' ignored the theoretical intricacies of the distinction between *equidad* and *igualdad* which was addressed in official publications aimed at teachers. What villagers interpreted as being *iguales* could not be reduced to the concern about equity or fairness, and the term 'gender equality' will be used throughout this thesis.

## Chapter Two

### **Accountability and ‘undoing gender’**

This chapter introduces the conceptual tools I use for structuring and analysing the experiences, ideas and practices of the people I worked with in Metztitlán. The ethnographic evidence that illustrates the pervasiveness of gender essentialism among Mexicans will allow me to show how the beliefs about the essential differences in men’s and women’s ‘real’ nature are translated into expectations about their ‘ideal’ nature and how these expectations affect the dynamics of change of gender relations. In the central section of this chapter, I will present the analytical framework and clarify the proposed contributions of this thesis. In this same section, by examining how ethnographic research with Mexican adults has documented and discussed the ways people resist traditional gender expectations, I will seek to bring to life theoretical explanations of the concepts of ‘accountability’ and ‘undoing gender.’ In the remainder of the chapter, while reviewing ethnographic accounts of how children in cross-cultural contexts and in Mexico in particular comply with and defy traditional gender ideals, I will explain why I find the notion of ‘undoing gender’ more compelling and useful than the more widely used concepts of ‘alternative masculinities and femininities.’

#### **Gleaning gender essentialism from ethnographic data**

The continuity between historical records and more recent ethnographic materials from Mexico is reflected through the insistence on diminishing traditional divisions while preserving the salience of the idea about differences between male and female essence. This deeply entrenched gender essentialism implies that sex membership determines psychological and behavioural predispositions or, to put it differently, what a man or a woman ‘is’ by his or her ‘true nature.’ However, as historical writings have suggested and ethnographic references will corroborate, popular beliefs are grounded not only in the conviction that men and women *are* essentially different but also in the expectation

that they *should* be different and *should* be assessed accordingly. Anthropologists have often felt the urge to stress their refusal of biological determinism by arguing that the gender relations they write about do not stem from ‘some primordial essence’ (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 14) but are socially constructed through everyday interactions under particular historical circumstances. However, their ethnographic material reveals that this idea often did not resonate easily with their Mexican informants. While they have demonstrated how Mexican women and men challenge traditional constraints and seek to forge modern identities (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Hirsch, 2003; Dreby, 2010), their accounts show that the belief in the emanation of gender from ‘some primordial essence’ continues to capture people’s imagination and to reinforce the relevance of gender dichotomies.

Ethnographic evidence coincides with historians’ writings in emphasising the ideal of motherhood as the most powerful idiom underpinning the distinction between men and women. The pervasiveness of maternity in local imagery apparently shapes the vision of both inherently female and male attributes and their entailing social roles. While among Argentinean farmers Stolen found that the relationship between femininity and masculinity was based on the idea of hierarchical complementarity (1996: 162), Melhuus in rural Mexico noted that ‘there is a double structuring permitting both dominance and complementarity for both male and female but where the female seems to escape the male in a way that the male cannot escape the female’ through the ‘all embracing value’ of the ‘non-sexual-woman-represented-as-mother’ (1996: 249). This figure, whose Latin American rendering relies upon the Catholic tradition related to the cult of Virgin Mary, continually emerges in ethnographic accounts about Spanish-speaking, *mestizo* Mexicans as ‘suffering mother’ (*madre sufrida*) and ‘self-sacrificing’ or ‘self-denying mother’ (*madre abnegada*) (Brandes, 1988; Melhuus, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1996; Hubbell, 1993) and is used to represent a legitimate form of womanhood. Browner (1986a) showed in an indigenous, rural community how even the women who expressed negative attitudes towards childbearing and child rearing felt the social pressure to reproduce.

The insistence on the reproductive distinction between women and men, expressed through the ideal of motherhood, is primarily coupled with the bodily differences relevant to sexuality and used to legitimise gender essentialism. As I have

noted in Chapter One, Octavio Paz explains the dichotomy between sexes in terms of ‘openness’ and ‘closedness’, which echo the Freudian contention that ‘anatomy is destiny.’ He argues in his best-known book, *Labyrinth of solitude* that a woman’s ‘social situation – as the repository of honor, in the Spanish sense – and the misfortune of her “open” anatomy expose her to all kinds of dangers, against which neither personal morality nor masculine protection is sufficient. She is submissive and open by nature’ (Paz, 1985 [1961]: 38). Ethnographic accounts show how, within this cultural logic, these features have been related to other inherently female and male attributes, such as chastity, suffering, passivity, domestic responsibilities, on the one hand, and sexual prowess, being in control, having authority over others, especially women, and economic responsibilities, on the other.

The ethnographic examples that show how different perceptions of male and female nature affect women’s and men’s experiences in various ways have been scattered across a wide range of anthropological accounts for many decades. These essentialist distinctions have traditionally been framed not only in terms of difference but also power. As Peñalosa notes, ‘male-female relations are based on strongly held beliefs in the superiority (biologic, intellectual, and social) of the male’ (1968: 683). Dualistic conceptions of male and female nature are translated into different expectations and different socialisation practices. It has been observed that girls were oriented towards a maternal role and domestic activities from the earliest age, while boys were prepared for ‘dominance and independence’ (Peñalosa, 1968: 688). Mirandé argues that among Mexicans in the United States mothers were more permissive towards their sons because ‘the boy is a fledgling *macho* who must be allowed to venture out of the home so he may “test his wings” and establish a masculine identity’ (1977: 753). Men’s greater mobility is closely tied to their role as breadwinners (Romanucci-Ross, 1973; Hirsch, 2003).

Brandes observes how in the indigenous village of Tzintzuntzan men and women performed different roles in the celebration of local *fiestas* in accordance with perceived differences between them. For example, he remarks that girls could never be expected to enact the role of Death or the devil and that ‘this wilder, less inhibited part in the drama is turned over instead to little boys, who are considered less controllable and, hence, assigned the less constrained role in La Danza. To Tzintzuntzeños men are unable to

harness their sexual passions, whereas women are not only capable of doing so but also must do so' (Brandes, 1988: 144). It has been reported that men's engagement in extramarital affairs was traditionally more tolerated since men were believed to have 'hot blood' (Grimes, 1998: 47) and to be 'dominated by an innate drive which impels them irresistibly to pursue women' (Stern, 1973: 397).

Legitimate forms of womanhood and manhood are not perceived as merely oppositional but also as asymmetrical. As Melhuus argues, whereas women are classified as decent or not decent, men are classified in positions relative to each other as more or less a man (1996: 231). Therefore, it is worth considering whether the perceptions of essential gender differences in this cultural setting concern only relations between men and women or also relations among men (Lancaster, 1992; Kulick, 1998; Prieur, 1998) and to what extent this might threaten the concept of binary gender. The ethnographic accounts from Latin America have shown that the idea of being 'less of a man' or 'less than a man' does not disrupt but actually reinforces the dichotomy. Scholars studying homosexuals, bisexuals and travestis insist that the idea of 'thirdness' is absent from their informants' representations of gender identities (Kulick, 1998; Prieur, 1998). The observation that in this cultural setting perceptions of gender are tied in with perceptions of sexuality (Melhuus, 1998: 378) has allowed anthropologists to explore how the idiom of being 'closed, impenetrable and active' as opposed to being 'open, penetrable and passive' operates both at the level of representations of cross-sex and same-sex relations (Lancaster, 1992; Kulick, 1998; Prieur, 1998; Melhuus, 1998; Levi, 2008). The claim that certain attributes, such as penetrability, may be detached from the sexed bodies they are commonly associated with, while being inevitably linked to a particular 'essence' (Prieur, 1998), challenges the idea of anatomy as destiny. Instead, it suggests that the destiny lies in the essence, which women and male homosexuals seem to share. But what actually is the essence which women and male homosexuals may have in common? Melhuus warns that, in order to share a gender, they would have to share more than being penetrated and clarifies that they would have to share 'the meanings attached to virginity and to motherhood' (1998: 378).

Bearing in mind the prominence of these values in local conceptions of femininity, the same contention may be made with respect to the construction of the essence. The distinct social treatment of the presumed female essence contained in

female bodies, on the one hand, and male bodies, on the other, suggests that sexed bodies do matter, after all. What I think is of great significance for grasping this distinction is the fact that, while the idea of female essence contained in female bodies and male essence in male bodies is usually based on the conflation of the perceptions of what men and women *are* like and what they *should be* like, in the case of the female essence in male bodies there is a discontinuity. Thus, the premise would be that they ‘should not be’ what they admittedly ‘are.’ Through this moral stricture, male homosexuals seem to be denied a legitimate space within the configuration of the gender dichotomy.

In contrast to the male homosexual who has not gained a legitimate space within this gender configuration, the status of the woman who engages in paid labour is changing and her position is being accommodated. The crucial difference seems to lie at the intersection of sexed bodies, gender essences and gender expectations. Male bodies containing female essence are marked by the discontinuity which further translates into the discontinuity between the essence and social expectations (‘is but should not be’) and, concomitantly, between bodies and social expectations. On the other hand, female bodies containing female essence are expected to fulfil it (‘is and should be’). While in the past legitimate female conduct was restricted to the realisation of these expectations, over the last few decades socioeconomic changes have apparently allowed women to legitimately engage in what was traditionally seen as an inherently male attribute, i.e. economic provision. The ethnographic accounts reveal that the legitimisation of what *is not* one’s essence is not unconditional. It is performed through the fulfilment of what *is* one’s essence. Some of the studies that I will refer to in the following section will show that women are permitted to expand the scope of their socially acceptable behaviour as long as they meet the expectation of fulfilling their essence or their true nature as mothers, wives and housewives. Since I do not intend to address the changes in the lives of Mexican homosexuals, I will not refer to ethnographic studies about homosexuality. However, I find it pertinent to stress here that, in contrast to working women, homosexuals do not seem to have the necessary resources for changing the way their actions are perceived within the present gender order since they do not count on any essence that they are expected to fulfill. These considerations are relevant to this thesis because they give us a glimpse into the internal dynamics of a gender configuration

grounded in essentialist thinking. They suggest that, while this regime leaves room for variation (Melhuus, 1998: 378) as the fulfilment of one's essence may empower individuals to venture into traditionally proscribed activities, its essentialist bias may heavily influence the scope of change, as will be shown in the following section.

### **Essential differences and change**

The tensions between the essentialist legacy and the emerging egalitarian conceptions of gender feature prominently in a wide range of ethnographic accounts. The interviews Peña conducted with Mexican migrant men working in orchards in the United States in the mid-1980s reveal a strong conviction of male superiority and anxieties about the erosion of male authority over women. These men's perceptions of Mexican-American women and concerns about the prospects of Mexican women show that they perceived women's resistance to gendered ideals of conduct as women '*wanting* to be like men' (Peña, 1991: 43) (italics added). In accordance with traditional ideology, these men seemed to believe that women and men might be '*misled*' into *wanting to be* but could never actually *be* alike. More recent ethnographic research suggests that both men and women in Mexico are becoming increasingly supportive of more egalitarian gender relations and critical of machismo (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Carrillo, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Ramírez, 2008). But gender essentialism persists and prefigures the transformation of gender arrangements in important ways.

As early as 1954, Hayner wrote of provincial Oaxaca that 'whereas twelve years ago a young woman who worked was looked upon as "some strange animal" her employment is now much more common' (1954: 369). However, anthropologists and sociologists writing about mestizos in Mexico showed that the status of a married woman working outside the home continued to be perceived as problematic across different social and geographic contexts for many decades (Romanucci-Ross, 1973; Hubbell, 1976; Arizpe, 1977; Melhuus, 1992, 1996). Yet it has been found that financial hardship increasingly forced families to accept a woman's incorporation into the workforce. Various ethnographic accounts, from settings as diverse as urban, middle-class families in Oaxaca, working-class Mexican migrants living in the United States or rural, migrant-sending communities in Jalisco, reveal that women could legitimately

engage in extradomestic labour as long as these duties were seen as compatible with or instrumental to their roles of mother, housewife and wife because ‘the essence of their nature as women is supposedly fulfilled through motherhood and housekeeping’ (Hirsch, 2003: 308; Zavella, 1987; Hubbell, 1993; Howell, 1999; Rees, 2006). But, although fulfilling ‘the essence of their nature’ apparently allowed women in some settings to expand the scope of their socially acceptable activities, it also limited their opportunities.

Gutmann found a shift in the way people made sense of women staying home to take care of newborn babies. While older generations more readily used the idea of ‘a *natural* and physically overwhelming bond involved in mother-child mutual dependency that *took precedence over all others*’ (italics added), younger fathers usually invoked practical considerations, such as that it was more convenient for women to stay home because they were nursing or because men could earn more money (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 64). He notes that the question as to whether men are naturally predisposed to behave in certain ways in their capacity as fathers was ‘hotly disputed’ in the *colonia* where he conducted his research (Gutmann, 2005: 141). Although this suggests that, within some circles, essentialist conceptions of parenthood may be losing their appeal, it has been argued that social changes have contributed to redefining but not to ‘revolutionising’ the idea of motherhood (Dreby, 2010: 85) even in the face of transnational migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ávila, 1997; Goldring, 2003; Dreby, 2006, 2009, 2010), non-traditional family arrangements (Sánchez Bringas et al., 2004) and faltering patriarchal authority (González Montes, 1994). A woman’s reputation was not enhanced by her capacity to secure an income (Hirsch, 2003), the expectations of the intensity of her professional engagement differed from a man’s (Zavella, 1987), working mothers felt anxiety over not spending enough time with their children more often than working fathers (Hubbell, 1993; Gutmann, 2006 (1996)), and migrant mothers expressed more guilt over leaving children behind than fathers (Dreby, 2010).

Dreby argues that, in the context of parents’ migration to the US, family members’ interpretations and evaluations of the relationships between children and their migrant mothers and fathers rested upon traditional conceptions of gender roles and reinforced the idea of women as caregivers and men as breadwinners. In this way, mothers ‘bear the moral burdens of family separation to a much greater degree than

fathers do' (2010: 62). Malkin claims that men who migrated to the US while their families stayed in Mexico confirmed their status as 'providers and patriarchs' through gifts and remittances and that these gendered relationships allowed them to 'confront the contradictions and disappointments of modernity that they experience in el Norte' (2004: 82). This kind of ethnographic evidence shows that even when people's everyday practices change, the way they make sense of their gender relations may remain anchored in old ideological prescriptions (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992: 411).

Women and men are not seen as different only in terms of their parental responsibilities and the perceptions of differences between them affect not only their access to but also participation in the workforce. Exploring the lives of working-class women in Mexico City, Benería and Roldán note that in industry women were concentrated in the branches which required physical and psychological predispositions that were 'commonly associated with the female "nature"' (1987: 87). Similarly, Fernández-Kelly remarks that employers at *maquiladoras* in Ciudad Juárez and the female workers themselves invoked 'the presumed biological and emotional differences between the sexes', when seeking to explain why 90% of plant workers were women (1983: 181).

While it has been noted that housework is becoming more 'degendered' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Hirsch, 2003) as refraining from domestic tasks is coming to be seen as less relevant to the pursuit of masculine identity, essentialist arguments are occasionally used to account for the obstacles to the completion of this process. Gutmann's male informants admitted that men occasionally avoided sharing housework with their wives 'by attributing greater natural energy to women and greater innate *flojera* (laziness) to men' (2006 [1996]: 157). The Mexican men with whom Hirsch worked in Atlanta assured her that they were happy to lighten their wives' burden by occasionally 'helping' them with domestic chores but 'none of them suggested it was in fact their burden as well' (2003: 140).

Scholars have also devoted considerable attention to understanding how changing socioeconomic realities have affected intimate relationships between Mexican men and women. It has been argued that in the 1980s younger married women living in urban areas who had more formal education and access to contraception showed reluctance to enduring infidelities, physical violence and other forms of abuse which

had been tolerated by older generations, and instead sought to forge relationships based on trust, understanding and companionship (LeVine et al., 1986: 201). Hirsch (2003) found that in the 1990s younger couples in rural Mexico and migrants in the US also embraced the ideal of companionate marriage. Yet the assumption of differences in female and male natures apparently prefigured people's expectations of how deep-cutting the changes in their marital relationships might be. As LeVine et al. note, women 'do not expect fidelity from their husbands, but increasingly they are demanding the right not to have to know about the "other" women' (1986: 201).

Hirsch reports that one of her male informants claimed that men were too weak to control their sexual desire and sought to justify male infidelities by recalling the school lesson that 'men need sex as a release (*desahogo*), which women do not need in the same way because menstruation is their release' (2003: 221). She stresses that other men challenged this justification of infidelities and argued that 'men are able to control their bodies' and that the new ideal of masculinity implied that 'real manhood' was demonstrated through the restraint of sexual urges (Hirsch, 2003: 221). However, ethnographic evidence suggests that this increasingly popular idea that men *can* and *should* 'control their bodies' continues to rest upon the assumption that sexual desire and the effort needed to control it differs between men and women. In their conversations with Castañeda and Zavella, female Mexican migrants working as farmworkers in the United States agreed that 'men have stronger sex drives than women' (2003: 138). Working with young, rural men, Amuchástegui and Aggleton (2007) have shown how the ethics based on the differential presumptions about male and female sexuality complicated men's capacity to transform their sexual practices as they struggled to come to grips with their own sexual desire and to acknowledge women as self-determining subjects.

### **Change and accountability**

The way I conceptualise gender in this thesis is grounded in what sociologists have defined as an 'integrative' approach which identifies three dimensions of gender: individual, interactional and institutional (Acker, 1992; Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Ridgeway, 2009). Risman notes that these different

dimensions are mutually dependent and that what occurs in one of them ‘reverberates throughout the structure dynamically’ (2004: 435). I find that this conception of gender is useful for exploring the process of transformation of gender ideology in Mexico as it exposes the complexity of gender relations and acknowledges that institutional changes may touch upon some individual selves, that individual attitudes may turn into acts that alter the course of everyday interactions, that these altered interactions may contribute to the renegotiation of the identities of ever more participants and that the changes in individual and interactional dimensions, in the long run, may shape cultural expectations and, eventually, affect future institutional policies.

The essentialist ideas about women and men that I reviewed in the previous sections continue to represent ‘hegemonic understandings’ (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004: 513) in Mexican society despite the fact that the efforts to challenge them and promote ‘alternative gender beliefs’ have been institutionalised over recent decades. But the assumptions that exist at the individual level, through individual identities, and the institutional, through cultural expectations embedded in public and private social institutions, actually come to life through everyday interactions between social actors. Cognitive research has shown that at an early age children learn locally salient definitions of femaleness and maleness, which ‘comprise a diverse and sprawling network of sex-linked associations’ (Bem, 1983: 603). This knowledge not only allows them to categorise others by sex instantly and automatically but also prompts them to evaluate their own and others’ adequacy with respect to these gender ideals (Bem, 1983: 604; Golombok and Fivush, 1994; Blakemore et al, 2009). These insights have been used in ethnomethodological accounts of gender to introduce the concept of ‘accountability’ and point out that people manage their activities with an eye to the possibility that they ‘may be held accountable for the performance of that activity as a woman or a man’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 136). It has been argued that gender is a powerful but not the only social category for which people are held accountable; others may include race, ethnic group and age (West and Fenstermaker, 1995).

Women and men anticipate other people’s assessments of their actions and behave in accordance with their readiness to engage with the consequences of these assessments. This means that ‘doing gender’ does not necessarily imply compliance with normative conceptions but engagement in behaviour ‘at the risk of gender

assessment' (1987: 136). Schwalbe explains that to be held accountable is 'to stand vulnerable to being ignored, discredited, or otherwise punished if one's behaviour appears inconsistent with what is ideologically prescribed for members of a certain category' (2000: 779). Yet social actors are not always actively aware of this process of monitoring and assessing, which rises to 'the surface of interaction only occasionally, such as when expectations change, accountability threats emerge, or other interactional disruptions occur' (Hollander, 2013: 6). This concept has been introduced and normally used to refer to 'others' in general terms. Indeed, people are concerned about accountability in interactions with both strangers and familiar individuals. However, the involvement of these different kinds of audiences entails clearly different outcomes. While brief encounters with anonymous social actors imply more immediate, short-term effects, the consequences of the exposure to familiar men and women or to those who may be related to these familiar men and women are more pervasive and lasting as they impinge upon the construction of one's reputation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the notion of accountability gains even more relevance in those settings where social networks are densely interconnected (Melhuus, 1992). Villages have been defined as places of 'constant mutual surveillance' (Coleman, 2002: 26). Hirsch argues that 'in small-town Mexico, a communal gaze monitors the dress, comportment, and speech of all members of the community' (Hirsch, 2003: 98). In the Mexican village of Tzintzuntzan, Brandes observes that

*(...) as the typical Tzintzunzeño enacts his or her daily routine, numerous people with legitimate claim to time and purse are liable to be encountered. Of course, these same individuals impart a sense of security, a feeling that one is squarely and firmly situated within a familiar universe. This very lack of anonymity, the high degree to which people penetrate one another's lives, produces an acute sensitivity to public opinion.* (1988: 35)

Hotchkiss explains that in the Mexican town of Teopisca one is concerned with his moral record because 'he knows that in his face-to-face encounters with others, the image of self that he presents must be congruent with his reputation, which nearly everyone in town has knowledge of or holds an opinion about. (...) New bits of

information are continually added to a body of knowledge' (Hotchkiss, 1967: 713). Although anthropologists studying gender relations among Mexicans have not used the concept of accountability explicitly, many of them have paid attention to people's sensitivity to others' reactions to their behaviour. The term 'accountability' refers to a deeply internalised, pervasive, most of the time unconscious mechanism. However, I suggest that, when it 'rises to the surface of interaction', in smaller, more closely interconnected communities, it may be related partly<sup>11</sup> to what is known in the Hispanic tradition as the concern about '*el qué dirán*' (lit. what will they say). But, as in the case of accountability, '*el qué dirán*' is not necessarily about others actually saying something since, as Burton et al. rightly point out drawing on Sánchez Acona, 'what others will say' implicitly also means 'what others will think' (2009: 1114). They define this concept as an integration of Mead's (1934) 'generalised other' and Goffman's (1958) 'presentation of self in everyday life' (Burton et al., 2009: 1114). While, similarly to accountability, the anxieties over *el qué dirán* may involve different aspects of one's social identity, ethnographic evidence reveals that they often centre on gender issues (see Hirsch, 2003 for rich ethnography on people's readiness to expose their behaviour to the public gaze).

Anthropological accounts show that there is a mutual understanding not only about the fact that everyone's behaviour is assessed by others, or that they will 'say' or 'think' something, but also in anticipating what kind of expectations these assessments will rest upon. Mexicans from different geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds have demonstrated the conviction that others would evaluate their actions by judging their adequacy with respect to traditional gender ideology, or to use West and Zimmerman's terminology, by 'holding them accountable' to the conceptions of masculinity and femininity grounded in essentialist beliefs. Dreby's (2009) analysis of transnational gossip among migrants living in the United States and their families and neighbours in Mexico corroborates the accuracy of these anticipations by showing that migrant men were criticised when they were not successful at providing for their families while migrant women were censured for neglecting their caregiving responsibilities. In rural Mexico, Hirsch notes that these gendered responsibilities reinforced other distinctions, such as home/street (*casa/calle*), which implied that,

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<sup>11</sup> Below I will explain why accountability can be only 'partly' related to the concept of *el qué dirán*.

unlike a woman, ‘a man does not invite criticism if he says that he has been in the street’ (2003: 99).

The dominant accountability regime is gendered not only inasmuch as it involves different accountability criteria for men and women but also as it does not presuppose the same ‘risk of gender assessment’ for men and women since women’s behaviour is monitored more strictly and the consequences of non-compliance with prevailing expectations are more severe. When it comes to sexuality, for example, one of Hirsch’s informants recalled her grandmother’s lesson about a woman’s reputation: ‘A woman is like a glass – with just a breath of air she gets fogged up – that’s how girls are here’ (Hirsch, 2003: 105). Indeed, in a different village Melhuus identified ‘*el qué dirán*’ as one of the concepts that are ‘intrinsically linked to women’ (1992: 108). She observes that women complied with traditional expectations because they were ‘extremely mindful of their reputations, and gossip is an effective sanction, as they are sensitive to what people say (*‘el qué dirán’*)’ (Melhuus, 1996: 245). Yet she stresses that ‘much of the criticism levied through gossip, though directed at a woman is (...) equally aimed at a man’ (Melhuus, 1992: 110).

While traditional accountability criteria have been actively challenged over the last few decades, Gutmann demonstrates that changes have not been equally pervasive in all domains of people’s everyday lives. He reports that, in contrast to the older generation of men in working-class *barrios* of Mexico City, who in their youth were ridiculed if seen holding their children or contributing to caregiving activities in any other way, younger men were more likely to get ridiculed if complying with these outdated gender divisions (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 59). At the same time, he observes that men still more carefully refrained from, for example, crying in public as this kind of behaviour ‘often remains forbidden in the minds of many men’ (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 103).

Anthropological research not only reveals that accountability is a useful conceptual tool for exploring gender relations among Mexicans but it also allows us to gain insights into different aspects of this process of monitoring and assessing. Through the ethnographic examples I engage with in the remainder of this section, I intend to draw attention to situations when concerns about others’ expectations may gain relevance, how people struggle to live up to or subvert these expectations and how the

presence of different kinds of audiences influences their efforts to manage social pressure. All these points will prove to be relevant to the discussion of the data I collected in Metztitlán and that I will analyse in Chapters Three-Eight. People's preoccupations with the opinions of others have often been used to demonstrate that women and men recognised the restrictiveness of dominant gender expectations. This is not surprising if we consider the fact that concerns about accountability do not rise to the surface of the interaction when interactions run smoothly but when, in one way or another, a disruption occurs. Zavella and Castañeda found that young Mexican women from working-class families living in the United States perceived the prevailing cultural expectations about female sexuality as 'limiting' (2005: 237). Even though their life conditions in the context of migration differed from 'the sheltered experiences of many young women in Mexico' (Zavella and Castañeda, 2005: 235), the cultural ideals of female sexual purity persisted. Some young women saw their parents as even more restrictive after migration. Women were 'hyper vigilant about guarding their reputations as good women (*mujeres decentes*)', especially in small communities in California where they regularly left home due to their occupational arrangements (Zavella and Castañeda, 2005: 235). The fear of being labelled 'an easy woman' influenced women's everyday experiences in different ways. While many of them engaged in sexual relations with their partners, they reported, for example, that they felt embarrassed to ask their companions to use a condom because they were concerned about prompting suspicions about their sexual activities (Castañeda and Zavella, 2003; Zavella and Castañeda, 2005). Women had to be mindful not only of how they themselves behaved but also about not hanging around with women who had 'bad reputations' (2005: 235). As Zavella and Castañeda claim, in this system of 'gossip and reputation, guilt by association carries heavy consequences, for being labelled a whore meant that men would not see them as marriage partners' (2005: 235).

Hirsch observed how Mexican women in Atlanta, due to the lack of 'social vigilance', felt more freedom to engage in behaviours that could have provoked harsh reactions back in their sending communities. She suggests that these new contexts allowed women to 'expand the range of the possible' and left more room for 'experimentation (and transgression)' (2003: 196-197). Similarly, among Mexican female farmworkers in California, Castañeda and Zavella (2003) found that women

faced more choices than in Mexico in different domains of their daily experiences, from the way they dressed to sexual relationships. While negotiating these new opportunities, women sought ways to ‘subvert patriarchal mechanisms of control’ but they still ‘accepted some notions of being *mujeres decentes*’ (2003: 140). Castañeda and Zavella account for these competing strivings by arguing that, while the anonymity allowed women to manage their behaviour more freely, ‘social surveillance’ was still present through transnational social networks (2003: 141). By linking transgressions with the absence of ‘social vigilance’ and anonymity, these accounts reveal that the context of migration to the United States contributed more to creating new possibilities for avoiding the assessments based on traditional values than to dismissing and actively challenging the legitimacy of these assessments.

Anonymity does not mean the absence of audience but it does mean the absence of an audience that matters in personally meaningful ways<sup>12</sup>. In the previously cited examples, the ‘range of the possible’ seemed to be expanded as long as one’s actions were not exposed to the gaze of an audience that mattered. Ethnographic evidence also shows that there is an important distinction between those who matter. I define it as a distinction between ‘intimate others’, such as parents, spouses or children and ‘outsiders’, such as neighbours. My field site was a densely interconnected space and the concept of anonymity will not gain much relevance in this thesis (except for brief references to migration). However, it is noteworthy that the notion of anonymous others greatly differs from the way I use the concept of ‘outsiders’. ‘Outsiders’ pertained to one’s social circle and the exposure to their gaze was not perceived as the lack of ‘social vigilance.’

While both ‘outsiders’ and ‘intimate others’ entertained expectations about an individual’s behaviour, they were differently positioned to enforce and to assess the fulfilment of these expectations. ‘Intimate others’ usually saw themselves and were seen by others as personally interested and involved in one’s well-being and the protection of one’s good name. At the same time, outsiders were those who had no stakes in one’s reputation and felt free to add information or critical assessment to one’s public record. This distinction helps clarify why I previously stressed that, even in small communities

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<sup>12</sup> As I have noted at the beginning of this section, this does not imply that social actors perceive the expectations of anonymous people as entirely irrelevant.

where people are densely interconnected, the concept of accountability may be only partly related to the concern about '*el qué dirán*.' People are held accountable for the way they act upon gender expectations not only by those who take part in the constitution of their reputations through silent or vocal assessments of their conduct but also by their most 'intimate others.' Although Zavella and Castañeda do not dwell upon this distinction, in their account of how their informants expressed preoccupations about the opinions of these different kinds of 'others', the differences are obvious. When young women talked about their parents, they did not worry about how what they might think affected their reputation but about betraying their loved ones' trust and 'dishonouring their struggle to migrate' (Zavella and Castañeda, 2005: 237). Yet these concerns were not unrelated to the concept of reputation as the idea of 'dishonouring' the family revealed the possibility that their parents might feel discomfort, not so much about an action itself as about its impact on their children's and their own public records. This led young women to negotiate gender and sexuality without their parents' knowledge (Zavella and Castañeda, 2005: 237).

And while in some situations people sought to hide their resistance to traditional expectations from their most 'intimate others' (Castañeda and Zavella, 2003; Zavella and Castañeda, 2005), in others they challenged traditional norms 'behind closed doors' (Hubbell, 1993; Hirsch, 2003)<sup>13</sup>. Working in two migrant communities in Western Mexico, Malkin argues that the enactment of gendered social roles in the family unit conferred status to women and men on both sides of the border and contributed to the production of 'respectable persons' (2004: 76). She shows how in this kind of gender order the resistance to gender divisions is a complex process as it requires not only the redefinition of gender ideals but also the renegotiation of the very grounds for respectability (2004: 94). Hirsch claims that in her field site 'assertions of joint decision making can be interpreted as aspersions on a man's masculinity' (2003: 123) and that neither men nor their wives could benefit from a man being considered to be a *mandilón*

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<sup>13</sup> Historical records about daily life in Mexico also drew attention to the 'symbolism of doors' (Lipsett-Rivera, 2012: 73) and to the differentiation between others associated with the 'internal' and with the 'external' space. Lipsett-Rivera claims that in the 18th and 19th centuries, 'the door was the demarcation line between inside and out; between the moral interior and the rowdy street' (2012: 82). But she notes that 'living spaces were not impermeable fortresses – even the wealthy with their spacious apartments composed of many rooms had visitors and multiple comings and goings of servants and trades people. As a result, in both elite and plebeian homes the internal activities of couples were often observed or heard' (2012: 105).

(apron wearer)<sup>14</sup>. The term traditionally referred to men who failed to enact the appropriate male role by engaging in what were perceived to be ‘female activities’ (e.g. housework) or displaying ‘female attributes’ (e.g. obedience to the spouse). This led spouses to ‘collude in the construction of public gender identities’, which meant that women often submitted to their husbands’ will in public while the partners renegotiated how they reached decisions ‘behind closed doors’ (2003: 123-124). Hubbell found that, as the economic crisis increasingly forced middle-class women in the Mexican town of Uruapan to enter the workforce, men’s respectability was threatened by the fact that they were no longer the only income-earners. She notes that many working women and their husbands developed different strategies seeking to mitigate this threat, such as avoiding, concealing or reinterpreting challenges to traditional values but she also remarks that a few of her informants ‘rationalised the violations of tradition’ through ‘open acceptance of changed values’ (1993: 11). In order to illustrate this ‘open acceptance of changed values’, she mentions the men who participated in domestic chores and stresses that ‘their embarrassment makes them most likely to do tasks inside the house, where their participation is least obvious to outsiders’ (Hubbell, 1993: 12).

Although the literature about accountability has usually dealt with generalised others (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Kane, 2006; Hollander, 2013), various ethnographic studies, mainly conducted in the United States, have recognised the relevance of different kinds of ‘audiences.’ This point has been usually framed in terms of the impact of gender composition or ideological affinities of the audience on an individual’s behaviour (see Martin, 2003; Denissen, 2010). For example, Martin, in her analysis of gender relations in multinational corporations suggests that researchers should be mindful of the possibility that men may ‘mobilise some forms of masculinities for women, some for men, and some for both genders’ (2003: 358). However, I suggest that ethnographic examples from Mexico demonstrate that it is worth not only paying attention to gender composition or ideological positioning of the audience but also drawing a distinction between ‘intimate others’ and outsiders.

At the same time, anthropological accounts reveal that both ‘intimate others’ and outsiders may become what I define as ‘accomplices’ in subverting traditional values.

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<sup>14</sup> I accept Hirsch’s translation of the term ‘mandilón’ as ‘apron wearer.’ Gutmann explains that its meaning is ‘stronger than the English henpecked but not nearly as vulgar as pussywhipped.’

Efforts by women and men to hide their challenges to traditional gender ideals from some social actors while exposing their behaviour to others show that in different contexts they found different kinds of ‘accomplices.’ This complicity occurred in spaces where dominant expectations seemed to be, at least partly, temporarily suspended and mutual understanding of the terms of the interaction assumed that the risk of censure was minimised (e.g. between young women and their partners who engaged in sexual encounters resisting the traditional ideal of female chastity). It would be misleading, however, to assume that the ‘accomplices’ were united by a common commitment to new, more egalitarian expectations and that their interactions rested upon a transformed accountability regime. One woman’s words about young men and women of Mexican origin in the United States who engaged in premarital sexual relationships may illustrate this point: ‘The majority of Mexican men that I know say “when I marry I am going back to Mexico because the women there are not like you”’ (Zavella and Castañeda, 2005: 235).

In this thesis, I build on these valuable anthropological accounts. Yet I believe that, in order to better understand the process of changing gender relations, more analytical attention should be dedicated to how people actually contribute to dismantling traditional accountability regimes, and how the presence of different kinds of audiences influences these contributions. Deutsch sees social interactions as an important ‘site of change’ (2007:120) as she notes that ‘even when structural conditions produce gender difference and inequality, these are mediated through social interactions that always contain the potential for resistance’ (2007: 108). She argues that, although West and Zimmerman use the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to both conformity and resistance, ‘the commonsense use of the language orients us toward conformity’ and suggests that we use the phrase ‘doing gender’ to refer to social interactions that ‘reproduce gender difference’ and ‘undoing gender’ to the ones that ‘reduce gender difference’ (2007: 122)<sup>15</sup>. The acts of resistance to normative conceptions should not be defined in terms of their intentionality or outcomes because, as Shaw remarks, ‘intentional acts to resist may be more or less successful, and successful resistance can occur without prior intent’ (2001: 199). However, what I define as acts of resistance or instances of ‘undoing gender’ in this thesis do have one important feature in common. ‘Undoing gender’ is an

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<sup>15</sup> Butler (2004) used the concept of ‘undoing gender’ within a different theoretical framework.

interactional concept and I do not apply it to any statement or action that does not comply with the traditional gender ideals but to the ones that are put to work, whether intently or unwittingly, through interactions with other social actors, in which they may pose a challenge to the preservation of the accountability criteria based on traditional beliefs. The absence of other social actors, ‘audiences’ or ‘witnesses’ implies the impossibility of contributing to ‘reducing gender difference’ or ‘undoing gender’ by renegotiating the dominant accountability regime.

What I understand as resistance to traditional accountability criteria or a contribution to ‘undoing gender’ may be illustrated, for example, by Howell’s (1999) reference to parents in rural Oaxaca who encouraged their daughters to study in spite of criticism from neighbours and older relatives. Although Howell does not use either the phrase ‘undoing gender’ or the term ‘accountability’, she cites the case of one father in his fifties who remembered how his already adult daughters had been victims of unfounded rumours while they studied outside the village. She recounts that the man confronted not only gossip but also direct insults for trusting his daughters and supporting their educational pursuits (Howell, 1999: 108). While this example shows how people handle the scrutiny of outsiders, another reference reveals how they can challenge traditional expectations within their intimate circles. In Pesquera’s (1999) account of the negotiations over men’s participation in housework among Mexican migrant couples in the United States, the author reports that one of her female informants ‘attempted a variety of techniques in her struggle’ to engage her husband in domestic chores. She employed ‘outright confrontation and nagging’ and, having become increasingly impatient with the man’s reluctance to collaborate, she had gone on strike (Pesquera, 1999: 190). This sort of action may give rise to different outcomes, from reinforcing a man’s reluctance to participate in a non-traditional gender arrangement through changing only his behaviour to transforming both his actions and his expectations about gender roles. Although the effects of ‘undoing gender’ represent an exciting line of inquiry for future research, in this thesis, I will pay particular attention not to the outcomes of resistance but to the resistance itself or, more precisely, to people’s readiness to resist.

My interest in accountability does not imply that I assume that people ‘do gender’ only as a result of social pressure. Martin wonders, even though she admits that

she does not intend to resolve the dilemma, whether people practice gender at work ‘due to free, unfettered choice or to accountability pressures of the gender institution’ (2003: 358). She understands West and Zimmerman’s theoretical framework to suggest that ‘accountability pressures prompt people to do gender, appropriate to the situation, rejecting the claim that “free will” in the form of unfettered choice – “wanting to” – is the reason people practice gender at work’ (Martin, 2003: 358). I believe that, considering people’s intense exposure from the earliest age to pervasive mechanisms that enforce particular accountability regimes, it is an arduous task to try to disentangle personal choices from the internalisation of cultural expectations and I doubt that this kind of effort would be productive. However, independently of why many people continue to ‘do gender’, what I find more interesting is to seek to understand the ways in which many others or these same people in different domains become motivated to ‘undo gender’ while exposing themselves to negative reactions and pushing gender boundaries. The analysis of my ethnographic material will suggest that resistance may be able to expose the workings of choice more effectively than compliance.

In his ethnographic study of young men’s attitudes towards machismo in Mexico City, Ramírez (2008) evokes his conversation with Patricia Piñones, who was a professor in developmental psychology at UNAM and the director of a peer counselling programme dedicated to the issues of sexuality and AIDS prevention. He reports that ‘she insisted that even if new ideas permeated student discourses they were not reflected in concrete practices’ (Ramírez, 2008: 37). However, he argues that he did not share her understanding of social change because as an ethnographer he was interested in ‘the politics of little things’, which meant that, for him, ‘change in discourses - in ways of talking about gender - registered as real change’ (Ramírez, 2008: 37). I do not find it useful to dwell upon what qualifies as ‘real change’ but I think that Professor Piñones’s insistence on the translation of discourses to practices should not be easily dismissed as ‘influenced by her bureaucratic role as administrator and player in the funding game’ (Ramírez, 2008: 38). It is surely important to identify changes in discourses. But, as ethnographers, we need to be mindful of whether particular discourses emerge only in individual interviews with our informants or also in everyday interactions among them.

Independently of the amount of information that Mexican informants possess about anthropologists, ethnographic accounts reveal that they usually perceive

anthropologists as representatives of a more modern, egalitarian accountability regime and the same thing occurred in Metztitlán. Yet the attentiveness to the distinction between what children in Metztitlán said in front of other villagers and what they told me is not grounded in the idea that what people tell an anthropologist is somewhat less ‘real’ because they may perceive her as a representative of a particular accountability regime and strategically manage their discourses seeking to live up to her expectations. Men, women, girls and boys continually shape the way they talk and behave for their audience and the interactions with an anthropologist are no exception (Hirsch, 2003: 159). In spite of this, my status was somewhat peculiar. People did not seem to view me as an ‘outsider.’ They assured me that, while their fellow villagers ‘loved to talk (about others)’, they felt free to talk to me because I did not go around recounting what others told me. But I also had no reason to believe that they saw me as an ‘intimate other’, who was interested in protecting their reputation from the threat of outsiders’ criticism and in front of whom others might refrain from criticising them. While it is important to acknowledge in what contexts and in front of whom people manage their self-representation in what ways, for the sake of an ‘appropriately critical lens’ (Hirsch, 2003: 160), all these different efforts should be recognised as part of one’s gender identity.

However, my emphasis on the distinction between what is said to the anthropologist, on the one hand, and to other villagers, on the other, is not only a matter of self-representation. It is primarily meant to call attention to the importance of distinguishing between discourses that can contribute to changing dominant gender arrangements or ‘undoing gender’ by questioning traditional accountability criteria in a particular social environment and those that cannot (e.g. because the anthropologist may be already seen as ‘modern’). Therefore, I am particularly interested to learn whether the attitudes children expressed in our conversations were actually put to the service of changing traditional expectations through interactions with fellow villagers.

### **Children’s perspectives**

The fact that anthropological research about gender relations among Mexicans has paid little attention to children prevents us from gaining a fuller insight into the

transformation of gender ideals and arrangements. Ethnographic accounts have shown that children in Mexico are ‘not powerless’ (Dreby, 2010: 33) and that they may ‘influence the decisions of the adults in their lives’ (Dreby, 2007: 1063; Boehm, 2008). Yet the studies about gender have mostly referred to children to spotlight adults’ renegotiations of parental roles or to illustrate changes in parents’ understanding of socialising practices (LeVine et al., 1991; Gutmann, 2006 [1996], 1998, 2005; Hirsch, 2003)<sup>16</sup>. According to 2010 census, the population aged between 0 and 14 years amounts to 32,110,156, that is 28.2% of the total Mexican population. However, the need for more ethnographic attention to how children negotiate gender relations is not merely a question of quantitative balance.

By foregrounding adults’ experiences, ethnographic research contributes to distorting the representation of gender relations among Mexicans in at least two ways. The first is that it locks reflections about gender within the same issues, such as motherhood, the division of labour and sexuality. Secondly, it continually recounts the story of these pervasive topics from the same perspectives (e.g. from mothers themselves, fathers themselves, breadwinners themselves and their spouses, homemakers themselves and their spouses, etc.). In this thesis, I will show that the focus on children’s ideas, concerns, expectations, practices and relationships with peers and adults not only gives us a fuller insight into the transformation of gender ideals and arrangements but also helps us reinvigorate the debate about gender among Mexicans by, on the one hand, engaging with less elaborated themes, such as the politics of gendered objects (e.g. toys), and, on the other, exploring familiar issues, such as the division of labour, from less familiar perspectives (e.g. from sons and daughters of breadwinners and homemakers).

Many anthropologists have shown great interest in the study of children over several decades (Mead, 1928, 1932; Hardman, 1973; Whiting and Whiting, 1975; Goodwin, 1990; Whiting and Edwards, 1992; Toren, 1993; Stafford, 2006 [1995]; LeVine and New, 2008). Yet the dearth of ethnographic information about children’s ideas and practices in many fields of research, such as gender relations among Mexicans, testifies to the pertinence of the concerns underlying Hirschfeld’s (2002)

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<sup>16</sup> Historian Lipsett-Rivera (2002) provides interesting insights into the lives of children in colonial Mexico and shows how in the 18th century the state began to show more interest in influencing children’s lives.

observation that anthropologists ‘don’t like children.’ However, a steadily growing body of research has demonstrated, as Hardman anticipated four decades ago, that children ‘have much to offer’ (1973: 516) and recognised them as informants whose thinking and experiences are interesting ‘in their own right.’ While feminist anthropologists invoke Ardener’s (1972) idea of ‘muted groups’ to promote the study of women’s experiences and perspectives (see Oakley, 1994 for differences and similarities between women’s and children’s studies), Hardman refers to the same concept to invite anthropologists to pay more attention to children. She criticises anthropological research that viewed children ‘to a greater or lesser extent, as passive objects, as helpless spectators in a pressing environment that affects and produces their every behaviour’ (Hardman, 2001 [1973]: 504).

Grounded in the understanding of childhood as socially constructed (see Aries, 1962; Pollock 1983 for historical studies that stimulated this approach), the ‘new paradigm’ or ‘new social studies of childhood’ advanced the argument that childhood is ‘constructed and reconstructed both for children and by children’ (Prout and James, 1997: 7). Sociological and anthropological research dismissed the idea of children as incompetent, inarticulate and passive recipients of socialisation (Corsaro, 1985, 1997; La Fontaine, 1986; James and Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; James, 1993, 1998, 2001; Mayall, 2001; LeVine, 2007; Montgomery, 2009) and shifted from the vision of children as merely ‘human becomings’ to their recognition as ‘human beings’ or ‘beings and becomings’ (Valentine, 1996; Balen et al., 2006; Uprichard, 2008; Qvortrup, 2009; Lancy et al., 2010). This approach did not imply ignoring the importance of learning in children’s daily experiences. As Lancy noted, ‘children can be seen as acting in the moment, behaving appropriately for their age but also moving on a developmental trajectory toward adulthood’ (Lancy et al, 2010: 6). Yet the idea that ‘because children’s roles were impermanent, they were also unimportant’ (Montgomery, 2009: 45) was firmly rejected. Michelet provides an insightful proposal for resolving the tensions between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ by distinguishing three levels of analysis: first, children as fully-fledged actors within social research (i.e. being); secondly, children as defined within their sociocultural setting (i.e. being and/or becoming); and finally, without playing down the specificities of their physical and psychological development, children as persons who are aging like people of any other generation (i.e. becoming) (2013: 51).

The final point is particularly important as, by drawing attention to an often unheeded fact that people's perceptions, beliefs, behaviours and roles are subject to change throughout life, it suggests that the impermanence of children's identities is, in a way, less extraordinary than many within social sciences are ready to admit.

Girls and boys are social actors who use their own perspectives to make sense of the beliefs, values and practices which are, intently or inadvertently, made available to them through adults and peers. By creatively engaging with their social reality, they put these interpretations to work in ways that influence their own lives and those of parents, relatives and friends. In this way, they are shaped by and contribute to shaping their social environments. The idea of children as fully-fledged social actors and 'meaning-makers' (Montgomery, 2009: 13), worth studying 'in their own right', is closely intertwined with the recognition that they are 'the best informants about their own lives' (Montgomery, 2009: 44) and competent and useful interlocutors about the social life in a particular setting. This acknowledgement inspired thoughtful efforts to come to grips with 'new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities' (Christensen and Prout, 2002), 'the pitfall of authenticity' in the representation of 'children's voices' (James, 2007) and the methodological challenges of children's participation in research (Christensen and James, 2000; Prout, 2002).

### **Children, accountability and 'undoing gender'**

A large body of psychological research, conducted mostly in Europe and North America, suggests that children tend to think about gender in essentialist terms. It has been argued that gender essentialism is a cognitive bias or explanatory device that spontaneously emerges at an early age and that 'the persistence of essentialism in adulthood may be traced to its developmental antecedents' (Gelman and Taylor, 2000: 170). Some of the evidence used to support these claims indicates that children readily infer gender properties on the basis of category membership, ignoring contradictory perceptual information (Gelman et al., 1986; Berndt and Heller, 1986), exaggerate gender group differences by denying or misremembering gender-atypical cases (Liben and Signorella, 1980; Martin and Halverson, 1983) and, at a very young age, attribute gender differences more commonly to biological causes than to socialisation (Ullian,

1976; Taylor, 1996; Gelman and Taylor, 2000)<sup>17</sup>. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that gendering practices are triggered simply by an essentialist cognitive bias. In her book ‘The essential child’, Gelman notes that ‘even on the most nativist accounts, environmental input must play some role, because at the very least, we have to learn which categories to essentialise’ (2005: 158) and lists perceptual information, explicit adults’ and peers’ talk and implicit cues from language as the potential social influences on children. Sociologists, anthropologists and historians have amply documented how the sources of environmental cues insistently promote gender dualism (Moreno, 1986; Subirats and Brullet, 1988; Davies, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Bustos Romero, 1994; Moral Pérez, 1995; Moreno, 2000; Kimmel, 2000; Varney, 2002; Connolly, 2003; Kane, 2006; Ringrose, 2007) and how children construct the ideals of femininity and masculinity as opposite and unequal identities (Mac and Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995, 2008; Davies, 1989; Skelton, 1996, 2001; Connolly, 1998; Francis, 1998, 1999; Paechter, 2007; Pascoe, 2007). Yet it has also been found that children’s essentialist theories become more flexible and probabilistic as they learn cultural explanations, grasp causal mechanisms and encounter within-category variability (Gelman and Taylor, 2000: 188).

The pervasiveness of gender dualism informs children’s expectations about the behaviour of their peers and adults or, to put it differently, the gender ideals to which they hold others accountable. When Davies presented American pre-school children with stories involving characters and situations which contradicted gender stereotypes, a four-year-old girl provided a strikingly telling explanation of how she perceived gender transgressions: ‘When the wrong kind of human being does that, I get a (pause) tickle in my brain...’ (2006: 119). Although most of the studies on children and gender did not explicitly address the concept of accountability, they have clearly shown its relevance to understanding children’s negotiations of gender relations. By showing how peers and adults enforce gender expectations, they uncover how accountability regimes are constructed and maintained. Thorne’s influential ethnographic study, conducted in American primary schools and published under the title ‘Gender play’, marked a shift in

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<sup>17</sup> These features are seen as central to the definition of essentialism in psychological research. However, throughout this thesis the references to gender essentialism are in line with the way the terms ‘essence’ and ‘essential’ have been used in anthropological accounts to denote the idea that men and women are inherently predisposed to differ in the ways they think, feel or behave.

the research on children and gender as it challenged the long-standing academic tradition of overstating gender separation and opposition in children's experiences (Lever, 1976, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1990) by arguing that gender relations are 'not fixed and invariant but vary by context' (Thorne, 1993: 160) and demonstrating the significance of those instances when boys and girls interact 'in relaxed and non-gendermarked ways' (1993: 64). Thorne notes that 'when girls and boys are together in a relaxed and integrated way, playing a game of handball or eating and talking together at a table in the lunchroom, the sense of gender as boundary often dissolves' (1993: 64). Thorne's study and the array of research it inspired (Jordan, 1995; Messner, 2000; Aydt and Corsaro, 2003; Morrow, 2006; Paechter, 2007) reveal that the accountability regimes in the settings where these projects were conducted did not rest upon the expectation that girls and boys should constantly differ in their behaviour in all domains of activity.

However, there is abundant ethnographic evidence, mostly collected in the fields of education and sociology, that confirms that girls and boys carefully monitor one another's behaviour and promptly react to violations of gender boundaries if, in the situations in which they are expected to differ, someone fails to comply with these expectations (Paechter, 2007). In this way, they participate in what has been labelled as 'gender category maintenance' (Davies, 1989). While adults are usually concerned about what others might think or say behind their back (e.g. *el qué dirán*), children know that the assessments of their violations of local ideals are often directly expressed by peers and adults in face-to-face encounters. The majority of studies that focus on children's gender relations are conducted in school settings and the manifestations of peer pressure have been more amply documented than adults' admonitions. Children who defy dominant expectations are subject to ridicule, physical abuse and social exclusion (Francis, 1998; Francis and Skelton, 2001; Skelton and Francis, 2003; Pascoe, 2005, 2007; Renold, 2005).

The central question of this thesis is whether children regarded traditional gender divisions as problematic and, if they did, whether they showed readiness to put this idea to work by resisting traditional gender expectations through their everyday interactions. In the light of this, what is particularly relevant to my research is how the existing literature engages with the issues of what kind of behaviour provokes censure and how

children respond to the manifestations of social pressure to conform to traditional divisions. Significant ethnographic attention has been paid to understanding what practices draw 'gendered and sexualised bullying' (Renold, 2005: 155) and many of these studies have been inspired by the concepts of multiple masculinities and femininities. Connell defines 'hegemonic masculinity' as 'the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable' (1995: 76). She explains that hegemonic masculinity is 'culturally exalted' in a particular setting at a given moment but stresses that the establishment of hegemony requires a correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power (Connell, 1995: 77). She recognises the importance of the interplay of gender, race and class in the construction of multiple masculinities. What has been seen as one of the major contributions of Connell's theoretical framework was the fact that hegemonic masculinity operates not only through the subordination of femininity but also through the subordination and marginalisation of other masculinities (Schippers, 2007: 87; Connolly, 2004: 60). Ethnographic research has shown that children's interpersonal attitudes, academic interests and achievement, participation in sports, clothing, music preferences or choice of friends are used as important markers of their compliance with hegemonic gender ideals and that challenges to dominant expectations comport important social consequences (Francis, 1998; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Reay, 2003; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Renold, 2004; Schippers, 2007; Paechter, 2007). The impact of Connell's argument on studies about children and gender is most clearly manifested through the tendency to interpret behaviours that did not fit in with the hegemonic gender distinctions as 'alternative masculinities and femininities' (Poudyal, 2000; Renold, 2004, 2005; Frosh et al. 2002; MacNaughton, 2000). The authors hope to contribute to the construction of an educational agenda that critically engages with traditional forms of masculinity and femininity within 'a pro-feminist framework' (Reay, 2001: 164) and that explores the possibilities that alternative masculinities and femininities open up in children's emotional and social experiences.

While children's challenges to hegemonic expectations, enacted through non-hegemonic behaviour, are framed in terms of 'alternative masculinities and femininities', the challenges that are articulated through reactions to bullying are usually dissociated from these efforts and defined as 'responses' or 'resistance to sexism.'

Children explained to Renold that teaching staff occasionally advised them that they should ‘keep away’ from or ‘ignore’ those who teased or ridiculed others (Renold, 2005: 155). This strategy was sometimes unsuccessful since, as children recognised, if they walked away to the other side of the playground, those who harassed them ‘just follow you’ (Renold, 2005: 155). One of Francis’s informants admitted that, when he heard people being sexist, he just moved away from them because he did not like ‘getting involved in these things.’ Francis argues that ‘while this strategy may save him from becoming involved, it does not challenge sexism in any way’ (1998: 86). However, ‘ignoring’ or ‘keeping away’ from sexist remarks should not always be interpreted as ‘not challenging sexism in any way.’ If children simply observe someone who engages in a behaviour that does not comply with dominant gender expectations and those who attack them, they do nothing to defy the prevailing accountability regime. Yet those who actually engage in gender atypical conduct and then ‘move away’ from sexist remarks, even though they may not experience immediate benefits from this strategy, may be contributing to challenging the hegemonic accountability criteria through the exposure of their very behaviour to the public gaze.

Francis notes that children did not only ignore sexism but also responded to it more actively. She identifies five other strategies of ‘resistance to sexism’: telling a teacher, rebuking the sexist person, arguing for equality, collective resistance, and demonstration of equality (1998: 95). For example, to illustrate ‘demonstration of equality’, she cites the words of a girl who explained how she reacted to boys physically picking on girls: ‘(...) if ‘e bullied *me* I’d bully ‘im back, I don’t care what Miss’d say, I’d just stand firm’ (Francis, 1998: 98-99). The fact that the existing research with children has mostly relied upon interview reports implies that it has predominantly provided insights into how children ‘claim to respond to sexism’ rather than how they actually react to this kind of situations (Francis, 1998: 99). In Metztitlán, I had the opportunity to collect information about both how children claimed to respond and how they actually responded to the enforcement of gender divisions through their everyday interactions.

In this thesis, the way I interpret children’s practices that do not fit in with traditional gender ideology differs from the dominant approach that frames them as alternative masculinities and femininities for, at least, two reasons. First, a different

analytical approach, grounded in the idea of ‘undoing gender’ helps me avoid contributing to the reification of gender dualism (even ‘multiple’ masculinities and femininities continue to be locked into a binary division). Secondly, it allows me to acknowledge equally different ways of challenging dominant expectations by pulling together under the same concept of ‘undoing gender’ the commonly dissociated instances of enacting gender-atypical behaviour and supporting the performance of these acts or responding to their derision. The avoidance of the concepts of ‘alternative masculinities’ and ‘alternative femininities’ is surely facilitated by the fact that the ethnographic examples of resistance to hegemonic ideals that I will address are not readily associated with particular groups of boys or girls but rather seen as the results of individual initiatives. But, regardless of this, I believe that the insistence on interpreting the acceptance, whether group or individual, of gender-atypical or non-hegemonic options as different masculinities and femininities bears important conceptual implications.

Risman rightly points out that ‘we must know what we are looking for when we are looking for gendered behaviour and then be willing and ready to admit when we do not find it. Why label new behaviours adopted by groups of boys or girls alternative masculinities and femininities simply because the group itself is formed of biological males or females?’ (2009: 82). I understand that ethnographic accounts about gender relations among children convincingly show that researchers’ usage of the concepts of non-hegemonic masculinities and femininities does not merely rest upon the fact that particular groups are composed of biological males and females but that it reflects girls’ and boys’ oppositional constructions of their own and their peers’ identities. For example, many authors have noted that even the boys who enact identities that are associated with the ‘feminine’ by others see themselves as opposed to girls. At the same time, those who identify them with girls differently evaluate the same behaviours embodied by boys and girls. These are important insights and should not be ignored. However, I believe that they suggest that we need to be careful to distinguish between how our informants and how we ourselves talk about gender. We need to pay ethnographic attention to whether children perceive certain practices as a contribution, as Deutsch (2007) put it, to reducing gender differences or ‘undoing gender’ or they see apparently identical behaviour as radically different depending on the sex membership

of those who engage in such behaviour. Yet, independently of our informants' perceptions, at a different level of analysis, I feel that, by couching the resistance to traditional ideals in the idiom of 'undoing gender', we allow for the possibility that some little, everyday acts, no matter whether they elicit or respond to the manifestations of social pressure, may participate in gradual, no matter how immediately imperceptible, process of undermining the accountability regime based on gender dualism and opposition.

### **Children and gender in Mexico**

Understanding children's readiness to resist hegemonic or traditional gender divisions gains particular relevance when exploring gender relations among children in Mexico because in this sociocultural setting the project of transforming gender relations has been institutionalised over the last few decades and traditional gender ideology is actively challenged. The first studies that paid attention to Mexican children and gender focused on how rearing practices contributed to the formation of social character and to the maintenance of Mexican cultural values (Lewis, 1951; Díaz-Guerrero, 1955; Romney and Romney, 1963; McGinn, 1966; Peñalosa, 1968; Fromm and Maccoby, 1970; Staton, 1972). Peñalosa argues that 'the nature of male-female relationships in Mexican society is the outcome of a lengthy and consistent socialisation process' (1968: 683-684). From the earliest age, boys are severely reprimanded for engaging in any activity associated with femininity, encouraged to despise elegance or sentimentality and to embrace 'a hard attitude toward life.' At the same time, girls are taught to 'be submissive and to cultivate the feminine charms', to repress self-assertiveness and to accept their 'inferior status vis-à-vis the boys.' Derisive labels, such as *jotitos* (little homosexuals) for boys and '*marimachos*' (tomboys) for girls are used to shame children back into their desirable gender roles (Peñalosa, 1968: 684-688, McGinn, 1966: 309). Staton reports that in both Mexican and Mexican-American families a young girl 'learns how to always dress like a female, to be neat, to be graceful, and to avoid playing rough games with boys' (1972: 326). He explains that as girls move into adolescence they come to learn the requirements of the '*hembrismo*' role which involves 'weakness, inertia, and passive attitudes toward males' (Staton, 1972: 326).

These studies viewed children as passive recipients of socialisation rather than social actors and showed no interest in boys' and girls' perspectives on these gender arrangements. While Lewis's book 'The Children of Sánchez' (2011[1961]) does not give voice to children either, childhood memories of adult sons and daughters of Jesús Sánchez and the recollections of Jesús himself provide more vivid insights into the differences between the experiences of boys and girls growing up in a working-class *barrio* of Mexico City through references to the division of labour, sexuality or violence. At the same time, the depictions of everyday interactions of these working-class children revealed more contradictions and ambiguities in their gender relations than the sociological accounts of rigid, socialising practices, observed mainly among middle-class families, indicated. One of the Sánchez daughters recalled:

*Once I got into a fight with a girl who pulled off my beauty mark. I was so mad I tore her dress from top to bottom, as though it had been cut with a scissors. I was always getting into fights because some girls are vipers; they get jealous, tell lies about each other, and start trouble. I fought with boys too. If they said or did anything to me, I never let them get away with it. One fellow, who was bigger than I, tripped me when I was running around the courtyard. I fell and cracked my head. I wasn't scared, just very angry, and when my head was better, I went after him for revenge. I hit him so much, his mother complained to my papá. But my father didn't pay any attention to her. (Lewis, 2011 [1961]: 143)*

The resurgence of the feminist agenda in the 1970s, rapid socioeconomic changes and the growing academic interest in gender inequalities converged to inspire research on the transformation of gender relations and on the role of children in this process not only in Mexico but across Latin America. Most of these inquiries were conducted in the field of education (see Delgado, 2003 for a review of research and *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa*, 2009, v. 14, n. 42 for a special issue dedicated to gender in education in Latin America). There has been particular concern with demonstrating that the increase in girls' access to schooling is not the only criterion

for assessing the effects of gender reform but that it is necessary to understand ‘the internal processes’ of girls’ permanence in education (Delgado, 2003: 524; Cortina, 1995; Messina, 2001). Researchers have explored how adults, especially teachers, fostered egalitarian values among children but, even more frequently, how they hindered the promotion of modern ideals by invoking traditional norms (Bustos Romero, 1994; Parga Romero, 2004; Ochoa et al., 2006; Nava Saucedo and López Álvarez, 2010). Yet, while the discourses and practices of teaching staff have received considerable attention, much less is known about how children themselves make sense of, reproduce, question and challenge dominant gender expectations. Delgado admits that ‘the studies about the classroom centre on the figure of teachers as the main reproducers of stereotypes, values and roles’ (2003: 519).

The accounts of Mexican children’s conceptions of gender are often based on responses to questionnaires and provide no evidence about how girls’ and boys’ ideas are negotiated through daily interactions with peers and adults (Reyes Luna et al, 2004; Martínez Reina and Vélez Cea, 2009). But even some ethnographic studies reveal little more than that about children’s experiences. Seeking to gain insight into the construction of female gender stereotypes in Mexican secondary schools, Parga Romero (2004) observed interactions in classrooms, interviewed students and teachers and circulated questionnaires. In the introduction to her study she announced that her intention was to explore how teachers and students ‘construct and reconstruct the behaviours that they consider to be appropriate for a man and for a woman within everyday school relations’ (Parga, 2004: 23). However, while her account of teachers’ ideas and practices was more detailed and showed how they participated in constructing and questioning gender stereotypes through interviews, questionnaires and observations of their interventions in the classroom, the information she provided about girls and boys relied almost exclusively upon their responses to questionnaires.

Leyra Fatou’s ethnographic study of girls’ labour in Mexico City provides a far more nuanced and thorough account of girls’ discourses, experiences and relationships. The author interviewed girls who worked in the streets and markets and their male and female relatives and observed their everyday interactions. While this account offers useful information about girls’ experiences of gender relations and Leyra Fatou shows considerable theoretical interest in the concept of resistance, we learn little about how

her informants actually resisted traditional gender expectations within this context.

Levinson's (2001) research about student culture and identity at Mexican secondary schools shows how, in spite of the officially promoted ideal that 'we are all equal', referring to social, ethnic, gender and other distinctions, the dominant accountability regimes in many domains of activity rested upon gendered ideals (Levinson, 2001). Although he does not engage thoroughly with the ways boys and girls challenged these traditionally upheld distinctions, he gives useful glimpses into how children dealt with the contradictions in gender expectations and exposed behaviours that did not comply with hegemonic expectations to the public gaze. For example, he notes that, while boys acknowledged that girls were capable of disciplining a group and advocating their common interests, in everyday interactions they called more forceful girls *marimachas* (tomboys). He observes that girls who excelled academically and showed keen interest in leadership roles 'took the risk of censure' and of being labelled as *fachosa* (conceited) or *sangrona* (pretentious) by boys and girls alike (Levinson, 1997: 10).

This thesis seeks to contribute to these efforts to grasp the dynamics of gender relations among Mexican children by suggesting that acts of resistance to traditional gender ideals and taking 'the risk of censure' deserve our careful attention (Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six). Defying traditional gender divisions does not require only the appreciation for egalitarian values or access to resources but also overcoming concerns about social pressure to conform to traditional expectations. At the same time, it is useful to examine how social actors engage with gender divisions when they are not held accountable to traditional expectations (Chapters Seven and Eight). Finding commonalities in children's readiness to embrace egalitarian arrangements when they feel that they are expected to comply with gender divisions, on the one hand, and when they do not, on the other, may help to better understand the process of change of traditional ideologies and arrangements. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that this thesis is only about how children come to resist traditional gender expectations. In order to understand resistance, it also looks at how they comply, to what extent they are expected to comply and how these expectations are enforced.

## Chapter Three

### **Inevitable differences and gender equality**

Héctor, Carlos, Esteban and Pablo were playing football in the front yard. I playfully pretended to be a TV commentator and holding a pen instead of a microphone loudly described what I observed in the field. They missed many chances and I teased them by saying that all the fans were leaving the stadium in tears. At one point, seven-year-old Pablo shot at open goal and missed once again. Eleven-year-old Héctor picked up the ball, kicked it and accidentally hit seven-year-old Carlos on the arm. ‘Ouch! You hurt me!’ the boy moaned. He sat on the ground and loudly complained: ‘It hurts!’ Suddenly, we heard Esteban and Carlos’s father Manuel, who was watching us from the window, disapprovingly shout, ‘You are like a woman!’ (*; Pareces vieja!*) The rest of the boys laughed while Carlos remained silent.

When I witnessed this scene, I had been in Metztitlán for more than three months and I was still seeking to figure out how such remarks fit in with the increasingly popular idea that ‘*los hombres y las mujeres son iguales*’ (men and women are equal/the same). I knew that it was far more complicated than assuming that the villagers who teased men by comparing them to women were not the same ones who argued that men and women were *iguales*. Manuel himself had made this claim in front of me more than once. But I was also confident that it would be misleading, in the light of the man’s admonition to his son, to dismiss his statement about men and women being *iguales* merely as an attempt at political correctness. It seemed more productive to try to understand how villagers made sense of the idea of gender equality, promoted through schooling, the media and public policies. As I noted in Chapter One, in contrast to the English distinction between ‘being equal’ and ‘being the same, identical’, the Spanish phrase *ser iguales* is fraught with ambiguities as it is used to denote both senses. This chapter aims to show the importance of these tensions to the transformation of gender ideals and arrangements in Mexico. It examines how parents, neighbours, teachers and authors of textbooks made available to children their negotiations of the ideas of difference, sameness and equality, and reveals how adult villagers, by

accommodating the ideal of gender equality within traditional expectations about girls' and boys' displaying and coping with aggression, hindered the construction of an alternative accountability regime. I found that 'intimate others' and the rest of the villagers grounded their assessments of children's behaviour in the same accountability criteria but enforced them in different ways.

### **Difference, sameness and equality**

Villagers shared a deeply entrenched conviction that, from the moment children are born, the inspection of their genitals allows others not only to label them as 'girls' or 'boys' but also to anticipate a whole set of traits and inclinations. None of the people I met had ever hinted at any differences in boys' and girls' intellectual capacities but they occasionally shared with me their impressions about many other characteristics. They believed, for example, that boys were more disobedient, bold or restless than girls and that girls were more responsible, sensitive or talkative than boys. Although my research focused on children who were in primary school, I occasionally also had an opportunity to observe parents' interactions with toddlers and I could see how adults strategically used children's behaviour from the earliest age to reinforce their own perceptions of men's and women's innate predispositions.

Anahí, a three-year-old girl, was lying on the couch combing her doll's hair while Yael, a boy of the same age, was running around the table where his mother Malena, Anahí's aunt Maritza and I were sitting. Yael pretended to be a policeman chasing thieves so he shouted and mimicked the sound of shotgun blasts. 'You see how different boys and girls are?' Malena asked, almost rhetorically. 'Well, Anahí is also a handful sometimes,' remarked the girl's aunt and quickly added, 'But yes, they are very different.' I reminded them that I had often seen Anahí run, shout and jump no less restlessly than Yael and that Yael sometimes sat quietly patting his stuffed animals or watching cartoons. 'It's true but it's not just about being more active. Boys are rougher. You don't see Anahí chasing thieves and pretending to hit them or shoot them. Boys like that kind of things. Girls don't,' Malena insisted. 'And do you think that they are born that way or they become that way? (*¿Crees que nacen así o se hacen?*)' I asked. 'If they see that their parents fight a lot and things like that, they can become more violent and if

you talk to them, orient them, it happens less, but they are born that way,' Malena explained.

Malena's words echoed an idea widely asserted among her neighbours. Of all the characteristics villagers associated differently with boys and girls, the distinction between boys being more rough (*toscos, bruscos*) or rude (*grosos*) and girls more calm (*tranquilas*) emerged most consistently. This distinction implied that boys engaged more readily and frequently in playful (rough) and intentional (rude), physical and verbal aggression (i.e. hitting, pushing, teasing and insulting others) while girls were more likely to refrain from these actions. Although many people claimed that social factors considerably influenced both boys' and girls' conduct, most of them believed in the existence of male and female nature and couched their ideas in phrases like 'girls are like that' (*las niñas son así*), 'boys are born that way' (*los niños nacen así*) or 'that's the way they are' (*es su forma de ser*).

These perceptions of essential gender differences apparently contradicted the premises of modern gender ideology which policy-makers sought to promote through schooling. As I mentioned in Chapter One, teachers were instructed by the Secretary of Public Education that sex is 'natural' and 'unchangeable' and gender is 'sociocultural' and 'changeable' and that 'if the feminine and the masculine as attributes and qualities are a fabrication that varies throughout different periods and societies, then those attributes are not natural, which means that they are not inscribed beforehand onto the sexed bodies' (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 15). This idea was conveyed to children by claiming that 'persons are the same as human beings but different as members of different sexes', (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 101) and that the differences between men and women are merely anatomical and physiological. 'From the moment they are born, men and women are physically different,' (SEP, 2009b: 38) stated the Natural Sciences textbook for the fifth grade. After carefully examining primary and secondary sexual characteristics, the unit ended with the conclusion that 'although men and women are physically different, their intellectual and creative capacities and their rights are the same: the right to be respected and listened to, equality of opportunities, equality of responsibility in taking decisions' (SEP, 2009b: 40).

In a seminar for teachers, organised at the primary school in Metztitlán by the Secretary of Public Education and the Institute for Integral Development of the Family

of the State of Hidalgo, and which I attended, the instructor enthusiastically addressed the distinction between sex and gender. She insisted on the existence of biological differences, but challenged the validity of differential attribution of intellectual and emotional traits or social expectations to men and women. Some of the attributes that the official publications listed as examples of gender stereotypes attributed to girls were ‘docile, dependent, home-loving, insecure, sensitive, delicate, tender, fearful, submissive, calm, passive’ and to boys ‘brave, independent, self-confident, reasonable, restless, adventurer, tenacious, tough, rough, practical, bold, disobedient, active and many more’ (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 16). The following excerpt from a publication on gender equality in education and prevention of violence shows how the official discourse defied gender stereotypes and invited teachers to contribute to the transformation of gender ideology:

*Every day we witness the reality where these attributes and qualities, which are assigned in a differentiated and unequal manner to men and women, have turned into gender stereotypes. This means that they have become fixed as if they were an essence, something inherent, immutable and eternal that determines our bodies, even though the experience tells us that women and men can share characteristics pertaining to both models. Nowadays we know, for example, that their sex does not prevent either women from being intelligent, reasonable, independent, autonomous and brave or men from being sensitive, affectionate, dependent and home-loving. Therefore, our direct experience contradicts the stereotypes. This could serve as evidence that these fixed models are socially and culturally fabricated or constructed and this is why we have to change them, especially when they entail inequality and disadvantage. (SEP and PUEG, 2010: 16)*

While the authors of the school curriculum questioned the legitimacy of viewing boys and girls as differently intelligent or sensitive, they did not dispute the accuracy of people’s perceptions of boys as more rough and girls as more calm. However, in contrast to my informants’ ideas about the innateness of these inclinations, the policy-makers attributed this distinction to the legacy of a patriarchal society which moulded men into ‘violent’ and women into ‘submissive’ subjects. This interpretation allowed

them to call for the eradication of these patterns and to include ‘re-education of boys into nonviolent behaviour’ and ‘re-education of girls into non-submissive behaviour’ (SEP and PUEG, 2009: 109) among the proposed interventions to achieve gender equality.

In order to grasp the logic underlying the Mexican gender reform, I found useful Gutmann’s observation that ‘one way to measure changes in gender roles and identities is to determine the extent to which activities become less (or more) gendered - less (or more) identified with women or men in particular’ (2006 [1996]: 151). But did the reformers assume that all gender distinctions *could* be deconstructed? And, no less importantly, did they believe that overall gender differentiation *should* be dismantled and promoted a genderless society? These questions echo Connell’s remark that ‘it is often clear what gender reform movements are fighting against – discriminatory laws, gender based violence, social oppression. But what are they fighting for? What are their ultimate goals? Where do they want to steer the society, in the long run?’ (2009: 145) Although the authors of official publications addressed to teachers never explicitly articulated the ‘elimination of gender’ as a goal of the reform, a closer examination of these texts reveals that the way they defined the key theoretical concepts leaves room for this kind of interpretation. Teachers were reminded that the construction of ‘a democratic, diverse and egalitarian society’ demanded the elimination of ‘sexism’ and ‘gender stereotypes’ but the ways these concepts were defined in the curriculum actually amounted to the same thing as ‘gender’<sup>18</sup> (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 83):

**Gender:** *Group of ideas about sexual difference which attributes ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ characteristics to each sex, to their activities and behaviours and to spheres of life.*

**Stereotypes:** *Group of beliefs about the characteristics which the members of a particular social category have in common.*

**Sexism:** *Discriminatory exercise through which psychological characteristics, forms of behaviour and fixed roles are assigned for the sole reason of belonging*

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<sup>18</sup> Although I use the term ‘gender equality’ throughout this thesis, I recognise that this point suggests that the usage of the word ‘gender’ in this widely accepted phrase is fraught with ambiguities.

*to a particular sex, restricting in this way a full development of women and men (...).*

Gender divisions were portrayed as unfair, disempowering and restrictive of individual potentialities. A publication on *Gender equality and prevention of violence in primary school*, issued by SEP and PUEG in 2010, stated that

*the order, grounded in differential and unequal treatment of sexual differences and gender mandates, does not have to be permanent. If, in the past, education was based on this order, nowadays we can think/imagine a more plural and diverse world: different from the black and white world which is seen and lived through a binary and antagonistic division between feminine and masculine* (SEP and PUEG, 2010: 27).

In spite of all this, while the official publications for teachers and students' textbooks promoted dismantling divisions in a wide range of internationally popularised gender issues, from access to education and the workforce, through expression of emotions, to children's toy and colour preferences, they made no reference to what seemed to be considered as more controversial topics, such as the use of make-up, dresses and high heels or the choice of romantic partners (i.e. heteronormativity). In this way, the reformers maintained ambiguities about the deconstruction of gender divisions and the desired long-term impact of change.

### **Gender and religious teaching**

It was not only educational institutions which sought to shape villagers' conceptions of right and wrong and to regulate their behaviour. The Catholic Church also aspired to make a strong impact on the ways people lived and made sense of their lives. Most families in the village were Catholic and parents introduced their children to religion from the earliest age. Mothers played the most important role in children's religious education, but many fathers also participated actively. Crucifixes and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and various saints could be found in most households and children were instructed that 'God is our father' and 'the Virgin is our mother', who 'protect us

and take care of us.' Villagers taught children as young as two or three to make the sign of the cross and thank God after every meal and before going to sleep. They explained to their sons and daughters that they needed to be grateful to God because 'thanks to him we have life and everything else.' When children showed curiosity about particular issues, adults usually limited themselves to providing brief answers to their inquiries. For example, when a boy asked, 'Why was Jesus crucified?' his mother readily replied, 'Because he suffered for our sake,' or when a girl wanted to know 'how can God see everything we do?' a father explained, 'Because he can do everything.'

Family habits in church attendance differed greatly. While many people attended the mass every Sunday, I also knew various women and men who did not and who noticed that 'often those who go to church most regularly are the ones who spread most gossip and do things they should not. There is a lot of hypocrisy.' Some couples went to the mass with their children, others without them; some mothers went alone, others accompanied by an older child. Throughout the year, adults usually avoided taking very young boys and girls to the mass on Sundays because 'the little ones get bored easily.' However, on the occasion of religious festivals, all the members of most households went to church. Although mothers were usually in charge of children's religious education, some fathers showed more interest in fostering church attendance than mothers. Mariela and Manuel once had a heated discussion because he agreed with his parents that they would all go to the mass together while Mariela had promised that she would take her children to the river that day. Mariela complained to me that Manuel 'did everything his parents wanted him to do' and added that 'God cares more about whether you behave well or not than whether you go to the mass.'

Few men and women expressly raised the importance of Catholic values when discussing their socialising practices with me or when seeking to convey moral lessons to their children. When I encouraged adults to reflect upon whether church influenced the ways they educated children, I encountered diverse reactions. Some people found no correlation between these domains and one woman, who attended the mass every Sunday, even expressed her 'surprise' with this question. 'It never occurred to me that the church and child rearing might be connected', she replied. Yet most villagers shared the idea that religious teachings played an important role in the socialisation of children because values such as honesty, responsibility or loyalty, and people's capacity to solve

conflicts and to exert self-control ‘became entrenched [in the society] thanks to the church.’ Their accounts suggested that they believed that these values were universal and that they concerned everyone independently of gender or any other socially salient distinction.

I never heard adults invoke religious sources to legitimise their gender expectations in interactions with children. When I sought to know how religious teachings affected gender socialisation, various mothers noted that ‘in the church there is no gender equality’ and illustrated this claim with the fact that ‘the priests are all men.’ They claimed that the church promoted a traditional vision of ‘a docile woman’ that they did not want to instil in their children. Yet other women did not agree with this interpretation. In response to Natalia who noted that ‘for the church, the man should be the one who gives orders’, her neighbour replied that ‘the priest has never said that,’ and argued that the church promoted the idea that ‘we are all equal; nobody is superior to anybody.’

Since Catechism classes for children did not address these issues and focused on the basic principles of the Catholic doctrine, they did not actively promote either an egalitarian or traditional accountability regime. Children had to attend a Catechism course for one year prior to First Communion and for another year prior to Confirmation and during the same period they were expected to accompany their parents to mass. Their attendance at mass beyond this period depended on their own interest and parents’ expectations. Children could start the Catechism classes as soon as they learnt to read and write but this decision fell to parents and most girls and boys received their First Communion at about the age of eight or nine and Confirmation at the age of twelve. Girls and boys were instructed in how to make their first confession, what it means to pray, what differences there are between the mortal and venial sins, what are heaven and hell and other similar issues. The Catechism book featured the texts of the principal prayers and the Ten Commandments and a list of brief and straightforward questions and answers: ‘Who created the angels? God created the angels’; ‘Who was Joseph? Joseph was the adoptive father of Jesus’; ‘Is it necessary to mention all the venial sins during a confession? It is not necessary to mention all the venial sins during a confession.’ Catechists in the village showed no interest in expressly engaging with gender relations and they neither celebrated nor challenged gender divisions. Yet I

noticed that one of the textbook answers made a clear allusion to the increasingly popular egalitarian discourse: ‘How did God create the first woman? God created the first woman in his own image and likeness, *with the same dignity and rights as the man*’ (italics added).

Religious teachings for the ages I focused on were not gender-differentiated but as children grew older gender distinctions gained relevance. Whereas a boy’s fifteenth birthday was celebrated with a party that was no different from the celebration of any other birthday, a girl’s fifteenth birthday, well known as the *quinceañera*, was a special occasion that consisted in a mass followed by a carefully organised *fiesta*. During the preparations for this event, girls were required to attend religious talks (*pláticas*). This event marked an important phase in the process of a girl ‘becoming a *mujercita* (little woman)’ (Napolitano, 1997; see also Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 106). When I asked mothers why a girl’s fifteenth birthday was celebrated differently from a boy’s, most of them simply attributed this to ‘tradition’ or replied that they did not know. Carmen paused to reflect, ‘I have never thought about why it’s different but, if you think about it, that’s also machismo.’ ‘I don’t see it like that. It’s a *fiesta* where everything revolves around the woman’, Gloria replied. ‘Yes, but they tell you that you have to behave like this, you have to behave like that, and what about men? They can behave however they feel like.’

### **Calm and delicate, rough and tough**

When I arrived in the village, the institutional changes in Mexican society were well underway. Villagers believed that gender equality was more advanced in some other countries but they saw the efforts to promote it as a legitimate national project of modernising society rather than as an imposition of foreign values. Migrants who lived in the United States and whom I met during their visits to the village told me that in their new sociocultural setting egalitarian arrangements were more widely accepted than in Mexico, but villagers did not refer to these individuals as models that inspired their interest in adhering to modern gender relations. Many parents were still in school in the 1990s, when educational reform began, and some of them recalled that their first exposure to the ideal of gender equality was during their school days. As sources of

knowledge and inspiration about these values, they also mentioned the media, state-sponsored courses and workshops and contacts with the educational agenda through their children's teachers and textbooks. Yet, although most villagers showed appreciation for the official initiatives to dismantle some gender divisions, they were convinced that not all gender distinctions were subject to change and the references to rough and rude boys and calm girls was the one they most readily cited to illustrate the inevitability of gender differences.

Villagers condemned aggressive acts independently of who perpetrated them and dismissed the idealisation of the aggressive *macho* as an expression of an archaic mentality. Few boys were actually seen as particularly aggressive and those were labelled as 'problematic' (*niños problemáticos* or *niños problema*). Their parents were also held accountable for their children's aggressive behaviour and criticised for not educating them properly or for neglecting them. However, most boys' rough play with male peers usually went unnoticed and was tolerated as long as none of the participants complained. They were encouraged to playfully fight with their male relatives and were bought toy guns, rifles and soldiers. They were invited to watch wrestling and boxing on television with their fathers. More foul language was used in adults' communication with boys. Male toddlers often received comments about their strength while girls were praised for their beauty. Girls' rough-and-tumble play was seen as more anomalous and more readily discouraged. I found examples of fathers simulating fighting with their daughters when little girls had no male siblings but these cases were rare and usually provoked mothers' protests. Even before they were old enough to ask for toys themselves, girls were bought objects in tune with a more 'calm' life style, such as baby dolls and kitchen sets.

But adults not only thought that girls were more calm and boys more rough and rude, they also believed in the existence of inherent gender differences in how children coped with roughness and rudeness. Although, at the ages I focused on, people did not talk about boys and girls as significantly different in their physical constitution, they believed that girls were 'more delicate' (*más delicadas*) and boys 'tougher' (*más fuertes*). Villagers usually reprimanded both boys and girls if they physically or verbally assaulted other children and, especially, older children who harassed younger ones. However, if children were of similar age, they reacted more harshly to violent acts that

were committed by boys against girls. Moreover, the differences in the treatment of aggression against boys and girls were not merely about the intensity of the reactions these acts provoked but also about the explanations they were accompanied by. I heard mothers scold their very young sons and daughters for hitting other children: 'Don't hurt him/her! She/he's little' or 'Don't hit her/him! He/she's your friend!' but the admonition 'Don't hit her! She's a girl!' did not seem to have a male counterpart.

The notion of 'rudeness' was seen as opposite to 'respect', which was cherished as the most pervasive local ideal. Since early childhood, villagers were strongly and incessantly encouraged 'to respect others.' This admonition was often reinforced by the phrase 'Don't be rude! (*¡No seas grosero/a!*)', which reflected the conceptual link between them. Whether boys and girls failed to greet or address an adult properly, ran around the classroom, used foul language or hit a peer, he or she was often firmly reminded that 'You have to respect!' (*Tienes que respetar!*). Respect was perceived as a fruit of the process of moral development, intimately related to the development of cognitive ability to 'understand.' 'She is still too young to be taught about respect', said don Fernando referring to his one-year-old grand-daughter Clara, and added: 'Miguelito (his four-year-old grandson), however, is old enough to understand that.' At a certain age, usually after they turned three, children were expected to start to 'understand' (*entender*) the social desirability of their actions and to show an effort to tailor their behaviour accordingly. I will illustrate this by evoking a few instances that reveal the situational diversity and developmental persistence of adults' insistence on respect.

Villagers mostly believed that the youngest children could not understand what respect was. However, lessons about respect started very early. Natalia admonished her two-year-old daughter Laura, who was removing magnets from my landlady's fridge: 'Respect, Laura. You must respect this house' (*Respetá, Laura. Tienes que respetar esta casa*). When four-year-old Miguel addressed his grandfather's sister as 'María Luisa', his mother immediately reprimanded him: 'She is *tía María Luisa* (Aunt María Luisa) to you, not just María Luisa.' When the old woman objected that 'it doesn't matter,' Catalina explained that he 'must learn to respect others.' Patricia also angrily invoked the importance of respect, when her five-year-old daughter Cecilia complained that her seven-year-old neighbour Pablo had asked her to give him a kiss in exchange for some crisps. 'You'll respect my daughter' (*A mi hija me la respetas*), the woman shouted at

the boy. While a couple of eight-year-olds ran around the classroom making noise, their teacher Elena raised her voice: ‘You have to respect!’ The school principal scolded twelve-year-old Enrique and eleven-year-old Daniel after a fight on the playground by expressing his surprise with the fact that the boys ‘by this age had not learnt to respect.’

Although apparently different, the events that these phrases were applied to shared a common feature. The situations involving the preoccupation with respect or rudeness were considered as a negotiation of interpersonal relations and the compliance with these expectations was taken as a precondition for peaceful coexistence. Thus, it was not surprising that the admonitions about respect were most commonly used to refer to the importance of refraining from physical and verbal aggression. Adults continually instructed children that they should ‘respect everybody’ but, while they often emphasised to boys that they should respect girls, they never showed any particular insistence that girls should respect boys as such. ‘You have to respect others, especially girls,’ parents commonly warned their sons. When I asked the teacher Luz María why boys were warned about respecting especially girls whilst girls were not instructed to respect boys, she did not hesitate to reply, ‘A woman always has to be more protected because we are very defenceless (*muy indefensas*).’ I sought to understand why women were ‘very defenceless’ and the woman calmly explained, ‘We don’t have that aggressive character which would allow us to defend ourselves in any situation.’ Luz María’s claim was instructive as it summed up the link between ‘rough-calm’ dichotomy, on the one hand, and ‘tough-delicate’, on the other, by suggesting that toughness (or the lack thereof) stemmed from roughness (or the lack thereof).

### **Gendering protection and self-defence**

As I have already noted, neither male nor female aggression was celebrated but aggressive acts were readily associated with boys. While adults sought to protect girls from aggression by teaching boys to respect ‘especially’ them, they demanded that boys defend themselves unaided<sup>19</sup>. I heard, on various occasions, how six-year-old Felipe was kicked, punched or slapped by his seven-year-old cousin José María. Felipe either cried or complained to his parents but he never turned to violence himself and neither

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<sup>19</sup> Boys were actually the target of their peers’ physical and verbal aggression more often than girls.

his mother Natalia nor his father Francisco appreciated this attitude. His mother Natalia explained to me that she was frustrated over the fact that her son ‘lets himself [be beaten]’ (*se deja*) and that he was being teased for behaving like a girl. She once observed: ‘He used to love to play fighting when he was little but then, when I started to work, my sister took care of him and I think she spoiled him.’ Natalia’s parents and sister lived next door while Francisco’s family lived in a nearby community. The couple often visited the man’s relatives and the clashes between Felipe and his cousin were continuous. ‘Next time, either you punch him or I will punch you’, his father Francisco shouted at him after one of these incidents<sup>20</sup>. Francisco spent a lot of time outside the home seeking to secure additional income for his family because he held a poorly remunerated, temporary teaching job. He occasionally took Felipe with him when he handled different business issues or socialised with his male friends because he claimed that it was important for male children to be exposed to male authority figures as much as possible. Yet the role of female figures was seen as no less significant for fostering conformity with traditional gender ideals. Natalia left her job as an administrative assistant when she got pregnant with her second child Laura. During my stay in the village, the family celebrated Laura’s second birthday and the woman started to think about looking for a new job. But she was troubled by the idea that, if Felipe and Laura stayed with her sister, the boy’s inability to defend himself might not be corrected properly. Parents’ accounts revealed that a boy was not expected to be aggressive but to show to those who were aggressive that he was able and ready to defend himself. Girls, on the other hand, were usually not instructed to fight back but to seek help and protection.

An effort to challenge the idealisation of ‘tough boys’ was manifested through the occasional usage of the phrase that ‘boys cry too’ (*los niños lloran también*). The adverb ‘too’ suggested that it was already taken for granted that girls cried and the phrase served as a critique of the traditional idea that ‘boys don’t cry’ (*los niños no lloran*). When Miguel fell down while riding a bicycle and burst into tears, his grandfather tried to comfort him: ‘Don’t cry, my son. Boys don’t cry.’ His father protested, ‘Yes, they do. Tell your grandfather that boys cry too. Right, son?’ The boy

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<sup>20</sup> These incidents occurred outside school. In school, neither boys nor girls were encouraged to fight back because of the fear of disciplinary consequences.

agreed, ‘Yes, boys cry. Juan Reyes cries. I saw him in “*Fuego en la sangre*” (his favourite *telenovela*).’ However, this kind of comment was not frequent. If a boy who was older than four-year-old Miguel cried after being hurt by another child, adults would never encourage him to express his discomfort by invoking the idea that ‘boys cry too.’ Moreover, as illustrated in the opening vignette of this chapter, he was more likely to be admonished or publicly ridiculed.

When children did not comply with their expectations, parents, relatives and neighbours readily used mocking labels (e.g. woman (*vieja*), girl (*niña*), fag (*joto*, *maricón*, *marica*) for boys and tomboy (*marimacha*), boy (*niño*), man (*hombre*) for girls) in order to shame them into their proper relational positions within the local gender order. These strategies were meant to call attention to discontinuities between the ‘real natures’ of boys and girls and their behaviour. Indeed, they revealed that these differences were not seen only as girls’ and boys’ ‘real’ but also as their ‘ideal’ nature. Parents’ anxieties over their children’s behaviour indicated that the evolution of innate predispositions was understood as an open-ended process which relied heavily upon environmental factors. As long as boys and girls lived up to the ‘rough, tough – calm, delicate’ dichotomy, their conduct was framed in essentialist terms. When they defied the stereotypes, their actions were attributed to social influences. These mechanisms seemed to thwart any potential challenge to the conviction that men and women were intrinsically different. But although this logic apparently locked villagers into the existing perceptions of gender differences, it may be argued that it left significant room for change by acknowledging the impact of social factors on human behaviour.

Ilaria had a similar but, at the same time, quite different problem from Natalia, whose son Felipe ‘let himself [be beaten].’ Ilaria complained that her seven-year-old daughter Marisa was very rough and that her favourite game was wrestling. Ilaria also had a ten-year-old son Alberto. She was a housewife while her husband Ernesto worked as an accountant. As I will show in Chapters Seven and Eight, Ernesto strictly imposed a gendered division of labour in his household and he was attentive to the enforcement of traditional gender ideals in all domains of life. He was often absent from home but his mother informed him that Marisa engaged in rough-and-tumble play too much and that she was becoming a tomboy. He reproached Ilaria for this and the woman assured him that she called the girl’s attention when she played hard with his brother and male

cousins. Similarly to Natalia, Ilaria recalled how her daughter was ‘calm and sweet’ when she was younger and blamed her increasing roughness on the fact that growing up with one brother and in the vicinity of two male cousins made her used to boys’ ways of playing. However, the problem with Marisa was not merely the fact that she played rough but, more importantly, that by not being calm she exposed herself to not receiving from boys the respect she was entitled to as a girl (*podrían faltarle el respeto*) and being hurt verbally or physically. Such considerations revealed that roughness in girls was not interpreted as a sign that, as Luz María put it, they had ‘an aggressive character which would allow them to defend themselves in any situation’ and did not need protection. Even if girls were rough, they continued to be seen as delicate. Both Marisa and her brother occasionally cried when they got hurt in rough-and-tumble play with their peers, but most of the time they got out of these encounters without complaining. Yet Ilaria seemed to remember her daughter’s tears more vividly than her son’s and she warned her, ‘Don’t play rough with boys. They are going to hurt you and you are going to cry. We all know that you are going to cry.’

### **Different others, different audiences**

These ethnographic examples show how essentialist beliefs translated into expectations that were enforced through admonitions, casual comments and unspoken practices. In this way, children from the earliest age learnt that their actions were carefully monitored and continually assessed because they were held accountable to these dominant ideals. Inevitably, individuals had different definitions of what counted as transgression and how rough was ‘too rough’ for a girl or how delicate was ‘too delicate’ for a boy. What some people saw as an active girl, others labelled as *marimacha*. In some situations, some parents showed more concern about whether their son got hurt or not than how he coped with harm. In spite of these variations in the definitions of what could be tolerated, villagers demonstrated allegiance to the same accountability regime and sustained the distinction between rough and tough boys and calm and delicate girls.

However, it is significant that children were surrounded by different kinds of audiences whose expectations were not grounded in the same concerns. I referred to this distinction in Chapter Two as the one between ‘intimate others’ and ‘outsiders’. When

Natalia talked to me about her son Felipe, she couched her thoughts about her son's presumed inability to defend himself in the preoccupation about his well-being. 'You know what boys are like. If he is not tough, they will tease him, he will be isolated and I don't want him to have that kind of life,' she admitted. Ilaria shared similar anxieties about the impact of gender nonconformity on the quality of her daughter's life. She was not only concerned that Marisa's identification with boys' play style might expose her to the risk of being hurt in a fight, which was what villagers most commonly associated with this kind of conduct. She also worried that these inclinations would lead her to spend too much time in all-male company and that some boy 'could take advantage of her' sexually. Marisa was only seven years old and Ilaria did not feel the need to explain to her all the psychological and social implications this might have but she warned her that someone could hurt '*su partecita*' (lit. her little part, referring to the genitals).

At the same time, both Natalia and Ilaria knew that parents were held accountable not only for their own but also for their children's compliance with gender expectations. Parents' accountability for children's behaviour was confirmed by the comments I heard from their neighbours and by the criticism they received in direct encounters. Ilaria's mother-in-law once complained to her son in private about Marisa's engagement in rough-and-tumble play but, on another occasion, she confronted Ilaria directly and accused her of having allowed Marisa to become *marimacha*. Ilaria recalled that she replied to the old woman that she took very good care of her children and that her daughter was just going through a phase. Yet she admitted to me that she hoped that it would not be long before the girl lost her interest in rough play. Although Ilaria was frustrated over her mother-in-law's remarks, she recognised her status of an 'intimate other' by admitting that she could not dismiss her comment by simply telling her: 'Why do you worry about my children?'

When neighbours talked about children who did not live up to local ideals, like Marisa or Felipe, they usually did not express concerns about their well-being but satisfaction that their own children were not like them or critique of their parents' socialising practices. I often observed how Óscar encouraged his son to be tough when he was hurt and I once asked him whether he thought people in the village instructed girls to be tough as much as boys. 'Not really because there is not so much need for that. Boys get into fights more. When someone hurts your son, you get angry. First you

make sure he's alright, that's clear. But you don't want to see him like, for example, little Felipe, who always cries when they hurt him. When I see him like that, I think: "I am glad my son is not like that".' Another neighbour once made a remark about a ten-year-old boy whom he perceived as too soft and vulnerable in his interactions with peers: 'I don't know what his parents did wrong but I am sure that they did something wrong. Now we all see him as what we call here *marica* and that can't be changed.' These kinds of claims testify to the pervasiveness of the idea that gender nonconformity stemmed from inadequate parenting and that it had a significant impact on one's public record. What is most pertinent to this section is the fact that they reveal how the assessments based on the same accountability criteria differed depending on the position of the social actors with respect to the individual whose behaviour was being assessed.

When it comes to non-compliance with dominant gender expectations, 'outsiders', in the absence of 'intimate others', usually felt free to exchange information and express negative assessments of a child's behaviour. Occasionally, they even teased or reprimanded their neighbours' or relatives' children but they rarely criticised the parents themselves in face-to-face encounters. At the same time, 'intimate others' shaped their reactions in accordance with their own audience. For example, when Natalia and Francisco talked to Felipe, they criticised him and even threatened or insulted him seeking to modify his behaviour. 'Don't cry like a *marica*,' his father exhorted him more than once. When the parents talked to each other, they expressed preoccupation or sometimes even blamed each other for the fact that their son showed more weakness than other boys in the neighbourhood. However, in front of their neighbours or relatives, their attitude was different. Although people usually avoided raising this issue in the presence of Natalia and Francisco, the woman related a few situations in which someone referred to the fact that her son did not react adequately to rough play. She recalled that her brother-in-law once mockingly said, in front of all the relatives, that Felipe cried like his six-month-old baby girl. 'You can't imagine how mad I was. I told him that Felipe did not cry when he played with other children but only with his son because his son was *problemático*,' the woman recounted. She admitted that it was not true that Felipe did not cry when other children hurt him but explained that her brother-in-law could not know that because he lived in another

village. This suggests that the ‘intimate others’ not only did not participate in the constitution of one’s reputation as *marica* or *marimacha* through gossip but that they even confronted those who attached this kind of label to their children. Yet it also shows that, rather than questioning the legitimacy of the dominant accountability criteria, parents reinforced them by challenging the accuracy of the claims that their children were not able to live up to these expectations.

I occasionally heard parents themselves, like Carlos’s father in the introductory vignette, use different labels in front of others to scold their children. In the presence of her two female neighbours, Ilaria told her daughter, ‘You’re like a man’ while the girl was wrestling on the ground with her brother. A few days later, when she shared with me her concerns about her daughter gaining a reputation as a ‘tomboy’, I asked her whether she was concerned that she might contribute to this by telling the girl *‘pareces hombre’* in front of others. ‘Not at all. It’s the opposite,’ she confidently responded and added, ‘If they hear me say that, they will know that I am educating her in the right way, that I am warning her that what she’s doing is wrong and that sooner or later she will understand that.’ These public admonitions were clearly not meant to allow parents to distance themselves from their children’s gender-inappropriate performances but to let the ‘outsiders’ know that the parents were doing their best to ensure children’s compliance with gender expectations and that it was only a matter of time until their teachings would take effect.

However, the identification of ‘intimate others’, on the one hand, and ‘outsiders’, on the other, was an ongoing, interactional process rather than the acknowledgement of fixed categories. Among the villagers I knew, parents, siblings and grandparents usually both recognised themselves and were recognised as the most ‘intimate others’ but there were also children who knew little about their fathers, for example, and who identified other individuals as more intimately relevant to their lives and distinct from the rest of the villagers. While most parents, siblings and grandparents acted and were seen as the kinds of others with whom other villagers could not freely exchange derisive comments about a child’s behaviour, close relatives and friends held a more ambiguous status. Depending on their relationship with the child and the situational context, their position shifted on what I refer to as the ‘audience continuum’ between ‘intimate others’ and ‘outsiders’. For example, when Felipe’s uncle was

confronted by the boy's mother Natalia for teasing Felipe, he was treated as an 'outsider' or, at least, a less intimate other. The woman did not interpret her brother-in-law's words as a joking comment among equally 'intimate others.' What made Natalia particularly sensitive was her conviction that the man would have never made a similar comment about his own son in front of their extended family.

At the same time, when Natalia criticised Felipe's aunt, her sister Katia for having spoilt the boy, she never doubted that Katia took care of Felipe as if he were her own son. I witnessed how Katia on one occasion responded to a neighbour who used the example of Felipe to illustrate for me that a boy should be taught from the earliest age to defend himself in order to avoid teasing. The woman promptly replied that her nephew was stronger than many boys but that he did not want to fight back because he was 'too good.' Her reaction in this situation might have been related not merely to the fact that she was the boy's aunt but also that they had a very close relationship and that the woman herself took part in the boy's care. In addition, her own audience in this conversation was, by all standards, an 'outsider' who participated with other villagers in the construction of her nephew's, her sister's and her own public record and who clearly made a mistake in her evaluation that Katia was someone in front of whom she could spread negatively connoted information about Felipe.

The position of the teachers also seemed to be somewhat peculiar since they were neither 'intimate others' nor real 'outsiders' as they themselves were responsible for children's education. But, first of all, it seems pertinent to wonder whether, amid the promotion of egalitarian values through the educational agenda, the same accountability regime operated in the school setting as in the domestic arena. Educational policy-makers promoted a transformation of the 'rough, tough-calm, delicate' dichotomy by instructing teachers to combat gender stereotypes, to question the idea that boys are '*fuertes*' and girls '*delicadas*' and to 're-educate boys into non-violent behaviour.' Manuals for teachers, published by SEP, explicitly urged them to avoid phrases like: 'Boys don't cry!' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 172). In the school, neither boys nor girls were invited to fight back when they got hurt and were urged to report those who harassed them. Rough-and-tumble play was not tolerated as much as it was at home.

In spite of all this, I found that teachers shared parents' essentialist beliefs and grounded their accountability criteria in the same idea that boys were rough and girls

calm and that, consequently, they should cope with aggression differently. I once heard a teacher scold a nine-year-old girl Nadia, who was known as rough and restless, by asking her, 'Why can't you be calm, like other girls?' Her male classmate later teased her by reproducing a phrase from a popular TV show, 'Why aren't you a normal girl?' (*¿Por qué no eres una niña normal?*) On a different occasion, I was sitting in the corner of a classroom where fourth-graders were waiting for their teacher Ricardo to return. At the moment the man arrived, two boys were wrestling on the floor, another two were chasing each other around the desks and one was crawling and imitating a dog. Another six boys and all the girls, except for the one who was cleaning the blackboard, were sitting at their desks. The teacher ignored the fact that most of the boys were calm and invoked gender differentiation to reprimand those who were not behaving properly: 'Always the same thing! Look at the girls! They are here, calmly seated, and you are always hitting one another, pushing one another, chasing one another. You cannot be calm even for a minute.' The teacher made a link between roughness and readiness to cope with roughness by warning the boys, 'Later, don't come here to complain when they hit you and you get hurt.'

But even the boys who did not play rough were often expected to be 'tough.' Two girls recounted to me how ten-year-old Giovani pushed to the ground a 'very calm' classmate, Damian, who burst into tears. Giovani was sent to the principal while Damian was advised by his teacher to be *fuerte* because 'he is a man.' Girls who cried were usually comforted more sympathetically. When nine-year-old Alberto hit his classmate Luisa after a heated discussion, children gathered around the girl to make sure that she was all right and to console her. The teacher quickly arrived, hugged the girl and, before sending the boy to see the principal, harshly scolded him: 'Haven't they taught you at home that only cowards hit girls? Girls must be respected!' Nevertheless, the teacher Luz María explained to me that some rough girls took advantage of the fact that girls were considered to be more calm and delicate. She observed that these girls provoked boys and then cried and went to complain to the principal when they got hurt. 'They know that boys will always be blamed,' she noted. The woman recalled that a few boys told her that two girls from her class attacked them first and when they reacted, they cried and called for help. She advised the boys not to fight back and to let her know as soon as an incident occurred. This incident reminded her of Nadia, whom she defined

as ‘very rude’ but, at the same time, ‘very delicate.’ She remarked that Nadia’s teacher and mother protected her because she was a girl ‘even when she was to blame.’ However, she stressed that ‘2 out of 10’ girls and ‘8 out of 10’ engaged in this kind of behaviour.

The way villagers talked about the development of roughness, toughness, calmness and delicateness suggested that they considered parents as responsible for steering children’s predispositions properly. If a child’s behaviour did not correspond to the local expectations, they always referred to where parents rather than teachers might have failed. However, the teacher’s position was, indeed, marked by some peculiarities. They felt more legitimised than neighbours and relatives to enforce the dominant accountability regime by drawing children’s attention to particular behaviours without the fear of being accused by parents of interfering in their duties. One woman told me that, when she warned a neighbour’s son that he should not cry like a *marica*, the boy reported this situation to his mother. The boy’s mother angrily warned the neighbour that she should never dare to call her son *marica* again and that she should take care of her own children. Teachers usually did not receive this kind of reproach. Yet this may not be attributed merely to the possibility that they were seen as legitimate educators but, perhaps more importantly, to the fact that, while teachers took part in the same accountability regime that was maintained at homes and in the neighbourhood, their assessments were often couched in more carefully expressed admonitions. They usually avoided labels that might be perceived as particularly offensive. For example, I found that teachers were more likely to phrase their reprimands as ‘you’re a man, be tough’ rather than, ‘don’t cry like a fag.’ In this way, teachers also differed not only from neighbours and relatives but also from parents themselves, who often used quite strong language when seeking to discourage their children’s non-compliance with traditional gender ideals. However, the point in which teachers differed most radically from parents and resembled other ‘outsiders’ was that they were not interested in confronting others in order to protect a child from gaining a socially undesirable reputation. Furthermore, by recounting their everyday experiences with children to other colleagues and neighbours, some of them even contributed to the maintenance of children’s public records.

## **Equal but different**

The authors of official, educational publications clearly stressed that the perceptions of boys as ‘tough’ and girls as ‘delicate’ were gender stereotypes which needed to be deconstructed. However, it would be misleading to assume that villagers developed their understanding of modern ideals by engaging directly with the texts of the institutional documents. Neither teachers nor parents were familiar with the nuances of the official definitions of gender terminology or with detailed elaboration of the relevant issues and they were convinced that the ideal of gender equality comfortably fit in with the accountability regime in which girls were expected to be calm and delicate and boys rough and tough. They were well aware of the fact that the egalitarian agenda sought to dismantle some gender divisions but they understood that the primary goals of these efforts were the empowerment of women and the eventual achievement of equal rights and opportunities for women and men and they seemed to believe that this could be attained only by acknowledging the essential differences between them.

People in the village readily reproduced the catch-phrase which summed up the thrust of modern gender ideology: ‘Men and women are *iguales*.’ Most of them were keen to express their approval of egalitarian gender relations and to condemn what they interpreted as the old way of ‘doing gender’ and labelled as *machismo*. They agreed that *machismo* generally referred to the values which idealised men who ‘wanted to boss everybody around’ and ‘be in control of everything.’ The concept was also more specifically related to traditional division of labour, alcoholism, domestic violence, infidelities and disregard of parental duties. Villagers’ accounts of their parents’ past experiences represented women as victims of an oppressive, patriarchal gender regime, and they were often critical of their relatives’ or neighbours’ current practices which were seen as maintaining male dominance and female submissiveness.

In the light of these considerations, people believed that, by encouraging boys to respect girls in a special way, they fostered attitudes which were in accordance with modern ideals. I noticed that many men and women, seeking to illustrate their allegiance to modern gender ideology and their efforts to promote these values among children, insisted that they encouraged boys to ‘respect especially girls’ or explained to them that ‘it was cowardly to hit a girl.’ Men and women were aware that these kinds of messages

did not emerge in the village through the transmission of the egalitarian agenda but that they were traditionally inculcated in children. However, as one woman in her fifties put it, ‘they always talked a lot about respecting a woman but back then it was just words. You don’t respect her if you mistreat her, if you humiliate her, if you control her. Nowadays, the word “respect” is acquiring a different meaning, the real meaning.’ Unlike most of the villagers, Carmen questioned the compatibility of the instruction that boys should respect girls in a special way and the discourse of gender equality: ‘We want equality and then we tell them, “You have to respect especially girls”. It doesn’t really make sense, right?’ But her friend Elena quickly responded, ‘Of course it makes sense. It makes a lot of sense. You teach him [Carmen’s son] to respect girls. That’s the right thing to do. Machismo taught them [boys] to humiliate women, equality teaches them to respect women. What’s wrong with that?’ Like most villagers, Elena justified the validity of the teachings about ‘respecting especially girls.’ The ways adults engaged with girls’ and boys’ displaying and coping with aggression revealed that this ‘special respect’ was not merely grounded in a striving for a redress of past injustices but in a conviction about the inevitability of differences in girls’ and boys’ predispositions. Although adults, in contrast to how they viewed older generations, supported gender equality in raising children, this did not mean that they believed that they should always treat girls and boys in the same way.

### **Concluding remarks**

By exploring the widely asserted distinction between ‘rough and tough boys’ and ‘calm and delicate girls’, in this chapter I illustrated how adults in Metztitlán conceived of differences between boys and girls and how they made available to children their negotiations of the social relevance of this differentiation. Villagers viewed these gender differences not only as aspects of girls’ and boys’ ‘real’ nature but also as their ‘ideal’ nature. In this way, essentialist beliefs translated into ‘interactional expectations’ or dominant accountability criteria which were differently mobilised by different social actors. ‘Outsiders’ used their assessments to contribute to the construction of a child’s public record. At the same time, parents and other ‘intimate others’ struggled to defend children from socially undesirable reputations in front of others while seeking to

correctly steer what they saw as girls' and boys' inherent predispositions. However, in the case of the 'rough, tough boys and calm, delicate girls' dichotomy, what these different audiences of children's behaviour or different others both in school and domestic settings had in common was the fact that they regarded this traditionally upheld distinction as not only compatible but also conducive to the newly promoted ideal of gender equality. This conviction seemed to hinder the emergence of an alternative regime within which the evaluations of roughness, toughness, calmness and delicateness would not depend on one's gender.

In the ethnographic example I used in the introduction to this chapter, the boys were playing football. In Metztitlán, football was traditionally associated with men and boys were usually perceived as more interested and more talented at football than girls. Although my friends gave a very poor performance in the pitch that day, the chances they missed to score a goal did not remind Carlos's and Esteban's father of girls. But once his son showed weakness when his friend hit him with a ball, the man promptly drew this connection. Boys and girls were seen as different in many ways but obviously not all the differences were equally pervasive or significant to people. In Chapter Four, I will explore how pervasive and significant the distinction between rough and tough boys and calm and delicate girls was for children. I will seek to understand how, in the absence of an alternative accountability regime, acts of resistance to traditional ideals occurred and how children reacted to them.

## Chapter Four

### **Tough boys and delicate girls, tough girls and delicate boys**

The last class had finished and nine-year-old Fernando and I were sitting on the ground in front of his friend Diego's classroom. We were playing '*Veo, veo*'<sup>21</sup> while waiting for Diego to come out as we wanted to walk home together. Suddenly, we saw a visibly upset eight-year-old boy approach his classmate demanding some kind of explanation about a piece of gossip he had apparently spread about him. After a few minutes of heated discussion, the boy who initiated the row pushed the other one to the ground. The child seemed to have hurt his elbow and he could not suppress his tears. Fernando did not know this boy and was not familiar with his behaviour or reputation but this one scene was sufficient for him to classify him as '*marica*' and conclude that he cannot 'put up with anything' (*no se aguanta*). On a different occasion, Fernando and I witnessed a similar incident. The only difference was that the person who ended up hurt was a girl. Fernando once again readily commented on what we saw. He was not bothered by the girl's tears or concerned about her inability to 'put up with' aggression. This time he criticised the boy who inflicted harm rather than the person who suffered it: 'You see, this boy is a coward. He hits girls because he knows that they can't defend themselves.' Fernando's assessments of boys' and girls' behaviour were widely shared by his peers. At the same time, he knew, like all other children, that his own actions were monitored by others and subject to these same assessments.

In this chapter, I examine children's perceptions of differences between boys and girls which lay at the heart of their different expectations and evaluations of boys' and girls' readiness to display and cope with aggressive behaviour. As I noted in Chapter Three, by accommodating this gender differentiation within modern ideology, adults hindered the construction of alternative accountability criteria and apparently reinforced the association of calmness and delicateness with girls and roughness and toughness with boys. Although, unlike adults, children did not use this dichotomy to demonstrate their allegiance to the ideal of gender equality, they entertained these same expectations.

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<sup>21</sup> The game known in English as 'I spy.'

Yet, as some of the ethnographic examples presented in Chapter Three have already shown, the absence of alternative expectations did not imply the absence of contributions to ‘undoing gender.’ I will seek to show that the instances of children’s resistance to the dominant accountability regime resulted from discomfort with the constraints inherent in gender divisions or tensions that stemmed from the application of traditional accountability criteria to non-traditional behaviour. However, in the absence of alternative expectations, even the children whose behaviour did not fit in with this dichotomy justified the enforcement of traditional gender divisions.

### **Children’s understanding of being *iguales***

The educational agenda promoted the idea that ‘*todos somos iguales*’ (we are all equal/the same) because we are all ‘human beings’ (see Levinson, 2001 for an ethnographic study of Mexican secondary schools entitled *Todos somos iguales*). The authors of textbooks condemned all forms of discrimination, which was defined as ‘distinction, exclusion or restrictions’ that may be based on a wide range of factors, such as ethnicity, skin colour, gender, language, religion, social and economic condition, age, disability, physical appearance, sexual orientation and many others (SEP, 2009a: 37). I found that, of all these forms of discrimination, distinctions based on gender were the ones that most commonly and most explicitly gained relevance in children’s everyday interactions.

Although young villagers were exposed to deep gender divisions from the earliest age, they showed great appreciation for the equality discourse. When I asked children whether men and women were *iguales* or not, I often heard them claim that ‘men and women are *iguales* before the law’, ‘girls and boys are *iguales*; we are all human beings’ or ‘men and women are *iguales*; the only difference is in their genitals.’ Both my questions and children’s responses reflected our awareness of the contention that lay at the core of the ideology of gender equality, which was insistently conveyed through schooling: *los hombres y las mujeres son iguales*. The acquisition of the two aforementioned meanings of the adjective *igual* as ‘identical’ and ‘equal’ revealed different developmental paths. While even children who were much younger than my youngest informants comfortably used the word *igual* as ‘identical, same’, only my older informants were familiar with the term *igual* meaning ‘equal.’ Although teachers

passed on to children messages about equal opportunities from pre-school (e.g. ‘both boys and girls can play with Barbies’), around the age of eight the lessons about equal rights for all became more explicit and systematic and at this age the usage of this notion started to emerge in young villagers’ accounts.

Considering the salience of the concept of gender equality in the educational agenda, I was intrigued to explore how children made sense of the idea of men and women being *iguales*. Although I did not conduct surveys or thought experiments and did not collect any quantitative data concerning this issue, in our informal conversations in school or at home I often took the chance to raise the question of whether boys and girls or women and men were *iguales* or not and noticed striking regularities in children’s responses. Older children<sup>22</sup> often interpreted ‘being *iguales*’ as ‘being equal’ and responded affirmatively, ‘Yes. We are all *iguales* before the law,’ or ‘Yes. They are *iguales* in their rights.’ The younger ones understood ‘*iguales*’ as ‘identical’ and answered ‘no.’ I frequently heard, ‘No. Boys have short hair and girls have long hair.’ Some children paused to reflect, others responded promptly. However, when both older and younger children interpreted the key word to mean that men and women were identical rather than equal<sup>23</sup>, older children tended to emphasise the sameness, and younger ones insisted on the differences. Older boys and girls, in their first reactions, tended to reply, ‘Women and men are *iguales*. The only difference is in their *sexo*’ (referring to the genitals) or ‘Girls and boys are *iguales*. We are all made of flesh and bones.’ Younger villagers were convinced that ‘they are *diferentes*’ and provided examples such as hair length to illustrate their claims. So, while older children’s responses suggested that different genitals did not detract from the fundamental sameness that existed between women and men, those of the younger ones indicated that even more easily alterable and less consistently distributed characteristics, such as haircut, were seen as distinctive features. But despite the fact that this particular question elicited different reactions, the observations of interactions among peers and our everyday conversations revealed that children of all ages shared the belief that boys and girls differed in important ways.

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<sup>22</sup> The label ‘older children’ refers to children aged nine-eleven and ‘younger children’ to those aged six-eight.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the claim that ‘we are all *iguales* before the law’ suggested a reference to ‘equality’, while ‘we are all made of flesh and bones’ hinted at ‘sameness.’

## Downplaying and highlighting the relevance of differences

Since Thorne's ethnographic study of girls' and boys' interactions at US primary schools in 1993, the claim that in children's social experiences 'gender varies in degree and mode of relevance' (1993: 159) has become common knowledge among researchers of children and gender. Dissatisfied with the framework which situated boys and girls within 'what are essentially different cultures' (Maccoby, 2003; Tannen, 1990), Thorne argued that 'when they form separate girls' and boys' tables in the lunchroom, kids make individual gender categories highly relevant to their social relations. But when boys and girls get together to work on a classroom project or in situations where age or ethnicity is at the fore, gender becomes less or differently significant' and concluded that 'at the level of social situations, gender has a fluid quality' (1993: 159).

As I noted in Chapter Two, this 'fluid quality' of gender can be interpreted in terms of accountability. In other words, girls and boys are not expected to differ in the performance of all their activities at all times and 'interactional expectations' may foreground the criteria based on other socially relevant distinctions, such as age or ethnicity<sup>24</sup>. The interactions among the children I worked with testified to the fact that this 'fluid quality' of gender existed in Metztitlán as well. Boys and girls in the village frequently played together. I observed them talking, joking, chasing one another or playing hide and seek, regardless of the sex membership of their playmates. As Thorne rightly remarked, 'the occasions when boys and girls interact in relaxed and non-gender marked ways are *also* significant, although, and this bears thought, it is more difficult to analyse and write about the relaxed situations within the rubric of "gender"' (Thorne, 1993: 63). Indeed, while I described this kind of situation in my field notes, I often wondered how the conceptual focus of my project would be affected if all my informants were equally disinterested in gender distinctions in all the activities they engaged in. But these reflections were often interrupted by an observation or a comment that would quickly remind me of the relevance villagers attributed to this dimension of their social identity.

On one occasion, during an English lesson, I instructed a class of fifth-graders

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<sup>24</sup> While age often proved to be an important factor in shaping children's expectations about peers' behaviour, ethnicity did not gain this kind of relevance in my field site. All the children were mestizos and, while I occasionally heard joking remarks among peers that referred to someone's tone of skin, I never observed that these distinctions gave rise to different accountability criteria.

how to play a language game. I taught them how to introduce themselves in English and then we practised through an activity which consisted of producing the sentences: 'What's your name? My name is X.' Children were standing in a line and each one of them was expected to state the word that corresponded to his or her turn, i.e. 1) What's, 2) your, 3) name?, 4) My, 5) name, 6) is, 7) x. The one whose turn assigned him or her to produce the last word was supposed to say his or her name and the next child would continue the chain by starting it all over again. Any child who could not recall the word that followed or said a wrong word was eliminated. All the children participated in the activity and no reference to gender or any other distinction among classmates was raised at any point.

When we reached the last stage and the final four participants remained, there were three girls and one boy standing in front of the blackboard. Héctor shouted: '*¡Que gane Roberto!*' (May Roberto win!) A few other boys roared approvingly: '*¡Sí!*' 'Why are you suddenly cheering for Roberto?' I asked. 'Because he's the only man,' replied the boys. 'And why does that matter?' I continued. 'Because girls are inferior,' (*Porque las niñas son inferiores*) responded Héctor adopting a teasing tone and looking provokingly at the girls. Héctor was one of my favourite and most insightful informants. We spent a lot of time together and I knew that he confidently defended gender equality principles in relation to many issues and that he interacted with girls frequently and very respectfully. 'Do you really believe that?' I asked. 'No. I am just kidding,' the boy concluded.

Héctor did not coin the phrase that 'girls are inferior' himself. As many other children, he was exposed to this idea in his interactions with adults. However, in contrast to what one may be tempted to expect, this idea was most readily available to children not as an assertion but as a negation of an outdated way of thinking (e.g. 'In the past, some people used to think wrongly that girls were inferior to boys and nowadays we know that this is not true'). So, Héctor's remark did not reflect an attempt to reproduce the traditional belief he was, supposedly, raised with but an effort to jokingly subvert the modern discourse all his teachers and many parents advocated. The boy enjoyed provoking the laughter of his classmates and this was not the only occasion girls were the target of his jokes. Once he tried to explain to me what he meant when he admitted that he 'liked to behave a little like a clown' and pointed to another one of his comments that called attention to gender divide by caricaturing the officially recognised

differences between women and men:

*Z: And what do you do when you behave like a clown, for example?*

*H: Well, imagine, once in my classroom they were reading the Natural Sciences textbook and they said that women get milk from their boobies and I said that they were cows and everybody burst out laughing.*

*Z: Who laughed? Boys or boys and girls?*

*H: Everyone.*

*Z: And the girls did not get angry with you?*

*H: No. They were going to go on strike.*

*Z: Who said that?*

*H: One of the girls.*

*Z: How were they going to go on strike?*

*H: I don't know that. They were girls. I didn't get into their conversations.*

These kinds of remarks were made in circumstances that, arguably, contributed to heightening the salience of gender (i.e. three girls against one boy in the final stage of the competition; reading a lesson on biological differences between men and women in natural sciences class). This fluidity, however, did not emerge only across different situational contexts but also across different social settings. I observed that, at home and in the neighbourhoods, children engaged far more frequently in relaxed, spontaneous cross-sex interactions than in the classroom or school playground. When girls and boys could count on a wider choice of potential companions, they were more likely to opt for playmates of the same sex and same age as themselves<sup>25</sup>.

Although the atmosphere in the school playground during the break was seemingly chaotic, buzzing with noise and movement, there was an easily noticeable pattern. Pupils wearing grey pants tended to move and play together and separately from pupils wearing grey checked knee-length dresses. The consistency of these trends depended on different factors, such as the type of activity, age, sex membership and social status of the participants. For example, cross-sex interactions in the playground were less frequent during a game of football than when children played *reinove*<sup>26</sup> or chased one another. Older boys more often engaged in the kinds of activities where

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<sup>25</sup> Although Thorne (1993) did not conduct research in children's homes, she noted that her informants' testimonies suggested the existence of these same trends.

<sup>26</sup> The description of the game will be provided below.

cross-sex play was uncommon and older children generally maintained gender separation more strictly than the younger ones. Children occasionally played the 'wolf' (*lobo*) game which consisted of moving in a circle and chanting to the 'wolf' who was expected to start chasing everyone at the end of the song. In the playground this activity was usually initiated by girls and the few boys who played the game (e.g. I recorded one occasion where ten girls and three boys played this game) were often the ones who did not enjoy great popularity among their male peers. The way the access to these activities was negotiated revealed that girls welcomed their male peers to the games they proposed more readily than boys did with their female classmates.

However, as Thorne notes, 'although contact sometimes undermines and reduces an active sense of difference, groups may also interact with one another in ways that strengthen their borders' (1993: 65). She used the term 'borderwork' to refer to these interactions which, in spite of involving both boys and girls, contributed not to loosening but to strengthening gender boundaries (1993: 64). On one occasion, I observed second-grade girls propose the game *reinove* which also started out with fewer boys than girls but displayed a clearly different dynamic. The distinction between boys and girls was highlighted by the fact that the initial teams were formed along gender lines. The members of each team were holding hands and standing opposite their rivals. In contrast to the 'wolf game', referred to previously, in this case, children could split in a way that allowed boys and girls to play *against* rather than *with* one another. This seemed to contribute to a different perception of the activity among peers and, while other boys just glanced at their classmates playing the 'wolf game' and walked by, here they cheerfully kept joining the teams with more members of their own sex even long after the game had started and eventually the whole class participated. Each team had to call the name of one of the rivals whose task was to run towards the other team and try to break the chain formed by the children holding hands. Those who broke the chain were expected to take one of the opposite team members over to their own team and the ones who failed to break the chain had to stay on the other team. The game lasted until all the players ended up on the same team. The sense of the initial team membership dissolved as most children did their best to break the chain in the interest of the team they were currently on. There was no explicit rule about how the initial teams should be formed or about whether children should choose someone from their original team in case they broke the chain. Yet, in spite of this flexibility in the norms, in the school

setting gender was used as an important marker in the performance of this activity. As the game progressed, the teams inevitably became mixed but the salience of gender was reinforced by the fact that children who broke the opposite team's chain were more likely to choose same-sex playmates to take over to the team they were currently on even though they were not required to do so.

Although the dynamics of this game did not allow the maintenance of the initially-set gender boundaries, it usually started out as an activity that opposed boys' and girls' teams and the relevance of gender affected children's choices throughout the game. This revealed that, when children engaged in cross-sex interactions, they did not necessarily downplay the relevance of gender. But there were also activities which more clearly reinforced the opposition between boys and girls. Young villagers occasionally engaged in cross-sex chasing, which Thorne described as one of the most illustrative examples of 'borderwork.' These interactions involved varying numbers of participants and were usually conceived of as elaborate shared fantasies, where chasers and chased were labelled as 'police' (*policías*) and 'thieves' (*rateros*) and the thieves who were caught were put in 'jail' (*cárcel*). This kind of oppositional cross-sex interaction was not only enacted in free play but also encouraged through certain activities teachers proposed. For example, a physical education teacher divided girls and boys into different teams, one of which was expected to hide the 'treasure' and the other to search for it. These activities affirmed the relevance of gender boundaries and served as a site for heightening the excitement of the competition by launching verbal provocations based on gender (e.g. Stupid girls! Horrible boys!).

Indeed, as Thorne put it, 'when girls and boys are defined as opposite sides caught up in rivalry and competition, group stereotyping and antagonism flourish' (1993: 86). But gender stereotyping and antagonism could also flourish in cross-sex interactions where girls and boys were not formally on different sides. Eleven-year-old Héctor, nine-year-old Itzel and ten-year-old Alejandra and Esteban were among the numerous older children who claimed that boys and girls were both equal and the same. On one occasion, during the first weeks of my fieldwork, I walked with these young friends to the *plaza* so we could play out what I had announced as a radio talk-show about boys and girls. The plan was that once we got to the *plaza* we would sit, make up the questions and record their discussion. While we were climbing the steep, cobbled streets, children excitedly related their own and others' experiences with different kinds

of spiders and snakes. Alejandra recounted how her cousin was almost bitten by a black widow and she carefully described what the spider looked like. Esteban nodded and observed approvingly, ‘Yes, yes! It has a red spot. I have seen it in my grand-dad’s front-yard.’ They were enjoying one another’s stories and laughed all together when Itzel imitated her little brother’s reaction to a snake. This scene evoked what Thorne referred to as those ‘relaxed, non-gender marked’ situations. Yet, when we arrived at our destination, Esteban and Héctor asked me to play ‘just one’ video game on the machines lined up in front of a shop. ‘Don’t let them play,’ Itzel and Alejandra warned me, ‘they say “just one” and then they won’t stop.’ I let the boys play. The girls showed no interest in playing and we sat on the staircase. Their prediction was right. Esteban and Héctor went on killing zombies for almost half an hour. They would say they had only one life left and then insert more coins into the machine and kept playing. I often played video game machines (*maquinitas*) with Héctor and Esteban but this time I stayed with Alejandra and Itzel preparing the questions for the talk-show and waiting for the boys to finish.

I encouraged the girls to propose the questions. After they received a very basic instruction that we would talk about boys and girls, they posed their concerns in clearly oppositional terms<sup>27</sup>. ‘Do boys and girls get along well?’ Alejandra suggested. ‘And you, Itzel?’ I asked. ‘They don’t get along well,’ she replied. ‘No, I mean give us another question and you’ll respond to the questions later,’ I clarified. ‘Ah, okay,’ the girl nodded and then snapped ‘Why do boys and girls fight?’ The fact that one of the following questions - ‘why do boys fight with other boys?’ - had no female equivalent suggested that this kind of behaviour was perceived as more characteristic of boys. The girls continued proposing questions that revealed their insistence on the tensions between girls and boys: ‘why don’t boys and girls get along well?’; ‘why is there so much difference between boys and girls?’; ‘why are boys so rude?’<sup>28</sup>

When the boys joined us, they made their contributions: ‘why don’t girls play football?’; ‘why should one not hit a girl?’; ‘why are girls very delicate?’; ‘why do girls cry a lot?’ After Esteban proposed the last question, Héctor promptly responded in a provocative tone, looking at the girls defiantly: ‘Because they are weak and pathetic.’

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<sup>27</sup> Such situations encouraged me to reflect upon the extent to which the very gendered linguistic labels prime the informants to think about gender in dichotomous and oppositional terms.

<sup>28</sup> These questions did not reproduce the format of my own questions children had been previously exposed to.

The girls protested. Itzel shouted that girls and boys ‘don’t agree on anything’ (*‘no están de acuerdo en nada’*) and, while the girls argued that boys were horrible and conceited, the boys retorted that girls were stupid and boring. In the midst of their heated exchange, the time for Itzel’s catechism class approached and we walked her home leaving the list of questions and our radio-show for another occasion.

The labels, such as ‘inferior’, ‘horrible’ or ‘stupid’, which boys and girls occasionally exchanged when the inter-group tensions mounted, did not reveal beliefs about inherently male or female characteristics as there was no systematic attribution of these traits to boys or girls either in children’s everyday accounts about their social experiences or in their responses to explicit questions about these properties (e.g. ‘Who is more intelligent: boys or girls?’ to which they would answer ‘Both’). However, not all the attributes Alejandra, Esteban, Héctor and Itzel referred to were randomly applied labels prompted by the divisive circumstances. When the girls posed the questions, ‘Why are boys so rude?’ or ‘Why do boys fight with other boys?’ and when the boys asked, ‘Why are girls so delicate?’, ‘Why do girls cry a lot?’ or ‘Why should one not hit a girl?’, they honed in on ideas that were systematically associated with boys and girls and that were used to justify instances of gender separation. Children told me again and again that the main difference between boys and girls was in their ways of displaying and coping with aggressive behaviour. They did not hesitate to claim that boys tended to be rude and rough and that they ‘played hard’ (*se llevan pesado*) but that they could also ‘put up with it’ (*se aguantan*). At the same time, they were confident that girls were usually calm and unable to put up with (*no se aguantan*) verbal and physical aggression.

### **Expected to differ**

Children never talked about this gender differentiation as a consequence of traditional gender relations, subject to change under the influence of the egalitarian agenda and, in contrast to adults, they did not seek to accommodate this traditionally upheld dichotomy within modern discourses or use it to demonstrate their allegiance to the ideal of gender equality. They simply expressed these ideas as an acknowledgement of what they viewed as essential differences between girls and boys. On one occasion, I engaged a group of four boys and three girls in an activity that involved taking turns to write and draw on the blackboard we had borrowed from a neighbour. At one point, Carlos and

Pablo stood up at the same time and started pushing each other in front of the blackboard. ‘Now it’s my turn, *pendejo* (asshole),’ grumbled Pablo, who was well-known for using foul language. Carlos’s mother Mariela, who was concentrating on her sewing, looked up and angrily admonished the boys, ‘Don’t be rude. Show some respect!’ (*No sean groseros. Respeten*) ‘Boys!’ Alejandra sighed, rolling her eyes. Then she looked at me and calmly said, ‘You see. You see that I am right when I tell you that boys are *groseros*.’ Pablo’s brother Héctor stood up and separated them. The two boys left the group. Carlos went into the house to watch television and Pablo began to play in the gravel. After a few minutes, we started a new game and first Pablo and then Carlos joined us again.

Although Alejandra’s claim might have been taken as an insult since it referred to socially undesirable behaviour and someone could have objected that not all the boys were rude, nobody reacted to her remark. I never asked why. Perhaps the rest of the participants just dismissed it as insignificant or perhaps they thought that the girl’s comment was a generalisation grounded in what was locally considered as common knowledge. Both children and adults, when thinking about the distinction between boys and girls, defined boys as ‘more rude’ and girls as ‘more calm.’ They did not believe either that all the boys were inherently rude or that all the girls were calm but they associated rudeness far more readily with males and calmness with females. Children usually used the term ‘rudeness’ to denote various manifestations of physical and verbal aggression, such as hitting, pushing, teasing, and insulting. Since the disruptiveness of this kind of action drew their attention more powerfully than calm behaviour, their accounts of everyday experiences contained more explicit references to rudeness than to calmness. When boys and girls explained to me why someone was crying, why two friends were angry with each other, why they did not like a particular person or why someone was sent to the principal’s office, the adjective ‘*grosero*’ always came in handy and it was much more commonly used in its masculine than in its feminine form.

Boys did not hesitate to admit that the members of their own sex engaged more commonly in socially undesirable behaviour. When Héctor explained to me his criteria for choosing friends, he emphasised the distinction between ‘rude boys’ (*niños groseros*) and ‘calm boys’ (*niños tranquilos*) but he also recognised differences between sexes in the prevalence of these properties.

Z: You mentioned *rude boys*<sup>29</sup>. What does it mean to be 'a rude boy'? How does a rude boy behave?

H: He only goes around saying rude things, hitting others, he pushes them and he tells them rude things.

Z: Are there many boys like that?

H: Some, not all.

Z: Are there also girls like that?

H: I haven't seen any.

Z: In the whole school you haven't seen any?

H: No.

I was sitting outside a classroom during a break when I started talking to a girl called Jessica who was sitting next to me. Since we had previously witnessed a scene where a teacher scolded two boys who were fighting, I asked Jessica whether there were any girls who fought at the school. 'No,' she replied. I wrote down her response. Suddenly, a group of five girls, aged from eight to ten, who were standing around us started to protest, 'She is very rude. She hits others.' Jessica looked embarrassed and lowered her eyes. I had never met Jessica before but her classmates' remarks revealed that she was known as 'a rude girl.' I found out that the girls who accused her of 'hitting others' defined themselves as 'good girls' because they 'behave themselves, don't hit, don't push, don't use foul language, do homework' (*se portan bien, no pegan, no empujan, no dicen groserías, hacen trabajos*), while rude girls 'pinch, hit, push, use foul language, when you play, they push you to the ground' (*pellizcan, pegan, empujan, dicen groserías, cuando estás jugando, te tiran*). Despite the awareness of differences across the same-sex groups, they insisted on the validity of the distinction between boys and girls:

Z: Are boys and girls 'iguales' or different?

GIRL1: 'Iguales.'

GIRL2: 'Iguales.'

Z: In what?

GIRL1: They have the same rights.

Z: And in the way they are?

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<sup>29</sup> The same form '*niños*' can be translated either as gender marked 'boys' or gender neutral 'children.' Here translated as 'boys' because it was clarified in the previous context. Lately there has been a tendency in the official discourse to eliminate the possibility of a gender neutral reading of male forms.

*GIRLS: Different.*

*Z: In what?*

*GIRLS: Boys are rude.*

*GIRL1: Some of them are calm but many of them are rude.* (Pointing at the two boys who are standing next to them). *They are calm.*

*GIRL2:* (Pointing at one of the two boys) *He was rude. He used to hit us when we were in the first grade but now he's calm. He defends us.*

*Z: And girls? What are they like?*

*GIRLS: They are calm. They are good.*

*GIRL1: Some of them are rude* (Pointing at Jessica). *But few of them.*

My observations of children's encounters with peers at home, in the street, school playground and classroom broadly matched children's perceptions and revealed that those who engaged in 'rude' behaviour were actually more often male than female. I was standing behind a class of fourth-graders during the regular Monday recital following the performance of the Mexican national anthem by the school choir. After the programme was over, while waiting for his group's turn to be sent to their classroom, Fernando approached Ricardo with a menacing expression and spoke into his face. 'They told me that you said I like pink. I don't want to hear you say that again, *joto* (fag)!' Fernando said and pushed Ricardo in the chest. Ricardo replied, 'I didn't say anything.' Fernando warned him, 'I'll kick your ass' (*Te voy a partir la madre*) and turned away. Although this exchange did not end in any physical harm, I occasionally witnessed interactions where I had to carefully observe children's (mostly boys') moves in order to evaluate the seriousness of the fight and decide whether I should intervene or not. Boys were predominantly the protagonists of these socially undesirable encounters, both as perpetrators and as victims.

In girls' same-sex interactions, I observed many of the acts I had encountered among boys. I chose the previously cited example involving Fernando and Ricardo precisely because it paralleled a situation featuring two eleven-year-old girls. Irene approached Lizbeth with a threatening gesture, pushed her on the shoulder and warned her that she should not spread lies about her. I saw girls push or hit, pull one another's hair and exchange insults but they engaged in these incidents more rarely than boys. While boys and girls often teased or insulted one another, physical aggression in cross-sex interactions was less frequent. However, it is noteworthy that verbal aggression was

far more common than physical not only in cross-sex but also in same-sex relationships. Intentional physical violence was not wide-spread and few children provoked such incidents regularly.

Gender differences in physical and verbal aggression in the village matched boys' and girls' differential exposure to objects, activities and language from an early age, as I noted in Chapter Three. The observations about how boys and girls were raised suggest that boys were more intensely exposed to the promotion of roughness and toughness. However, their greater engagement in aggressive behaviour also led them to be more insistently reminded of the importance of respect in general, and respect for girls in particular. One of the most salient lessons children reported to have learned from their parents was that they 'should respect everybody.' But while boys occasionally also emphasised that they should respect girls, girls never expressed any particular preoccupation with respecting boys as such, which coincided with the adults' remarks I reported in Chapter Three. Although children received little clarification of the connection between gender and respect, they found these ideas easily comprehensible as they fit in with their own perceptions of male and female nature. Both boys and girls saw girls as more delicate than boys and they were particularly harsh in judging violence committed by older boys who 'only dared to hit small children and girls.' Children did not approve of rude behaviour regardless of the identity of either perpetrator or victim and many of them claimed that they tried to avoid the individuals who performed such actions, as exemplified in ten-year-old Miguel's remarks:

*Z: Do you hang out with rude boys?*

*M: No, not much.*

*Z: Why?*

*M: Because they get you into trouble.*

*Z: Really? What kind of trouble?*

*M: Like what happened the other day. They suspended football because one boy hit a woman and he blamed it on another boy and that other boy was sent to the principal's office and they issued a report on him.*

But children usually interpreted their own social personality as complex and rejected black-and-white representations. Even when they insisted that they had no sympathy for rude boys, my male informants admitted that their male friends and they

themselves occasionally not only engaged in socially undesirable behaviour, involving verbal or physical aggression, but also found this behaviour entertaining. They usually interpreted these actions as playful and expressed them in morally less charged terms of being ‘naughty’ (*travieso*) or ‘clown’ (*payaso*) rather than ‘rude’, as can be seen in my conversation with Héctor:

*Z: Are you known as rude, a trouble-maker and bad or good and calm among your friends?*

*H: How do you think they see you?*

*H: I don't know how they see me.*

*Z: Nobody has ever told you anything?*

*H: No.*

*Z: Do you think you are calm or a trouble-maker?*

*H: Both. Half and half, I'd say.*

*Z: A bit of this and a bit of that?*

*H: Yes but not really a trouble-maker. It's better to be the clown of the class.*

*Z: It's better to be the clown of the class?*

*H: No! Only half.*

*Z: What does it mean only half? A bit of a clown and a bit calm?*

*H: Yes.*

While boys insisted more than girls on the ‘naughty’ side of their social behaviour, girls did not ignore the moral ambiguities of their own same-sex interactions. As with the boys, girls’ accounts showed that, although the labels ‘rude’ and ‘calm’ usually stood for socially undesirable and desirable actions respectively, the connotations of each moved beyond the negative/positive dichotomy. As I found in my conversation with Alejandra and many other boys and girls, being ‘calm’ was occasionally equated with being ‘a little boring.’

*Z: You told me that you choose your friends for their character?*

*A: I judge them for their character. If they are like, rude, I don't hang out with them. Well, sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. Because, like, there is a girl who is rude, you see?*

*But I hang out with her because there is another girl who is calm and who always fights with the rude girl. And you see, that girl is more fun and the other one is a little bit boring because . . .*

*Z: Which one is more fun? The rude one or the calm one?*

*A: The rude one.*

*Z: She's more fun?*

*A: Aha.*

*Z: And the calm one is more boring?*

*A: Aha. I get more bored with her so I hang out with . . . Sometimes I do hang out with the calm one because I am also calm. I don't say rude things at school but I do here [at home]. You see, I don't like to say rude things at school but here I do. Here I take out everything that happens to me, all the anger I keep inside. I can't take it out there, but I can take it out here.*

But despite children's awareness of the fluidity of their identities and the intricacies of their same-sex relations, they continued to insist on the validity of the dichotomy between rude boys and calm girls. Alejandra herself once explained, 'I am very rude sometimes but I could never be as rude as boys.' Although intentionally violent acts were usually condemned by all children and occurred less frequently, negotiating aggression and its impact through play was more challenging and more common. The same kinds of actions that were defined as 'rude', such as hitting, pushing and insulting, were reinterpreted in play contexts and labelled in less morally charged terms as 'to be rough' (*ser tosco, brusco*) or 'to play hard' (*llevarse pesado*). The distinctions in the meanings attached to these acts depended on their intentionality: what was widely interpreted as socially unacceptable behaviour in playful settings, when intended to cause harm, became a legitimate form for asserting masculinity for many boys, but remained an undesirable form of interaction for most girls. The dichotomy thus persisted. Boys were seen as showing a greater tendency to be rough and hard on one another as opposed to calm girls.

Unsurprisingly, the boundaries between playful and non-playful interactions were not always clear-cut. Occasionally, aggressive acts defined as playful by those who perpetrated them were interpreted as 'rude' by those at the receiving end. On various occasions, I witnessed Héctor's unprovoked, violent outbursts against his neighbour Cecilia's dolls. While boys regarded their engagement in physical violence against girls as problematic, some of them seemed to find aggressive acts against objects associated with girls rather enjoyable. Héctor was calmly sitting in his neighbour's front-yard with a group of children. The boy seemed a little bored when he suddenly stood up and grabbed Cecilia's baby doll, which was dressed in pink. He started smashing it against the ground while making growling sounds. Cecilia's and Héctor's brothers and two

neighbours, a girl and a boy, were watching his performance while Cecilia screamed: ‘No, Héctor! Mum!’ Héctor took a handful of gravel and threw it at the doll hanging from his hand. Then he threw it at Cecilia’s feet, approached it again and kicked it. Cecilia’s mother Patricia shouted from inside the house, ‘Héctor, you’ll destroy it!’ Iván asked Cecilia to hand him the doll she had just picked up. ‘Héctor, Héctor,’ he called his friend. He pressed the doll against his head and pretended to cry. They both laughed. ‘Héctor!’ he drew his friend’s attention again. Héctor looked back. Iván kissed the doll and laughed again before Cecilia eventually seized her toy.

When I asked Héctor why he liked to smash Cecilia’s dolls against the ground, he smiled: ‘Just for fun.’ What he represented as a playful interaction was seen as ‘rude’ by Cecilia and her mother. ‘Héctor and Pablo behave like that because their parents have not taught them to respect,’ Cecilia’s mother explained. However, Héctor was aware that his action breached morally approved social models. Since the boy, while hitting the doll, produced sounds in a voice much deeper than his own, I was curious to know whom he was imitating. ‘A bad man’, he replied. Children who justified acts that were normally defined as socially undesirable, such as teasing, insulting or physical aggression, usually reinterpreted these as ‘just playing’ or ‘joking’<sup>30</sup>.

Yet, although children emphasised the differences between rude and rough boys and calm girls, their accounts revealed that what they regarded as the most salient distinction between boys and girls was not their readiness to engage in aggressive behaviour but the way they coped with its consequences. Even when girls and boys shared the awareness of the play context, for some of them intentionality mattered less than the fact that both rudeness and roughness could cause harm. When I asked ten-year-old Carolina why she did not like to play football with boys, she confidently explained: ‘Why should I put up with their pushes and punches? I prefer to play calmly without thinking about whether I would get hurt. We play differently. We are not so hard on one another. They get all excited and they don’t care if they hurt you. I don’t like to play like that.’ I once observed three girls kicking a ball to one another in the front-yard when suddenly the brother of one of them ran out of the house, kicked the ball against the wall, seized it and proposed a game: ‘Come on, two against two.’ ‘I don’t want to play with Álvaro. Remember how you pushed me last time. You gave me a bruise’,

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<sup>30</sup> See James, 1993 for how children in the UK schools explored the possibilities of being ‘a baddy’ through pretend play.

eight-year-old Cristina complained. The boy's sister Araceli promised her neighbour that her brother would be more careful this time and the game eventually began.

Girls did not talk of themselves as physically weaker than boys but most of them showed reluctance to tolerate what they considered as arbitrarily inflicted pain. They occasionally couched their attitudes in the claim that 'boys are hard on one other, so they have to put up with it', which reflected the idea about the inseparability of the aggressiveness and its consequences. While boys' discourses significantly differed, they were based on the same premises. Eleven-year-old Gabriel and nine-year-old Ricardo on one occasion informed me about the fight Gabriel had had with Ricardo's ten-year-old sister Karen, whom I did not know since Ricardo's family had come to the village only a few weeks earlier. After Gabriel recounted the incident, they explained to me how strong Karen was and did not hesitate to recognise their own physical inferiority with respect to the girl.

*R: She is very strong.*

*Z: Ah, yeah? Is she stronger than the two of you?*

*G: If we both try to push her, we can manage, but she can push us.*

*Z: But separately you can't.*

*R: We slapped her once on the face and she slapped us three times.*

*G: Three or four.*

*(...)*

*Z: So, tell me what your sister is like?*

*G: She gets angry easily, she is grumpy.*

*R: Rough.*

*G: Very rough and very beautiful.*

*Z: Very beautiful, too? Yes?*

*G: (nodding and smiling)*

*R: She can beat both of us in a fight.*

*Z: And what does she like to play?*

*G: She does this (showing muscles).*

*R: She does that.*

*Z: Oh, yeah? She's so strong?*

*R: But she's not fat at all. She's very thin.*

*Z: And does she like to fight?*

*R: No.*

The conversation with these boys illustrates the conviction, shared by most of their peers, that the most fundamental difference between boys and girls was not in their physical strength or aggressiveness but in their ability to cope with aggression. It reveals that differences in 'putting up with' pain were not explained away by referring to differences between boys' and girls' bodies as children did not insist on boys' lesser sensitivity to physical pain but on their greater predisposition to 'put up with it.'

*Z: Who do you get along with better? Ricardo or his sister?*

*G: With Ricardo.*

*Z: And why with Ricardo?*

*G: Because I play football with him and all that.*

*Z: And why not with her too?*

*G: Because she only wants to play with dolls. Well, she also plays football but I don't like it.*

*R: We told her not to play because she will get hurt and she doesn't want to.*

*G: She will what?*

*R: She will get hurt.*

*Z: And why will she get hurt and the two of you will not?*

*G: Because we play rough, right?*

*Z: But if she's stronger than you?*

*G: Yes, but last time we hit her with the ball in the face and she started crying, right? And we received kicks in the 'forbidden zone'<sup>31</sup>.*

*Z: And why does she cry when a ball hits her hard and you don't?*

*R: We just pushed her like that, that's all, and it hit her in the face.*

*G: But really hard. And he hit me with the ball in the 'forbidden zone' and I didn't cry. And I also hit him.*

*R: And I didn't cry.*

*G: And we hit her once again and she cried.*

*Z: So, why did Karen cry and you did not?*

*G: Because we put up with it. We always play like that. That's already our way of playing.*

*Z: Ah, and she's not used to that way of playing?*

*G: No.*

*Z: And why not?*

*G: Because we almost never invite her to play.*

*Z: And why not? Because of that? So she would not get hurt?*

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<sup>31</sup> Alluding to the genitals.

*G: So we would not hurt her. We could make her bleed.*

*Z: But I don't understand. Why would she get more hurt than you if she is stronger than you?*

*G: Not so much.*

*Z: But she is strong. She's a strong girl.*

*R: But it hurts her. Once we were playing and the ball hit her on three fingers. Three fingers, look, like this, and it hit her, and then her fingers were hurting and since that day I told her not to play anymore.*

*G: And they hit me with 'a cannon kick' in the chest and I became like all blue and I didn't cry.*

*Z: And what do you think? Why does Karen not put up with it and you do?*

*G: Because she's a girl. It's obvious right away.*

*Z: Because of what?*

*G: Because she's a girl.*

*Z: And what's that got to do with it?*

*G: All the girls are like that.*

*Z: Really?*

*G: But my little sister puts up with it more than her.*

*Z: You see? Although she's a girl, she puts up with it.*

*G: Because I hit her with a ball. But she doesn't put up with it, she doesn't put up with it.*

*R: She wasn't hit in the face.*

*G: Ricardo, wait. She doesn't put up with it in the sense that she doesn't cry. She starts crying and there's no way to make her shut up.*

*Z: And what do you think, Ricardo? Why doesn't Karen put up with it and you do?*

*R: Because she's stronger but her fingers were hurting and I told her not to play anymore.*

My first attempt to find out why Karen reacted to harm differently from Ricardo and Gabriel - 'And why will she get hurt and the two of you will not?' - and Gabriel's claim - 'Because she's a girl. It's obvious right away' - sound like a very straightforward exchange so it is telling that my question appears in line 10 and Gabriel's answer in line 33. The fact that the boys struggled to articulate something that to them was 'obvious right away' seems to reveal their perplexity that I did not find such an essential difference between boys and girls equally 'obvious.' Although this kind of remark was more common when discussing physical aggressiveness, children held the same beliefs about girls' and boys' reactions to verbal violence. On one occasion, I observed a heated

discussion between one eleven-year-old boy and three of his female classmates. The boy used foul language to insult one of the girls and the girl started to cry. Héctor was sitting next to me while watching the scene. The boy was well aware of the kinds of issues I was interested in and, before I asked him anything, he helpfully commented<sup>32</sup>, ‘You see, if he had said this to a boy, he would have never reacted like this. He just keeps staring at you or he insults you too. He puts up with whatever you tell him. Girls are not like that, they are more delicate.’

### **The pitfalls and possibilities of being less different than expected**

These perceptions of how girls and boys behaved and what they could cope with served to justify different accountability criteria for assessing their behaviour. The pervasiveness of these convictions, however, did not imply that children were oblivious to the existence of boys and girls who, in some situations, could not easily fit within this dichotomy. As Deutsch (2007) noted, interactions always leave room for resistance. In Chapter Three, I referred to the concerns adults raised about Felipe and Marisa. Felipe was a lively boy who liked football and enjoyed playing with cars and soldiers. As long as children complied with local expectations, the gender appropriateness of their behaviour usually went unnoticed and Felipe’s gender identity would not have attracted the attention of others had he been able to cope with his peers’ physical aggression differently. The fact that he readily burst into tears in interactions with other children exposed the boy to criticism but, at the same time, it tacitly reminded everyone around him that ‘boys cried too.’ Marisa was interested in many activities associated with girls and she told me that she enjoyed playing with her dolls and a kitchen set. The girl knew that the engagement in these activities never gave rise to admonitions or teasing. Yet she was also aware that her interest in rough-and-tumble play occasionally provoked some tensions. In the school setting, she did not engage in this kind of game with her peers but her teacher had noticed that she was ‘not so calm as most other girls’ and that she did not hesitate to ‘get in a row with boys and used the same foul language they did.’ On one occasion, I observed how one of her male classmates did not want to give her back her pencil and Marisa angrily shouted at him: ‘Give it back to me, asshole. Don’t think

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<sup>32</sup> These situation made me reflect upon the extent to which my informants’ awareness of my research interests affected the spontaneity of the comments people made about the issues I focused on.

that I'm afraid of you.' Such interventions challenged the perception that girls usually sought to solve their problems by turning to teachers or parents for help.

Eleven-year-old Yaritza was not one of my main informants. She was very silent whenever I saw her and I rarely had a chance to exchange even a few sentences with her. I knew that she was seen as a tough girl who could 'put up with' harm. Yaritza successfully maintained her circle of female friends, who considered her to be not only calm but also kind and funny. Outside the school, I often saw her in the company of her best friend Iván. They did homework together, played board games, rode bicycles and occasionally gathered with a group of male neighbours to play football. Boys never protested about Yaritza's participation and, when I asked them why they invited Yaritza to play with them more readily than any other girl, I was not surprised to hear once again that Yaritza was not like other girls because she could 'put up with it.' She was viewed as an exception, but her example demonstrated to her peers that there were also girls who could 'put up with it.' In spite of this, in the school playground, boys never invited Yaritza to play football with them and she never sought to gain access to their matches.

These instances of resistance to prevailing expectations did not result from the newly promoted efforts to achieve gender equality. Girls who could 'put up with it' and boys who could not existed long before the egalitarian policies were implemented or socioeconomic transformations facilitated changes in gender relations among Mexicans. These acts emerged from the contradictions inherent in the gender order grounded in a homogenising, essentialist logic, which prescribed unambiguous definitions of what men and women were and what they should be. Boys and girls who challenged these definitions apparently found the constraints they imposed problematic. Marisa complained that sometimes her mother made her stop wrestling with her brother and cousins precisely at the moment when they 'were having most fun.' I suggest that these challenges may be defined as contributions to 'undoing gender' because of their potential for exposing cracks in the construction of gender divisions. Yet I must not lose sight of the fact that my informants did not seem to perceive these actions as reducing gender distinctions. In the absence of alternative discourses about socially acceptable behaviour, children did not critically engage with the enforcement of different expectations for boys and girls. Even the children whose gender performances did not fit in with the traditional expectations seemed to be more interested in accommodating

their behaviour within these dominant ideals than in downplaying their relevance or questioning their validity.

For example, when Marisa explained to me why her mother should not worry about her being hurt when playing rough with her brother and cousins, she did not argue that she could ‘put up with it’ as much as them but that they knew that she was a girl and that they were careful not to hurt her. In response to my question whether boys cried or not, Felipe told me, ‘Sometimes they do but not as much as girls.’ Pedro, another boy who was known for not being able to ‘put up with it’, explained that, although sometimes he could not ‘put up with’ physical harm, he still ‘could put up with it more than any girl’ he knew. Similarly, Alejandra claimed that she could be very rude but that she could ‘never be as rude as boys.’ Brief references to the idea that ‘boys cry too’ were not sufficiently expanded upon either in classroom or at home to encourage children to legitimise non-traditional behaviour. When I asked Esteban why children teased Pedro when he cried if they learnt at school that ‘boys can cry too’, he did not hesitate to reply, ‘They can cry but it doesn’t mean that they should cry like girls.’

Children believed that, by being ‘hard on one another’, boys voluntarily exposed themselves to being hurt and that, consequently, they were expected to put up with rough play. At the same time, girls could show their discomfort when hurt because they were calm. This kind of reasoning was grounded in a sense of reciprocity, which might have had the potential to destabilise gender distinctions. According to this logic, girls who were rough would also be expected to be tough and boys who were calm would be allowed to be delicate. Yet this was not the case. Marisa’s brother Alberto, who played rough with her himself, told me that he had to be more careful with her than with his male cousins because she was a girl. Elías, who often played with Yaritza in the neighbourhood, once explained to me that, while Yaritza could ‘put up with it’, in the school setting he had a wider choice of male friends, who could ‘put up with it more’ than Yaritza. Elías could not recall any situations when Yaritza could not ‘put up with it’ but he was clearly convinced that the mere fact of being a girl meant that she could not cope with harm in the same way as his male peers. When I talked to Yaritza’s female friends, they also expressed concerns about the girl’s ability to cope with boys’ aggression. Although they had witnessed Yaritza’s toughness on numerous occasions and enthusiastically recounted how she ‘did not cry when Pablo hit her with a ball in the face’ along with similar anecdotes, they cautioned her that ‘she should not play rough

with boys because they could hurt her.' These comments revealed that, even though Yaritza demonstrated on numerous occasions that she was a tough girl, her roughness and toughness were assessed differently from boys'.

When observing daily interactions of various boys who were defined as the ones who 'could not put up with it', I realised that the social impact of these labels was not easily predictable as mournful responses and complaints about kicks and pushes were not the only criteria that determined one's status among male peers. I noticed ten-year-old Pedro and Daniel when Esteban, one of my main informants, cited them as examples of boys who could not 'put up with it.' Esteban was not especially fond of and did not have much contact with either of these boys, yet their relationships with other peers revealed significant differences. Pedro was often teased by his male classmates (e.g. 'You are *vieja!*'), rarely interacted with boys in the school, joined girls' conversations during the break and accompanied them to lunch in the school canteen. Daniel, on the other hand, spent most of the time with his male classmates. He was not very much appreciated as a football player and he was not on the school team but he participated in informal football matches during breaks, walked around the school playground joking with his male friends and chased girls.

However, although the social experiences of these two boys in the school context greatly differed, the way boys and girls from their class described them confirmed that Esteban was not alone in lumping them together. When they talked about both Daniel and Pedro, children readily noted that they 'could not put up with it.' Yet, about Daniel, children also stressed that 'when he plays, he pushes others and all that but, when someone pushes him, he always complains and cries and doesn't put up with it. He's irritating.' Thus, Daniel's conduct was seen as even more problematic than Pedro's. Daniel failed to comply with the expectation of reciprocity as he was 'hard on others' and could not 'put up with it' when others were hard on him; on the other hand, Pedro was reluctant either to inflict or to suffer harm. While the lack of endurance in boys apparently did not provoke easily identifiable social consequences, the way Pedro's and Daniel's classmates addressed this issue revealed that the generalisations about female and male nature powerfully influenced children's expectations of their peers' behaviour and shaped the assessments of individual inclinations and actions. As one boy objected, when talking about the two boys: 'If you're a man, behave like a man.' His words suggested that there was an inherent essence that distinguished men from women and

that was expected to be expressed through a proper performance of gender identity. ‘Putting up with it’ seemed to be an important part of it. When I asked children whether the fact that boys ‘put up with it’ more than girls meant that they felt less pain, they disagreed. As Héctor once put it, boys also felt pain but they ‘just put up with it.’ Nine-year-old María Isabel was Pedro’s neighbour. She was fond of him because he was ‘a good boy’, who was ‘always ready to help everyone.’ María Isabel insisted that she was not judgmental of the boy’s inability to ‘put up with it’, and yet she subscribed to the prevailing accountability criteria for assessing male and female behaviour: ‘He is very delicate. I don’t mind that but he is a bit like a girl.’

Although girls and boys were aware that everyone around them shared the same expectations, they understood that different audiences would react differently to their behaviour. The fact that Yaritza played rough games with her neighbours and refrained from this kind of activity in the school playground might suggest that she felt more comfortable to defy local expectations in a smaller circle of familiar others who, in spite of the conviction that she could never be as tough as a boy, at least knew that she was not ‘like other girls’ and did not tease her. Although Yaritza knew that her friends participated in the construction of her public record and that they were reluctant to defend her participation in the team before other ‘outsiders’ in the school setting, in the neighbourhood, they clearly moved closer to her ‘intimate others’ on the ‘audience continuum’ and she sought accomplices in them. On one occasion, I approached her during a break and told her that I had heard that she was very good at football. I wondered why she never played football in the school playground, where boys from different classes played together. ‘I prefer to play with my friends (male form, *amigos*),’ she replied briefly but tellingly. She obviously felt more comfortable in seeking complicity among the boys she was more familiar with. Yet one of Yaritza’s female friends told me that she believed that the girl was disappointed that her male friends forgot about her once they entered the school gates. I never talked to Felipe about the fact that he was perceived as someone who could not ‘put up with it’ but we talked about coping with physical and verbal aggression in general and he explained to me that, if a boy could not ‘put up with it’, other children would tease him. ‘And what about his mum and dad? Would they also tease him?’ I asked. ‘No, they would not tease him but they would be angry because he can’t defend himself.’ The boy’s words reflected his parents’ concerns correctly.

Although children agreed that boys' and girls' actions should be differently assessed, they disapproved of using teasing as an instrument for enforcing these expectations. They expressed their rejection of teasing when I explicitly asked them to evaluate this type of pressure. But they rarely raised this concern in their everyday interactions or confronted those who, for example, called boys who cried 'fags' or 'girls.' Boys' non-compliance with the dominant expectations provoked public ridicule more often than girls'. The fact that they questioned the validity of teasing in front of me did not stem from the recognition that it was wrong to believe it was unacceptable for a boy to cry in a fight or for a girl to be hard on others; nor did it reflect an interest in reducing gender differences. The disapproval of teasing was couched in the locally salient idea that teasing was disrespectful. Like many other children, the siblings and close friends of those who challenged traditional expectations often resorted to teasing in spite of its undesirable connotations. However, they usually did so when they and their interlocutors were not exposed to the public gaze. Alberto admitted that he would never tease his sister in front of other children and stressed that he would defend her if anyone said anything against her. These 'intimate others' sometimes sought more subtle strategies to enforce their assessments of gender-atypical behaviour. Micaela, one of Yaritza's best friends, was concerned that her friend might get hurt and she formulated her expectations as a well-intentioned warning: 'I warned her on various occasions that she should not play so rough with boys.'

I observed that, even though children insistently held on to different assessments of girls' and boys' behaviour, some of them occasionally, perhaps inadvertently, questioned the expectations on which these assessments were based. Alberto was convinced that boys should be tough because they were rough and girls delicate because they were calm. Yet he did not seem to attach much importance to the reciprocity between roughness and toughness, on the one hand, and calmness and delicateness, on the other, when he claimed that although his sister Marisa was rough, she could not 'put up with it' as much as boys. He also recognised that Pedro was calm but he still made fun of him and claimed that he was 'like a girl' because he could not 'put up with it.' But I found that, when Alberto and his friends were affected by this sort of accountability regime, they complained. Similarly to what the teacher Luz María mentioned in Chapter Three, I heard testimonies from a few boys who protested that there were girls who 'hit them, pushed them or insulted them' and, when the boys

fought back, the girls ran to report them to the principal or to the teachers. On one occasion, while I was entering the principal's office, Alberto and two of his classmates were just leaving. I later asked Alberto why he had gone to see the principal that day and he said that they went there to explain to the principal that he should not punish one of his male peers for an incident that had occurred that day because the girls had provoked it. In this case, the boys felt that they were damaged by the fact that adults 'punish boys and protect girls even when girls are rude.' They apparently found problematic the differential treatment that these different expectations gave rise to, and this led them to challenge the very accountability regime that they usually sustained. In this way, the discomfort that some children felt with the constraints imposed by gender divisions and others with the tensions that stemmed from the application of traditional criteria to non-traditional behaviour could serve to widen the cracks in gender divisions and contribute to 'undoing gender.'

### **Concluding remarks**

Children's accounts of their social relationships showed that boys and girls shared the belief about being differently predisposed to engage in and 'put up with' aggression. I found that children used these perceived differences in girls' and boys' predispositions to justify differences in the expectations and assessments of female and male behaviour. The concept of reciprocity entailed in the idea that those who were rough should be tough and those who were calm should be delicate seemed to contain potential for overcoming gender distinctions, and yet children's evaluations of their everyday interactions revealed that these expectations were strongly gendered and that any inconsistencies were readily accommodated within the prevailing accountability regime. Children did not view this differentiation as a consequence of traditional gender relations, subject to change, but as an expression of inevitable differences between men and women. In spite of this, the experiences of various girls and boys suggest that not everybody felt equally comfortable with these gender arrangements at all times and that children resisted these expectations in various ways.

However, in the absence of an alternative accountability regime, in which girls and boys would not be expected to differ in the way they displayed and coped with aggression, even the villagers who found these arrangements problematic were not

likely to critically engage with the enforcement of traditional gender divisions. West and Zimmerman noted that ‘while it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those interactions are enacted’ (1987: 136-137). Neither private institutions, like family, nor public, like school, provided the ‘idiom’ for engaging with roughness, toughness, calmness and delicateness in alternative, ungendered ways. In Chapters Five and Six, I will show what happened in the domain of toys, where an alternative accountability regime was available and where children could rely upon the discourses about the legitimacy of egalitarian access to toys to critically engage with what they recognised as constraints and injustices stemming from traditional precepts.

## Chapter Five

### **The importance of dolls and cars**

‘Machismo is still here,’ said Gloria. ‘You spend all day with children. You must have noticed how parents tell boys, “Don’t play with dolls. That’s women’s stuff,” or say to girls: “Don’t play with cars! That’s men’s stuff.” They don’t let them choose freely what they like because they are stuck with that idea’, the woman explained and grimaced in disapproval. ‘It’s easy for you to talk like that,’ Elena countered, looking confident about the strength of her argument. ‘You don’t have children. I’ll see you when you get children. I’ll see whether you’ll buy your son a Barbie. No. I’m sure you won’t. Machismo, we’re all equal, all that and, at the end of the day, your boy becomes gay and then what?’ Gloria looked at me, seeking reassurance, ‘He won’t become gay because of that, right?’ Her reference to the inhibitions of children’s free choices echoed the idea, promoted through the modernising agenda, that children should be equally encouraged to explore different objects and activities in order to acquire different skills and develop their individual preferences and inclinations. Elena herself took pride in supporting the ideal of gender equality and she did not hesitate to condemn what she interpreted as unjustified, arbitrary constraints. Yet her discomfort with questioning the legitimacy of gender divisions in children’s use of toys was grounded in the conviction that, in this case, dismantling traditional arrangements might bring more harm than good.

In this chapter, I will show that these different expectations about toys were not isolated, individual opinions among adult villagers but that they corresponded to alternative accountability regimes that coexisted in Metztitlán. In contrast to what I claimed in Chapters Three and Four about the absence of alternative criteria for assessing boys’ and girls’ ability to display and cope with aggression, the traditional distinction between ‘boys’ and girls’ toys’ was actively defied, primarily in the school setting, through the discourse of egalitarian access to toys. I will explore how mothers, fathers, neighbours, teachers and authors of textbooks grappled with these different ideals and how they exposed children to these tensions through the construction of contradictory perceptions of how objects influenced who girls and boys were and who

they might become. I will suggest that the very process of monitoring and assessing children's engagement with toys differed depending on their sex membership. Boys were observed more carefully and censured more strictly primarily because of the anxieties their 'intimate others' felt not so much about the division between toys itself as about their understanding of how this distinction was connected to sexual orientation, which seemed to be what they valued as the most meaningful of all gender distinctions.

### **Gendered objects**

Parents usually claimed that boys simply did not like dolls or that girls showed no interest in toy weapons or cars. Daniela once explained to me that 'God made dolls for girls and cars for boys.' Although none of my other informants ever accounted for gender appropriateness of toys by invoking religious principles, her claim mirrored the widespread belief that differences in children's toy preferences derived from essential differences between boys and girls. Many villagers seemed to perceive this distinction as so deeply entrenched that they struggled to even imagine a different scenario as a legitimate alternative. When I asked Alejandra if she would buy a doll for her son when she grew up, her mother Daniela burst out laughing as she came up with a hypothetical situation, 'How embarrassing it would be! Imagine if I went to the shop to buy a toy for my boy and I said to those selling the toys, "Listen, I want a Barbie for my boy. Which one would you recommend?" Imagine how they would all laugh at me! What a fool I would make of myself!' The woman and her daughter were so entertained by this possibility that they started to cry with laughter.

The meanings villagers traditionally attached to toys transformed them into symbolic tools for telling a cultural story about how different boys and girls were in their interests and predispositions. As with the way they conceived of gender differences in displaying and coping with aggression, which I mentioned in Chapter Three, villagers showed uneasiness with the idea that these inclinations could be altered by the social environment and they sought to properly attend to them by enforcing the traditional accountability regime, which expected girls and boys to play with different toys, from babyhood onwards. People's conceptions of the role of toys in the formation of children's gender identity suggest that the power they attributed to these objects resembles what has been reported in some other sociocultural settings. For example,

Kirkham and Attfield observed that in the UK objects are amongst ‘the strongest bearers of meaning’ and that ‘the relationships between objects and gender are formed and take place in ways that are so accepted as “normal” as to become “invisible”’ (1996: 1). Indeed, the normalisation of the idea of gender appropriateness of toys in Metztitlán rendered children’s preferences ‘invisible’ as long as they complied with the traditional norms.

The access to many objects children handled in their playful interactions in Metztitlán was not restricted by local gender expectations but by their parents’ economic status. If children were old enough to play with balls, puzzles, board games or bicycles and their parents could afford them, these objects rarely provoked any concerns about their appropriateness. But when children showed interest in dolls, kitchen sets, beauty cases, cars, action figures, toy weapons or marbles, adults policed their choices more carefully. Parents ensured that children were exposed to gender-appropriate toys from infancy and, as their sons and daughters grew up, they were alert to any breach of the social desirability of their requests. Women and men shared an awareness that gender appropriateness of toys was not merely a matter of the objects themselves and confidently used colours and styles as important conceptual cues for distinguishing between ‘girls’ stuff’ and ‘boys’ stuff.’ For example, although a car was commonly seen as a ‘boys’ toy’, the perception of it radically changed if it was pink, covered in little hearts and labelled ‘Barbie’ in which case it was shifted to a symbol of femininity. Unlike Barbies or baby-dolls, action figures were not known as *muñecas* (dolls, female form) but as *muñecos* (male form). This division between ‘boys’ toys’ and ‘girls’ toys’ was maintained through the enactment of tacit transactions involving parents who consistently purchased and children who chose, received and played with gender-appropriate toys. Yet many women and men readily verbalised the principles underlying these daily routines when children failed to live up to their expectations.

Some parents immediately recognised and children clearly recalled situations when their mothers and fathers scolded them for playing with toys that were not considered to be gender-appropriate. These admonitions did not seek to provide elaborate explanations of the premises underlying gender divisions but were intended to effectively remind boys and girls of the gist of their transgression: ‘You are not a woman to play with kitchen sets!’, ‘Trucks are not for girls!’, ‘You are a boy! Dolls are for girls.’ Elena recounted how her husband Óscar once returned home earlier than

expected and smashed his daughter's doll against the wall when he found his son Álvaro playing with it on his own. Álvaro did not show much interest in dolls. He occasionally played with his sister but he never played with dolls by himself. However, on that occasion, while he was playing with his sister, Elena sent the girl to the shop to buy some eggs and the girl was out when her father arrived. The woman explained: 'Even if Araceli [her daughter] had been there, he wouldn't have said: "Ah, alright, my little son. Don't worry! Play with your sister as much as you like". Some fathers are like that but he is not like that. Not at all. But if she had been around, he wouldn't have gotten so angry. He would have just shouted at him: "Are you a woman or what?" but he wouldn't have smashed the doll or anything like that.' She noted that her daughter had received that doll from her relatives who lived in the United States and that it was the best doll she had. After the incident, the doll could not move her head or say 'mummy' anymore and Araceli 'cried for days' when she found out what happened. Elena observed that from that moment not only did Álvaro refrain from playing with dolls even more strictly but also his sister was very careful not to let him 'get close to her things.'

I found Elena's account instructive as it pointed to various aspects of parents' relationship with toys which I noticed throughout my stay in the village. Most children had access to gender-inappropriate toys at home only when they had siblings of different sex and their engagement with these toys was more easily tolerated in the presence of playmates of different sex, especially if children were younger than six years of age. Indeed, when I visited children's homes, I occasionally encountered younger boys and girls joyfully enacting role play between dolls or running car races in the front yard without any opposition from either their fathers or mothers. Although girls also experienced restrictions, reactions to boys' transgressions were stronger. Many parents allowed or even encouraged children to play with gender-atypical toys when, for example, an older brother was expected to keep his younger sister company and entertain her. While most parents held on to the same accountability criteria and were determined to foster gender-appropriate toy preferences in their children, mothers and fathers did not always agree on the rigidity that was called for in monitoring children's play habits. Some 'intimate others' were more likely than others to occasionally tolerate non-traditional choices as long as these were not exposed to the public gaze or, to put it differently, to the gaze of those who participated in the construction of a child's public record. I knew a few children who, in the absence of their fathers, indulged in playing

with gender-inappropriate toys after negotiating this arrangement with their mothers who, in the protected surroundings of the home, sometimes acceded to their requests.

Yet the sensitivities were not only attached to objects, colours and styles but also to how children made them come to life. Yoselin, a mother of seven-year-old Antonio and three-year-old Anahí once told me that her husband reproached their son because his action figures ‘didn’t do anything but talk’ and encouraged him to get them into more action, like chasing one another or some wrestling. Similar concerns were also raised about the ways girls used their toys as I heard Elena draw her daughter’s attention to the fact that her dolls were ‘too aggressive’ and that they ‘fought all the time.’ These examples showed that children sought loopholes in gender divisions by using traditional objects in non-traditional ways but also that parents were alert to children’s often unwitting efforts towards subverting adults’ expectations. Parents in the village were clearly less ‘naive and misinformed’ than people whom Attfield, in her theoretical essay, criticised for assuming that ‘macho soldier dolls simply instil sexist attitudes or that jointless dolls only encourage passivity in girls’ (1996: 88). Their everyday experiences with the ways their children engaged with toys seemed to make them aware that ‘toys cannot fully determine actions or thoughts, they are themselves the focus of play – a dynamic activity used to rehearse, interpret and try out new meanings as well as products of complex social relations’ (Attfield, 1996: 88) and they aspired to keep this ‘dynamic activity’ under control. The attention to the stories that children enacted through toys led parents to be permissive of instances when girls used boys’ cars to transport their dolls or when boys rescued ‘defenceless’ Barbies with their ‘courageous’ male action figures.

### **The right to play with everything**

Educational reformers shared the villagers’ belief in the alterability of children’s traditional toy use. However, while parents and neighbours interpreted different toy preferences as a result of some idealised notion of male and female nature and interpreted the potential of the social environment to undermine these ‘natural’ predispositions as a threat, the educational agenda defined them as restrictive social fabrications. Concomitantly, in official publications, the references to changing these play habits were not imbued with anxieties but with hopeful determination that inspired

the construction of an alternative accountability regime. Gender distinctions in children's toy use and in expectations and practices regarding their play have been heavily documented<sup>33</sup>. As Francis argues, toys play an important role in the production and reproduction of both gender difference and gender inequality as 'boys and girls are being inculcated to different gendered worlds due to their distinctive gendered consumption of toys and leisure resources' from the earliest age (2010: 340). In Western societies, the persistence of these patterns has even provoked 'a sense of despair, that after twenty to thirty years of concerted attempts to promote equal opportunities between boys and girls one can look around most nursery classrooms and see the same gendered grouping of play preferences: girls in the home corner; boys on the construction carpet' (Holland, 2003: 16). Mexican educational policy-makers were not discouraged by this 'sense of despair', which was found in countries with a longer tradition of 'concerted attempts to promote equal opportunities', and insistently recommended that teachers should encourage boys and girls to play games that members of their sex have not played with traditionally (SEP and PUEG, 2010: 109).

This call for a change of traditional gender arrangements fits comfortably with Connell's contention that 'to argue that the current gender order should be changed is to claim that it does more harm than good' (2009: 143). Mexican gender reformers recognised this harm primarily in two realms: firstly, the perpetuation of gender inequalities, since toys were transformed into 'the instruments of ideological penetration in the service of the dominant classes that serve to implement sexual division of labour from an early age' (Aranda et al. cited in SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 103); secondly and no less importantly, the restrictions to the development of a child's individual potential, which ignored the fact that 'belonging to one or the other sex should not limit

<sup>33</sup> Sociologists, anthropologists, educators and developmental psychologists have suggested that toy selection and parental reactions to toy play serve as the primary influences in the learning of socially desirable gender roles, which led them to explore the distinctions between female and male toys in children's and adults' narratives and practices, in their social environment, in the media and in marketing in different sociocultural contexts (Yu et al., 2010; Blakemore and Centers, 2005; Streitmatter, 1994; Pomerleau et al., 1990; Miller, 1987; Robinson and Morris, 1986; Fagot, 1978). Children's toy preferences have been found to be significantly related to parental influences as parents provided gender-differentiated toys and rewarded play behavior that was gender-stereotyped (Raag, 1999; Raag and Rackliff, 1998; Witt, 1997; Peretti and Sydney, 1984). It has been argued that children aptly applied local gender stereotypes to toys from an early age (Martin et al., 1995; Martin and Little, 1990; Huston, 1985) and that they readily predicted their parents' reactions to gender-typical and cross-gender play (Freeman, 2007). Gender stereotypes represented through toys have been interpreted as an antithesis to the efforts to redefine gender identities (Attfield, 1996) and educators have been encouraged to use gendered objects to engage children in critical dialogue about the preconceived ideas about gender (Zimmerman and Aberle, 2002; Wagner-Ott, 2002; MacNaughton, 1996).

one's options' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 172) and that playing with different toys, such as dolls and cars, would provide girls and boys with 'more opportunities to develop as many capacities as possible' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 172).

The state policies, inspired by the educational reform, encouraged the organisation of courses, workshops and distribution of booklets within the school setting, dedicated to raising awareness about different aspects of gender equality among adults. Teachers were encouraged to invite children to play with all kinds of toys, 'cars as much as building blocks, dolls and planes' (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 172) and instructed during *cuadernos de capacitación* (professional training) that the principles that restricted access to particular objects or activities to 'only boys' or 'only girls' were incompatible with the ideal of equality, which was presented as one of the most salient strivings of modern Mexican society. In the classroom, they usually translated this to children through the claim that they all 'had the right to play with everything.' The Spanish Language textbook for the fourth grade, which was written according to the curriculum dating back to 1993, featured a text about a girl who dreamt about playing football and was compelled to fight against prejudices to achieve her goal: '(...) She was a girl, girls play with dolls, prepare play food, behave themselves, say good morning, good afternoon and that kind of thing. How could it cross Mayte's mind that she wanted to be a football player? But that's the way it was.' (SEP, 2000) After inviting children to express their understanding of the key points of the text, a teacher intervened by providing one of the examples she felt the children would most readily identify with: 'It is wrong to say that, for instance, boys cannot play with dolls. There's nothing wrong with that. In the past, it was different. Boys could play only with cars and girls only with dolls. Nowadays everybody has the right to play with everything.' In Civic and Ethical Education classes, teachers also instructed children that it was 'wrong' to impose gender divisions in toy choices and invoked the importance of respecting others' right to make their own choices. What lessons about different issues concerning the negotiation of traditional and modern gender expectations had in common was an apparently unambiguous ideological distinction between 'the right' and 'the wrong' way of doing gender. If a child raised a hand to give an example of a person who defended the opposite values to the ones endorsed at school, teachers readily warned her that the person she referred to was 'wrong' and that those ideas belonged to the past.

However, I found that, although teachers were more familiar with the equality

discourse than most other villagers and taught their own children these same lessons, they shared the anxieties that others felt about dismantling gender divisions in toy use and through their everyday interactions with their children enforced similar restrictions that I encountered at other homes. In the light of this observation, I argue that the enforcement of the egalitarian accountability regime in the school setting was simultaneously hindered and facilitated by the dynamics of daily school routines. Primary school pupils were generally not allowed to take toys to school. This meant that, at the primary school, teachers did not have as many opportunities as their colleagues who worked at the pre-schools or nurseries to put the egalitarian ideas into practice and to enforce these values through everyday interactions. Yet this same fact implied that they also had fewer occasions to incur contradictions through casual remarks or admonitions grounded in their concerns about the abolition of traditional divisions.

Despite the rule about not bringing toys to school, the presence of some toys, such as balls or marbles, was tolerated. While in the classroom teachers promoted ‘undoing gender’ in children’s toy use, during the break they allowed children to manage their spaces and activities freely. They passed by spontaneously formed same-sex play groups that were engaged with gender-appropriate toys (e.g. boys playing football or marbles) without commenting on the gender bias underlying these daily routines. At the same time, children readily censored the behaviour of those who sought to cross gender boundaries by showing interest in the activities performed by schoolmates of different sex. This meant that, in contrast to the egalitarian accountability regime, traditional expectations were actively enforced through a constant process of monitoring and assessing. One teacher explained to me that he would intervene if any of the children complained that they were excluded from an activity due to gender discrimination. When I asked another teacher what she thought about this approach, she disagreed: ‘We should raise awareness about this issue and not wait for children to complain.’ Her words sounded even more compelling as I knew she was one of the rare teachers who occasionally invited eight-year-old boys and girls from her own class to play marbles together because, as she reminded them, ‘who says only boys should play with marbles?’

The need for ‘undoing gender’ in this realm was not only articulated through the educational agenda but also captured the attention of the Mexican media. ‘From

childhood, games and toys impose sexist stereotypes' (Díaz, 24/12/2011), announced the headline of a Mexican daily newspaper, which reported the results of a research project, conducted in Spain, about the impact of gender differentiation in toy marketing on child development. The authors of this study suggested that 'it is necessary to take into account the values of social equality and equity, established by countries known for their advanced pedagogical practices, which propose new alternatives in the use of toys, aimed at providing equal life opportunities for boys and girls' (Martínez Reina and Vélez-Cea, 2009: 143). Media reports about this kind of research were accompanied by statements made by Mexican gender experts who either criticised traditional gender arrangements and argued that 'it seems that toy stores are the most traditional and conservative redoubt of gender inequalities' (Universia, 05/01/2011), or noted with satisfaction that 'the society is changing little by little' (Díaz, 24/12/2011).

### **More harm than good**

Although many villagers had never attended the courses organised by SEP at the local primary school or read articles about the promotion of gender equality in the national newspapers, word of mouth among relatives and neighbours and occasional references to these issues on television had made the idea that the traditional distinctions between male and female toys countered the modern gender ideology widely available. When Claudia, who had recently returned from Los Angeles, told me that socialising practices in the United States were much more liberal than in Metztitlán because American people were not so 'obsessed' with distinctions between pink and blue or dolls and cars, her friend Ilaria admitted that these divisions were still powerfully pervasive but she also stressed that migrants usually remembered the way things were ten or twenty years earlier and that people in the village were not so *machista* as they used to be.

Indeed, most people in the village were keen to clearly state their appreciation for the modernising project and for what they understood as a quest for a more just society, unfettered by oppressive rules. Thus, it was not surprising that, when asked whether they allowed their sons and daughters to engage with traditionally gender-inappropriate toys, villagers often constructed narratives which relied more heavily upon the choices they made in exceptional cases than upon the principles they systematically enacted. They downplayed the salience of the situations when they

discouraged their sons and daughters from playing with gender-atypical toys and highlighted the instances when they tolerated such practices. In this way, they stressed examples involving the interactions of younger children or situations where older children entertained their younger siblings of different sex by adapting to their toy preferences. Various parents noted with disdain that the insistence on the ideas that ‘boys cannot play with dolls’ or that ‘a girl cannot play with cars’ were outdated, dubbed them as *machista*, and explained that they encouraged their sons to play with dolls if their little sisters were bored and had no female playmates or said that ‘there is nothing wrong if a boy plays with dolls once in a while with his female cousins or friends.’ The references to these rather limited cases were apparently expected to provide compelling evidence that the speaker was not burdened by the traditional legacy of strict gender divisions.

In the absence of any ethnographic evidence about how this kind of situation was managed in Metztitlán in the past, I cannot make any claims about whether or not these acts demonstrate the relaxation of gender divisions over the last few decades or not. If older generations of parents were less likely to tolerate their children’s engagement with gender-atypical toys under any circumstances, gender distinctions have been somewhat reduced<sup>34</sup>. However, independently of whether this tolerance of gender-atypical choices actually reflected long-standing practices or increasing acceptance of egalitarian values with respect to the past, these instances surely represented ‘undoing gender’ when compared to the efforts of my informants who policed gender boundaries in toy use more strictly.

While all adults monitored children’s actions and loudly or tacitly assessed their desirability, ‘intimate others’ felt that they had more authority but also more responsibility to regulate what kind of transgressions qualified as tolerable. They knew that parents were held accountable not only for their own but also for their children’s behaviour (see Kane, 2006 for US parents’ concerns about accountability in their responses to children’s gender non-conformity). This observation is, in a way, reminiscent of what De la Peña noted in Southern Jalisco in 1980s: ‘Parents are

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<sup>34</sup> Even if some tolerance of crossing gender boundaries in play habits had occurred prior to the promotion of egalitarian values, it was undoubtedly not couched in the newly popularised idiom of adherence to gender equality. Yet, independently of how people interpreted these acts, this kind of evidence would show that tolerance of gender-atypical choices in some situations did not result from the promotion of the egalitarian agenda but that the egalitarian discourses merely served as modern rationalisations of old socialising practices.

responsible before God for the qualities and deficiencies (physical and moral) of their child, because God has entrusted them with the continuation of his endless creative task' (1984: 210). Villagers rarely shared with me such metaphysical concerns or their responsibility 'before God' for their children's behaviour. Yet they readily referred to the responsibility they felt before their relatives and neighbours. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, one man said of a boy who could not cope with aggression as expected, 'I don't know what his parents did wrong but I am sure that they did something wrong.' In contrast to this, when it came to toys, people were confident that they knew what had gone wrong. They believed that too much interest in gender-atypical toys in middle childhood usually meant that parents had been too permissive about crossing gender boundaries and, in this way, had not properly enforced the traditional accountability regime.

Although people defined tolerable scenarios differently, the cases that did not fit in with these definitions usually provoked unambiguous responses and demonstrated that traditional ideals prevailed in villagers' reactions to their children's play. The idea of a child's persistent engagement with gender-atypical toys seemed to be particularly problematic. Among the villagers I interacted with, none of the parents observed that their sons were systematically more drawn to female toys and only a few of them told me about their daughters' clear and consistent interest in male toys. Even those parents who laid claim to modern identities by emphasising how they did not hinder their daughters' defiance of traditional divisions and allowed them to play with whatever they chose clarified that they encouraged their daughters to pay more attention to 'girls' toys' because they did not want them to be perceived as *marimacha*. In this case, the concept of *marimacha* did not seem to prompt the same, clearly articulated concerns as when girls did not comply with the expectation to be 'calm', which I referred to in Chapter Three. If girls were 'rough' rather than 'calm', their parents feared that they might be identified with boys and not receive the respect they were entitled to as girls. This primarily meant that they might not be granted special protection and suffer physical, verbal or even sexual aggression. When calm girls showed preference for 'boys' toys', adults did not show this kind of preoccupation and explained the undesirability attached to the notion of *marimacha* in, arguably, more vague terms. They did not tend to relate gender-appropriateness of toys with future occupational roles or with sexual preferences but provided rather tautological explanations.

Ilaria's interpretation of the term *marimacha* in response to a question about her daughter Marisa's hypothetical interest in 'boys' toys' differed from the way she understood this label when talking about Marisa's actual interest in rough play. When I asked the woman why she insisted that she would not like her daughter to play only with 'boys' toys' and be seen as *marimacha*, she gave me what she seemed to think of as a very straightforward explanation: 'If you gave birth to a girl, you want her to be a girl not a boy, right?' Marcela once explained: 'My daughter can play with whatever she wants but if she was more interested in boys' toys than in girls' toys, I would find that weird.' The woman admitted that she would be confused with her daughter's atypical toy preferences because she felt confident that she had properly attended to her play habits since she was an infant. These remarks suggest that people continued to regard toy use as an important marker of what it meant to be a girl but they did not show much interest in articulating the concerns underlying what they saw as a natural, self-explanatory link.

Malena was the mother of a nine-year-old girl Itzel and three-year-old Yael. She prepared and served food at a buffet next to the bus station and her husband Roberto worked as a builder. Malena and Roberto lived with the woman's widowed mother Herminia who took care of Yael while Malena was at work. After school, Itzel visited her mother at the buffet, where she often ate, did homework, joked with her mother and played with the daughter of a woman who worked at a nearby shop. Sometimes, Itzel dropped by the buffet to give her mother a kiss and hurried home, which was within a ten-minute-walk, to play with her little brother. Itzel enjoyed playing with cars and Malena recalled that her husband once told the girl that he would throw away all her dolls if he found her playing with 'man's stuff' ever again. After this threat, Itzel became more mindful of her behaviour in front of her father but she did not give up on pursuing her preferences. She expressly asked her mother whether she could play with cars while her father was not at home. Malena explained that the girl told her that she had so much fun playing with her brother's cars that she 'could not tell her, "No!"' However, she readily added that she tolerated Itzel's choices primarily because, by playing with cars, she kept her younger brother entertained and because 'she doesn't like only cars but also "girls' stuff".' Although Itzel's grandmother Herminia initially scolded Itzel for her engagement with her brother's toys, she finally accepted Malena's argument that it was difficult to keep up with the daily routine of a remarkably active

and adventure-loving three-year-old and that she should be happy that Itzel managed to distract Yael.

While Josefina's daughter Diana shared Itzel's interest in cars, her situation was different. She had no brothers and there were no cars in her household. Josefina and Diego had two daughters, ten-year-old Rosalía and eight-year-old Diana. The woman worked as an administrative assistant while her husband Diego was a taxi-driver. Diego's parents and his brother's and cousin's families lived in the same area of the village and their children often played together. Josefina and Diego were known as a couple who 'got along well.' The woman often expressed satisfaction with the fact that her husband was not a womaniser and that he spent a lot of time with the family. The atmosphere in their home was relaxed and I occasionally witnessed how Diana and Rosalía cried with laughter while joking and playing with their parents. As I will mention in Chapter Seven, Diego was a cooperative husband who assisted his wife with the housework more than most other men I met in the village. Although Josefina and Diego allowed Diana to play with cars during frequent visits to her male cousins, they were not ready to buy that kind of toy for her. On one occasion, Diana wished for a truck in her letter to the Three Kings. Although Josefina and her husband eventually decided not to accede to their daughter's request, the woman admitted that they discussed 'for two hours' whether it made sense not to give her 'what would make her happy.'

In spite of the fact that girls' toy use was carefully monitored and assessed in accordance with traditional criteria, they were given more leeway in managing their play habits than boys. This greater attention to boys' transgressions changed when children moved into adolescence and the issues related to sexuality began to gain more relevance (see also Thorne, 1993). While parents' evaluations of girls' persistent interest in 'boys' toys' revealed vague discomfort, the responses to the possibility of boys continually opting for the toys associated with girls clearly provoked not only deeper but also more specific anxieties<sup>35</sup>. Many parents recognised that they would feel 'unhappy', 'worried' or 'angry', if their sons insistently attempted to engage with gender-inappropriate toys. 'I tell my [seven-year-old] son to play with his [three-year-old] sister and her dolls if I see that she is bored and wants to play with him. There's

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<sup>35</sup> For differential treatment of boys' and girls' gender-atypical behaviour, see Wood et al., 2002; Sandnabba and Ahlberg, 1999; McCreary, 1994; Archer, 1984; Feinman, 1981.

nothing wrong if a boy plays with dolls but if he wanted to play with dolls by himself every day, I would not tolerate that. To be honest, I would be worried about that', Yoselin admitted. I once chatted with Irene while her seven-year-old son Hugo was playing with his nine-year-old cousin Katia and the dolls she had brought over. She recalled that a few days earlier we talked about how she would react if Hugo was interested only in dolls or, at least, more in dolls than in male toys. 'I am looking at him now and trying to imagine that. Like Katia is not here, he is playing on his own, and like that every day. No. No. May God not want that. I would be depressed. I swear to you. I would be depressed', the woman commented, shaking her head. When asked to clarify how intense boys' interest in 'girls' toys' would have to be to provoke these preoccupations, parents, as I have already noted, demonstrated different criteria. I heard people say that they were not ready to allow a boy to 'play with dolls every day', 'more than a couple of times a month' or 'he should never play with dolls if there is no reason for that, for example, if he needs to take care of his little sister or something like that.'

Similarly to Ilaria's claim about the importance of 'a girl being a girl', adults often simply claimed that they did not want their sons to play with 'girls' toys' because they were boys and it was 'natural' for them to play with 'men's stuff.' However, when pushed to articulate more clearly what they would be 'worried' or 'depressed' about if their sons showed more interest in Barbies, beauty cases and kitchen sets than they were ready to tolerate, many of them did not struggle to identify the source of their anxieties and recognised that they would be concerned with the possibility of their sons becoming homosexuals<sup>36</sup>. This fear suggested that, in case of boys, the enforcement of traditional expectations about toys was seen as conducive not only to proper use of toys but, even more importantly, as a contribution to fostering socially desirable sexual preferences. In this way, the efforts to 'undo gender' in boys' play habits became more costly because they were not obstructed so much by adults' insistence on preserving these very divisions but on harbouring the divisions in male and female sexual preferences, which they seemed to value more than any other gender distinction. These anxieties translated into harsher admonitions and more severe punishment for boys' transgressions. I heard more frequently of examples involving breaking toys, different kinds of threats or

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<sup>36</sup> Martin claims that although in the US child care advice is grounded in liberal feminists' understanding of gender socialisation, gender nonconformity is 'still viewed as problematic because it is linked implicitly and explicitly to homosexuality' (2005: 456).

prohibitions (e.g. watching TV or not attending the Carnival) or even physical punishment if a boy crossed these gender boundaries.

Mothers were confident that they knew their children well and that they were familiar with their toy preferences and play habits. Mariela's son Carlos was one of the few boys who told me that he 'had fun playing with dolls.' Mariela was a housewife and her husband Manuel worked in the field<sup>37</sup>. Manuel was usually absent from home until 6 pm but, after work, he immediately returned home and spent the evenings with his family. Mariela helped her sons with homework, watched television with them and talked but she believed that they looked forward to their father's arrival because they liked to play 'men's games' with him, like football, wrestling or car races. Mariela recalled that Carlos was interested in dolls as a toddler but that he was 'not drawn to them anymore' (*ya no le llaman la atención*). The woman acknowledged that both she and her husband had always strongly opposed their sons' engagement with 'girls' toys' because they did not want them to become *maricas*. She commented that little children could be confused sometimes and that it was parents' responsibility to ensure that their sons and daughters did not 'make mistakes' by opting for gender-inappropriate toys. She cited the example of her sons' cousin Diana to illustrate how a child could develop gender-atypical preferences if parents were too permissive. She observed that, whenever Diana's family visited them or other relatives, the girl played cars with her male cousins and her parents 'did not tell her anything.' Although Mariela assured me that her sons showed no interest in 'women's stuff,' I knew that Carlos liked to play with dolls and that he occasionally did so precisely with his cousins Diana and Rosalía. Since Carlos avoided any contact with dolls in front of his parents and played with them only in front of his two female cousins, as I will mention in Chapter Six, it is possible that the woman was actually unaware of her son's gender-atypical preferences.

Gender divisions in the choice of sexual and romantic partners have not gone unchallenged in Mexican society and people in Metztitlán were not unaware of these initiatives. Carrillo explored the role of different social actors, such as the Mexican state, Catholic church, mass media and diverse liberal and conservative groups, in shaping public opinion and policies about sexuality-related issues and found that 'urban Mexicans often seem engaged in a project that mixes social and cultural change with a

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<sup>37</sup> I will provide more details on Mariela's and Manuel's working arrangements and family circumstances in Chapters Seven and Eight.

need to belong to a perceived core of old-fashioned normality' (2007: 87). In one of the examples concerning the public debates about homosexuality, he noted that the president of the National Association of Parents (*Asociación Nacional de Padres de Familia*) reacted to the forthcoming media campaign against homophobia, sponsored by the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (*Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación*), by demonstrating his organisation's concern that 'this campaign would promote the view that homosexuality should be seen as natural, especially by young children.' Instead, he argued that 'homosexuality is unnatural and goes against society's good costumes' (Carrillo, 2007: 81).

Like Carrillo's urban informants, people in Metztitlán were familiar with these tensions in the public representations of homosexuality and they themselves seemed to mix the appeal of modernisation with the 'need to belong to a perceived core of old-fashioned normality.' They readily expressed their tolerance for homosexuals but carefully added 'as long as they do not provoke or disrespect others', revealing the perception that there was something inherently threatening about homosexual identity. This reservation was most powerfully manifested through their insistence on protecting their sons from the socialising forces which might turn them into homosexuals<sup>38</sup> and an excessive exposure to gender-inappropriate toys proved to be an important one. Parents, and fathers even more frequently than mothers, did not hesitate to convey these concerns to their children very straightforwardly: 'Don't play with that. You'll become a fag!' This fear of a child becoming a fag was mainly grounded in the preoccupation about not belonging to what most villagers defined as 'normality.'

Some parents were uncertain of whether toy preferences were in any way linked to future sexual preferences but they had no doubts that gender-atypical choices would lead their sons to be seen as 'effeminate' and none of them was indifferent to this prospect. Furthermore, even though some people themselves were not convinced about the impact of play habits on a child's sexuality, they could not ignore the perception that most villagers believed in this link and that they were alert to the responsibility of 'intimate others' in enforcing this accountability regime. Irene and I were sitting at the staircase in front of the shop where she was working. The shop had an upward sliding door so when it was open, its interior was entirely exposed to a rather busy street.

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<sup>38</sup> This seemed to counter Prieur's (1996) informants' idea about homosexuals as lacking male 'essence', which I referred to in Chapter Two.

Irene's son Hugo often did homework with his mother during her working hours and played inside or in front of the shop. On one occasion, the boy's cousin Katia dropped by and brought a couple of dolls. Hugo and she occasionally played with dolls at her or the boy's home and she happily invited him to join her as she was starting to mimic small talk between the dolls. Irene promptly reacted, 'What's going on with you? With all these people here, do you want them to think that he's *maricón*?' The boy and the girl remained silent, while the woman turned to me seeking to clarify her position, 'There's nothing wrong with that. You know that they play at home sometimes but here no. Someone might think that I always let him play with dolls. They might think "Oh, she doesn't care how he might turn out." Natalia once told me, 'Perhaps that's not right, perhaps they don't become gay but everybody here believes they do and they would think that I am irresponsible [if she allowed her son to play with dolls in front of others].' Such remarks revealed that villagers did not perceive these strategies merely as instruments for discouraging gender nonconformity. They served to demonstrate to those who 'held them accountable' for their children's well-being that they were parents who cared. People were clearly more concerned about the harm that might come from abolishing gender differences in toy use than tempted by the good which the educational agenda promised this change might bring. These perceptions seemed to be reinforced by the fact that accountability to their neighbours was a far more immediate and meaningful concern to these men and women than a more abstract accountability to the state, which promoted a regime that was grounded in equal expectations from boys and girls.

Teachers did not show any interest in raising the issue of homosexuality in class but they were aware of the fact that the educational policy-makers sought to dispel this kind of anxiety (although they referred to both boys and girls). In the publications dedicated to teachers, they expressly and repeatedly stated:

*It is important to clarify that toys, per se, do not determine or condition, children's eventual sexual identification. It is convenient to make this remark because even nowadays one can observe a strong resistance from fathers and mothers (and also teachers) to allow boys to use toys traditionally assigned to girls and vice versa, because there is a prejudice that this will have a direct impact on their sexual preferences.* (SEP and INMUJERES,

### **Concluding remarks**

In contrast to what I showed in Chapters Three and Four about the local conceptions of displaying and coping with aggression, when it comes to children's toy use, the traditional accountability regime was forcefully challenged by discourses about girls' and boys' egalitarian access to toys, promoted primarily in the school setting. However, I suggested that, although in the classroom teachers advocated egalitarian expectations which encouraged girls and boys to play with whatever they liked independently of their sex membership, these accountability criteria were not actively enforced through everyday interactions. I sought to demonstrate that, while villagers showed their appreciation for the equality agenda, they did not hesitate to recognise their conviction about the need for setting limits to the teachers' message that 'everybody has the right to play with everything.' 'Intimate others' were seen as the ones who had the authority and, most importantly, the greatest responsibility to regulate these limits and adequately steer the essential differences in children's predispositions. While official publications promoted the benefits of the transformation of traditional play habits, villagers were concerned that the harm these changes might bring was greater than the good.

I found that the preoccupation about the impact of dismantling gender divisions in toy use on boys and girls was not viewed in the same way and that boys' transgressions were more severely censured, which rendered the process of 'undoing gender' more complicated. Parents' concerns about girls were cast in more vague terms than their preoccupation with boys' play. I claimed that parents' anxieties about boys could not be accounted for through their shared commitment only to these very gender divisions but also to the idealisation of heterosexuality. The conceptions of children's gender nonconformity were reinforced by morality tales about good parenthood inspired by adults' sense of accountability to fellow villagers. In Chapter Six, I will shift my focus to children's discourses and experiences and examine whether, in the presence of contradictory accountability regimes, girls and boys expressed support for egalitarian arrangements and whether they showed readiness to resist traditional divisions through everyday interactions.

## Chapter Six

### Girls, boys and toys

Pablo and I were standing in a small toy shop. The boy was carefully inspecting a large truck. ‘That one is nice,’ I remarked. ‘It’s not that good. My cousin has a better one. You cannot even open the doors on this one and the tyres are made of plastic,’ the boy observed drily. I showed him a soldier wearing a camouflage suit and asked, ‘And this one?’ He grabbed the toy and smiled, ‘This one is cool!’ But he was not entirely satisfied: ‘It’s cheaper in Pachuca.’ Then I picked up a doll with long blonde hair in a pink dress and handed it towards him, saying, ‘What do you think about this one?’ The boy looked up. ‘Ugh! I am not a woman! (*Guácala, no soy vieja*)’, he exclaimed with disgust and poked the doll with one finger pushing it back to me. ‘But I saw you play with your cousins the other day,’ I replied. ‘Only sometimes but almost never,’ he concluded and calmly continued to rummage among haphazardly displayed toys. Pablo did not need to inspect the doll to be sure that there was something wrong with it. The problem with the doll was not that her hair was too long, that her legs were jointless or that she was too expensive. The doll was for girls and Pablo was not a girl. I looked at the boy wondering how much it mattered to him when his teachers assured him that he ‘had the right to play with dolls’ and that ‘there was nothing wrong with that.’ Did his father’s warning that he might become gay if he played with dolls sound more convincing? Or did he perhaps care less about his teachers’ instructions and his father’s anxieties and more about his peers’ teasing?

In this chapter I will explore how, while engaging with these different social actors, children negotiated the contradictory messages about gender appropriateness of toys which I referred to in Chapter Five. I will show that the availability of egalitarian assessments of girls’ and boys’ toy choices influenced children’s discourses in important ways. In spite of the fact that children held essentialist beliefs about toy preferences, many of them confidently claimed that traditional expectations about gendered play habits were problematic because they contradicted the ideals of ‘freedom’ and ‘equality.’ They expressed their allegiance to an alternative accountability regime which expected

girls and boys to choose toys in accordance with their individual interests rather than gender. However, I will argue that only a few children put these ideas to work and actually challenged the traditional accountability regime by exposing themselves to the risk of censure through everyday interactions. I will suggest that, in contrast to most of their peers, children who eventually confronted social pressure and resisted traditional expectations, were not driven by any abstract concerns about 'freedom' or 'equality' but by the interest in personally meaningful benefits.

### **About equality, freedom and fairness**

Children claimed that 'boys don't like dolls' and that 'girls don't like cars.' They were not oblivious to the fact that there were boys and girls whose toy preferences contradicted these perceptions but they were still confident about the validity of their generalisations. On one occasion, I went with Héctor and Esteban to buy a birthday present for a girl whom they did not personally know. When I remarked that there were some nice cars in the store and that I might purchase one of those, Héctor warned me, 'Don't buy that, she won't like it. You'll just waste your money.' Esteban smiled and added, 'She'll throw it into the garbage.' I asked them how they could be so sure about it if they had never even talked to my friend. 'Girls don't like boys' stuff. There are some who do but very few of them. She would think that you made a mistake and thought that it was her brother's birthday,' Héctor concluded.

Unlike adults, children did not pay so much attention to the idea of alterability of different predispositions in boys and girls under the influence of social environment and they seemed confident about the inevitability of the persistence of differences in toy preferences. They anticipated that, whatever toys one offered to boys or girls from babyhood onwards, most of them would prefer gender-appropriate objects. However, while children of all ages shared these essentialist beliefs about boys' and girls' inclinations, not all of them seemed to be equally likely to translate these different perceptions of what girls and boys liked and how they behaved into different expectations about how they *should* manage their play habits. When explicitly asked about the acceptability of particular toy choices, the ways younger and older children assessed the engagement with gender-atypical toys revealed that they held their peers accountable to different ideals or, to put it differently, that they subscribed to different

accountability regimes. In accordance with traditional expectations, six- and seven-year-olds usually objected to crossing gender boundaries in toy use. Although I noticed that some of them were somewhat more permissive of girls' than of boys' transgressions, they usually couched both boys' and girls' gender-atypical behaviour in apparently self-explanatory comments that 'a boy can't play with dolls because he's a boy' or that 'a girl can't play with cars because she's a girl.'

Yet, from the age of eight, when children became more intensely exposed to the egalitarian messages through school lessons, many of them started to critically engage with traditional divisions of toys by invoking the ideal of equality in our conversations. They confidently recalled that their teachers or parents taught them that 'boys can play with dolls and girls with cars' and that 'we should respect other people's decisions.' Eight-year-old Rodrigo used the newly promoted discourse about the validity of gender-atypical choices to make sense of different kinds of situations where one's right to be different from the majority might be denied. He compared a hypothetical case of a boy who might be teased for playing with Barbies with his own experience of having been laughed at for wearing glasses and called 'four eyes' (*cuatro ojos*). The boy dismissed the acceptability of this behaviour and concluded that 'this is a free country' (*es un país libre*). By the age of nine, this tendency seemed to gain more strength as fourth- to sixth-graders, in individual interviews, commonly supported equal access to toys. I often heard them say that it was alright for a girl to play with cars or a boy with dolls because 'we are all equal' and because discrimination was 'not fair.' Ten-year-old Lupe told me that her aunts teased her that she was a boy even if they only saw her holding a marble in her hand. The girl voiced her opinion, 'I say that's not fair because so far as I understood boys and girls must be treated in the same way.' The invocation of 'rights' was particularly popular and numerous girls and boys confidently argued that 'we all have the same rights' and 'we all have the right to play with everything.' Interestingly, at these ages, many children found this concept so appealing that even those who insisted on gender divisions occasionally referred to 'rights' to support their claims. 'A boy doesn't have the right to play with Barbies because he's a boy,' noted ten-year-old Abigail or, as nine-year-old Leticia put it, 'girls have the right to play with their own toys.'

In our conversations, most older boys and girls were interested in presenting themselves as advocates of the egalitarian accountability regime and this type of

comment, grounded in the appreciation for the ideals of freedom, fairness and equal rights, were seen as evidence of one's commitment to the modernity project. Another important way to demonstrate their allegiance to these modern values was the criticism of the strategies used to enforce traditional expectations. When children objected to this kind of social pressure and sought to illustrate its manifestations, they most readily referred to teasing among peers. In contrast to the reasons underlying their disapproval of teasing those who did not display or cope with aggression in accordance with local expectations, which I examined in Chapter Four, in this case, children objected to teasing not only because it was disrespectful but also because it revealed a commitment to 'wrong' and outdated gender ideals. 'Those who make fun of boys who play with dolls don't understand that nowadays we all have the same rights', explained eleven-year-old Patricia. Ten-year-old Yaír noted that many children teased others for their gender-inappropriate choices 'because their parents raised them with the idea that boys should not play with dolls,' and added that 'in the past there was a lot of machismo here.' Children believed that identifying with modern ideals required cognitive resources not everybody had an opportunity to develop due to social influences (e.g. 'they don't understand (...)', 'they were raised with the idea (...)') and they seemed to indulge in what they regarded as moral and intellectual superiority of modern gender identities. They defined those who teased others for their toy choices as 'ignorant', 'stupid' or '*machistas*'.

However, while official publications suggested that educational interventions *could* lead to the transformation of differences in play habits and *should* give rise to the elimination of the relevance of gender to toy use, children interpreted the apparently ambiguous statements by teachers that all children 'could play with whatever they wanted' and that 'everybody has the right to play with everything' simply as a legitimization of greater tolerance for crossing what were seen as inevitable gender boundaries. According to their interpretations, the gist of the egalitarian logic was that the choices of those who persistently or occasionally represented exceptions to the perceived regularities should be respected. Some children supported the equality discourse by expressly using the idiom of 'respect' to refer to how those 'some' (*algunos*) or 'few' (*pocos*) who played with gender-atypical toys should be treated and to illustrate how those who tolerated these choices differed from the ones who held on to the traditional gender ideals. Children who claimed that they did not tease those who

made gender-atypical choices occasionally told me, ‘I show respect’ (*Yo respeto*). Others implicitly pointed to the importance of ‘respect’ through the claim that children who did not play with gender-appropriate toys should not be teased or insulted.

The claims about the legitimacy of children playing with ‘whatever they wanted’ emerged in older children’s responses to direct questions so confidently and continually that, had these brief interviews been my only methodological tool, I would have left Metztitlán convinced that these young Mexican villagers had accomplished the arduous, for many feminists even revolutionary, mission of ‘undoing gender’ in toy use. Yet, although these statements may point to a fledgling destabilisation of traditional divisions, children’s everyday interactions revealed that they made little effort to put the ideas they expressed to work. In spite of their declared support for alternative accountability criteria, most girls and boys failed to resist traditional expectations and to contribute to ‘undoing gender’ as they refrained from engaging in behaviour that did not comply with these prescriptions and from confronting those who sought to enforce them.

### **Resisting resistance**

The composition of children’s play groups outside school hours depended primarily on the availability of other children in their neighbourhood. Since boys and girls were usually not allowed to roam the streets searching for company, they were constrained to play with their closest neighbours. Their choices of playmates usually relied more upon other children’s age than upon sex membership so that cross-sex interactions were quite common. The games that children opted for in these cases mostly involved activities and objects that were locally seen as gender-neutral, such as hide-and-seek, chasing, running down improvised slides, certain ball games or creatively manipulating natural materials (e.g. stones, leaves, digging in the dirt, etc)<sup>39</sup>. Yet the availability of play partners also affected children’s engagement with gendered toys. A girl who was regularly surrounded by male siblings and neighbours and a boy who lived with girls played with gender-atypical toys more frequently than those who could count more

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<sup>39</sup> Some of these activities, such as chasing, in the school setting, where a wider choice of participants was available, were not performed in a gender neutral manner as team membership was usually based on sex membership.

consistently on the presence of the same-sex company. Moreover, children occasionally created play settings that accommodated the involvement of both ‘girls’ and boys’ toys’ in cross-sex interactions, which seemed to mitigate concerns about gender-atypical play. For example, boys and girls drove cars that transported Barbie dolls and soldiers who headed to a restaurant that provided food prepared at a kitchen set. Although certain activities, such as food preparation, were often assigned depending on sex membership, in these contexts children handled all kinds of toys in a more relaxed manner.

Even when children complied with stereotyped play habits and strictly split along gender lines to engage with gendered toys, they did not necessarily use these objects in accordance with traditional expectations. For example, by engaging with dolls, girls often acted out stories through which they dealt with family and social tensions (e.g. crime, drinking, generation gap, etc.) rather than exercising their nurturing and homemaking abilities. At Rosalía’s and Diana’s grandmother’s birthday party, I enjoyed a tasty dinner laughing and chatting with a large group of children and adults. After the children finished the meal, they got up and quickly organised the game ‘musical chairs’. Boys and girls excitedly played together. However, after three rounds, a few of them seemed to start losing interest in this game and one of the boys proposed to play marbles with another boy. The boy eagerly accepted his proposal and the rest of the boys followed. The girls were not invited but none of them showed interest in joining the group of boys who set out to clear the space on the ground under a tree. ‘Let’s play mums,’ one of the girls suggested and five girls cheerfully entered the house.

They picked up a few dolls, a kitchen set and a cash register. While two eight-year-olds, a seven-year-old and a four-year-old sat on a bed feeding their dolls, a ten-year-old placed the cash register on the other bed and took charge of the shop where the others were supposed to come to buy food. What started out as a calm, family setting at one point turned into a social drama involving a kidnapping, the death of children and a mother summoned for an interrogation in prison.

*R: Everybody’s starting to make a mess.*

*D: She’s mum. Clara’s mum.*

*L: We must obey her.*

*R: Elena’s also mum.*

*L: No, Elena is not mum anymore.*

*R: Then only Clara is mum now. Clara, you have to create some order.*

*D: Besides, when my mum comes in (unintelligible).*

*R: (To the microphone on the cashier) Mrs Diana, they will take you to jail if you don't come here for a moment.*

(Laughter)

*R: You are required to show up at (unintelligible). Say the words that I told you before/to your daughters who have already died. (Laughter)*

*D: Bla-bla-bla-bla-bla-bla.*

*Z: Why did her children die?*

(Laughter)

*R: (Laughing) Because they were kidnapped.*

*D: Bla-bla-bla-bla-bla-bla-bla.*

*Z: Who kidnapped them?*

(Laughter)

*R: That's just a make-believe.*

*Z: I know. That's why I am asking you as a make-believe.*

*L: Who kidnapped them?*

*D: A criminal.*

(Laughter)

*Z: And you didn't save them?*

*D: (To the microphone on the cashier) The gang 'Star rain'*

*C: The gang 'Star rain.'*

*D: And where were they kidnapped?*

*R: (To the microphone on the cashier) In a hut.*

*C: Ay.*

*Z: And what were they doing there?*

*L: (Unintelligible).*

*C: In a hut?*

*R: (Whispering to Diana) And they didn't arrive in time.*

*L: (To the microphone on the cashier) And they didn't arrive in time.*

*Z: Uy, horrible.*

(Laughter)

*R: (Whispering to Diana) The police.*

*D: (To the microphone on the cashier) The police.*

*D: Goodbye. (Background noise, shouting, laughter)*

*C: They are calling me now.*

*D: (Shouting to the two girls she's trying to put to sleep) Enough!*

*R: (To the microphone on the cashier) Mrs. Clara is (interrupted)/ E: Down!*  
*(Trying to put them to sleep)*

*R: Mrs. Clara is required. (Background noise, laughter)*

*L: They are taking you to jail (unintelligible). (Laughter). They are going to ask you what they did to you.*

*R: (To the microphone on the cashier) Did they kidnap you?/ L: To bed, to bed, to bed, Elena!*

*C: Never.*

*R: (To the microphone on the cashier) And if they had kidnapped you, would you have liked it?*

*C: (To Rosalía) No, of course not.*

*D: Elena, we're going to sleep now.*

*E: No!*

Such interactions were not uncommon, despite the fact that some parents, as I noted in Chapter Five, sought to police not only what toys children played with but also how they played with them. Girls experimented with toys more readily than boys and subjected traditionally accepted objects to a range of situations which did not fit in with the traditional ideals of female domesticity and calmness and they were never criticised by any of their peers for doing so. Moreover, boys were more likely to join them if they recreated this type of scenario. Yet even the instances when the engagement with gender-inappropriate toys were more easily tolerated were not free from ambiguities and children most commonly played with gendered toys within same-sex groups. I often heard how boys and girls referred to their play with atypical toys by downplaying or denying their own interest in them and highlighting the circumstances that led them into these situations. These tensions were often accounted for by referring to the instances when older children were expected to help their mothers by entertaining younger siblings and adapting to their toy preferences. As ten-year-old Juan explained, his mother 'forces him' (*me obliga*) to play with his younger sister although he does not like

to play with dolls. He recalled his mother saying, ‘Play with her for a while, if not, you won’t play with your things.’ Nine-year-old Jesús related a similar situation:

*Z: If you wanted to play with Barbies, would your mum and dad let you play or not?*

*J: If I played with my little sister; yes. Alone, not.*

*Z: And if you played alone, they wouldn’t let you?*

*J: No.*

*Z: Why?*

*J: Because they say that/ my dad says that dolls are only for girls but if I play with my sister; no.*

*Z: Do you like to play Barbies with your sister?*

*J: Not really because it’s very boring.*

However, although most children expressed preference for gender-appropriate toys and recognised the same inclinations among their peers, I occasionally witnessed situations and heard testimonies that revealed that the social pressure to conform to traditional expectations played an important role in their play habits. In contrast to adults, who often worried about ‘*el qué dirán*’, children did not raise the concern about what others might think or say behind their back as much as the possibility of being publicly ridiculed by their peers. Ten-year-old Manuel told me that he did not play with Barbies because he did not like them but he spontaneously added that even if he did like them, he would not play with them because he would be ‘scared of being teased’ (*Tendría miedo de que se burlaran de mí*). In response to my question about whether he would play with dolls or not if he knew that nobody would tease him and if he saw other boys play with dolls, nine-year-old Roberto, who strictly avoided ‘girls’ toys’ admitted, ‘If I was sure that nobody would tease me and if I saw that other children were playing with them too, I would play sometimes but only sometimes because I like other toys more.’ Yet the distinction between what a child ‘did not like’ and what he was ‘not expected to like’ to play with occasionally remained ambiguous, as illustrated by six-year-old Ana Gabriela’s reference to her interest in cars:

*Z: What toys do you like to play with?*

*AG: With Barbies.*

*Z: With Barbies?*

*AG: Aha.*

*Z: And with cars?*

*AG: No. Not with cars.*

*Z: And why not with cars?*

*AG: No. Because my mum says that cars are for boys and she says, “Why do you play with cars for boys?” and I tell her, “Because I like them”, and she doesn’t let me.*

*Z: She doesn’t let you?*

*AG: No.*

*Z: Really? Although you tell her that you like them?*

*AG: Aha.*

*Z: And what does your teacher tell you?*

*AG: She doesn’t tell me anything.*

*Z: And what do you think? Should girls play with cars?*

*AG: No.*

Children seemed reluctant not only to expose themselves to censure by engaging with gender-atypical toys but also to confront those who sought to enforce the traditional accountability regime. Even though older children, in our conversations, usually expressed their support for the modernity agenda and advocated respect for individual toy choices, they were convinced that the institutional changes had not automatically led to the transformation of their peers' expectations and that most of them continued to hold others accountable to traditional gender ideals. When I asked them why they did not defend, in front of their friends and schoolmates, the ideas they shared with me, children revealed their worries that, if they confronted this form of peer pressure, they would expose themselves to ridicule. Furthermore, they felt that they could not do much to alter the persistence of different criteria for assessing boys' and girls' behaviour. 'Many times I don't tell them [those who tease others] anything because they don't understand anyway', Patricia explained in relation to her silence in the face of acts she condemned. Similarly, ten-year-old Armando explained that 'even if I told them that they are wrong, they would not pay attention to me and they would go

on doing it.'

After expressing their disapproval of those who pressured others to conform to traditional gender ideals through public humiliation and defining them as disrespectful, stupid, ignorant or *machistas*, many children admitted that even they themselves occasionally enforced traditional ideals through different kinds of remarks. They usually refused to apply the same labels to themselves because, as nine-year-old Elena clarified, 'I don't call them *joto* or *jota* or anything like that, I just ask them, "Are you a boy?" and that's it.' Some children did not highlight their participation in these exchanges but were ready to address it if I reminded them of the situations I witnessed. Iván explained how wrong it was to tease others because of the toys they chose to play with and even correctly reproduced the school lesson that 'boys could not play with Barbies and girls with cars in the past but now it's different.' I had seen how he made fun of other children who made non-traditional toy choices on several occasions and I was curious to know how he interpreted these events. 'Well, yes, I sometimes do that, but not often. We're just joking,' the boy replied.

While teasing was a popular strategy for enforcing traditional gender ideals both among 'intimate others' and among children who barely knew one another, different kinds of audiences managed derisive comments in different ways. Although Pablo usually showed great aversion to any objects associated with girls, on one occasion, he joined his female cousins in recreating interactions between dolls. The girls were entertained by their cousin's comments. Assuming a female voice, the boy announced, 'I have to go out with my boyfriend and we will kiss like this.' The boy pouted his lips. One of his cousins found her brother's male action figure in a box and handed it to Pablo. He put the bodies of the two dolls together and reproduced the sound of kisses while his cousins laughed with amusement. This boy showed an interest in topics related to sexuality from an early age and this type of reference commonly emerged in his everyday interactions with peers and adults. The children continued playing and while Pablo was changing a doll's clothes, his brother Alejandro and his twelve-year-old cousin Ricardo entered the room and started laughing. His cousin promptly noted, 'Look at this *vieja* playing with dolls. You are *joto*!' Pablo's brother Héctor and the girls laughed. The boy lowered his eyes, got up and left the room. His brother later told me that Pablo went to his room and cried. Héctor often defended his younger brother when he was teased or insulted, no matter whether or not these incidents had to do with

gender. In this case, he not only remained silent but even laughed at his cousin's mocking remark. He told me that he would never allow anyone else to call his brother *joto* but, since on this occasion the insult came from his cousin, he knew that the boy was just joking. 'I know that Ricardo loves him [Pablo] like a brother and that he would get into a fight to defend him if necessary,' Héctor explained. The belief that Ricardo loved Pablo as if he were his own brother allowed Héctor to classify him on the 'audience continuum' close to the position he himself occupied as his actual brother and to dismiss the offensiveness of his remark. On a different occasion, he pointed out that his brother rarely engaged with 'girls' stuff' but that, when he did, he teased him because 'it's better if I tease him and he does not repeat the same mistake in front of others.' Although Héctor confidently claimed that everybody had the right to play with anything they chose, he insisted that doing it in front of others was a mistake because it exposed one to public humiliation. He still clarified that he would warn those who ridiculed Pablo not to 'mess with his brother.'

The boy's remarks suggest that his readiness to defend his younger sibling from teasing did not imply readiness to challenge the grounds on which he would be teased or, to put it differently, to question the legitimacy of holding him accountable to traditional gender expectations. Óscar's reaction in a situation when his sister Cecilia was teased by Héctor himself revealed that children could stand up to those who enforced the traditional accountability regime by reaffirming rather than undermining the validity of their assessment criteria. When I discussed toy preferences with Cecilia, Jesús, Pablo, Óscar and Héctor, they informed me that girls could not play with cars. 'The only cars for women are Barbie cars or Bratz cars', they specified. I noted that I had seen some girls, including Cecilia playing with cars, which was no news to the boys since two of them were her brothers and the other two neighbours who regularly visited her home. 'You are *desbiana* (incorrectly pronounced word *lesbiana*, meaning "lesbian")<sup>40</sup>, Ceci', Héctor said jokingly. The girl ignored his remark. Her older sibling Óscar did not understand the meaning of the word either but he rightly interpreted its intently negative connotation. 'She plays with cars because she has almost no dolls', Óscar defended his sister without challenging the association between girls and dolls.

Héctor's use of the word '*desbiana*' caught my attention not only because of its

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<sup>40</sup> When I asked for an explanation of the term Héctor used, he correctly explained its meaning and clarified that he heard it on a US television show.

incorrect pronunciation but, much more importantly, because it was one of the rare occasions when I heard that a girl's gender nonconformity was related to homosexuality. The scarcity of such remarks about girls contributed to heightening the awareness of the frequent usage of the terms '*joto*'<sup>41</sup>, '*maricón*', '*marica*' (fag). Children were widely familiar with these words and many of them, especially boys, readily used them when addressing boys' gender nonconformity. Children did not seem to share their parents' anxieties about homosexuality although boys often remembered parental admonitions of this kind. 'I played with Barbies when I went to my cousin's (*f. prima*) home while I was younger but my dad scolded me and told me that I can't play with dolls because I am a man and that, if I kept playing with dolls, I would become *marica*', Esteban once explained. However, I found that the way children used these labels to censor gender-inappropriate behaviour could be more successfully grasped through Pascoe's analysis<sup>42</sup> of the 'fag' discourse among American adolescents. In the ethnographic research she conducted in a school setting, Pascoe noted that 'fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships.' (2005: 330) She argued that it is misleading to frame the derisive usage of this label simply as homophobia and that the 'fag epithet, when hurled at other boys, may or may not have explicit sexual meanings, but it always has gendered meanings. When a boy calls another boy a fag, it means that he is not a man, not necessarily that he is a homosexual.' (Pascoe, 2005: 342)

Although mothers and fathers expressed actual concerns about their sons becoming homosexuals due to toy use, Pascoe's insights also proved to be useful for understanding parents' instructions. I observed that their references to homosexuality did not always reflect the preoccupation that any contact with 'girls' toys' could be a threat to the development of their sons' sexuality but the uneasiness about them not being or not being seen as men (enough). 'I once took my sister's doll and I played with it and my mum yelled at me and threw it onto the floor. She said that if others saw me playing with a doll, everybody would call me *joto*', eight-year-old Ricardo recalled. While this label was not usually attached to girls (see also Pascoe, 2005: 330) and their toy use was approached with more flexibility than boys', they were aware that the

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<sup>41</sup> Although far less frequent, I also encountered the usage of the female form of this word '*jota*' but, in contrast to '*joto*', it was usually not defined in sexual terms but as a girl who liked 'men's things.'

<sup>42</sup> Pascoe's discussion of the fag discourse is useful although it did not refer to toy choices.

assessment and enforcement of their play habits also predominantly rested upon traditional expectations.

Children were not only reluctant to challenge their peers' efforts to enforce the traditional accountability regime through teasing and insults. They also rarely confronted adults' admonitions based on different assessments of girls' and boys' behaviour. They explained that mothers and fathers expressed their opposition to gender-atypical choices in different ways, through scolding, threats, punishments and, more rarely, careful explanations of the undesirable impact of gender-inappropriate play habits. I once encouraged Araceli and her friend Yulisa to enact a role-play involving a mother, a daughter and her brother's cars. Since there were no cars in Yulisa's house, Yulisa and Araceli decided that chili cans would be cars and Araceli started to roll them across the floor. Yulisa, who was acting the role of the mother, left the room. As soon as she reappeared, she started to shout, 'What did I tell you, what did I tell you? Don't play with little cars when your brother is not here! Are you a man? Are you a man?' She seized the chili cans. Araceli stood up and started to shout back, 'Mum, have you read this? Have you read this?' She took the first book she found in the room and she thrust it in front of Yulisa's face: 'We all have the right to play with whatever we want.' Yulisa responded, shouting even more loudly, 'Do whatever you want but don't come to complain when all the children make fun of you.'

Independently of the theme of a role-play, children often enacted tense situations and experimented with conflict. Once the proposed scenario involved an exchange between a shop-assistant and a client and it ended up in a kidnapping, chasing between police and kidnappers and eventual discovery that one of the policeman belonged to the criminal gang. Perhaps, it was this striving for drama that inspired Araceli to stand up to her pretend mother and resist the enforcement of traditional restrictions through role-play. Yet this scene resembled in no way what I commonly observed in spontaneous interactions between children and parents and what parents and children themselves recounted about their experiences. Children usually did not oppose their parents' admonitions by suggesting that the accountability regime that was promoted in school was more legitimate than the one they were seeking to enforce. Most of them explained that they complied with their parents' instructions about toys because these fit in with their own preferences but they also mentioned that they did not want to make their parents 'angry' or 'worried.' These concerns were raised only with respect to parents or

grandparents, which once again testified to the relevance of the distinction between different kinds of audiences.

Children believed that, as long as they lived up to traditional expectations, they would not draw any particular attention from the public gaze. But in the few situations that I witnessed or heard of, if children failed to do so and their neighbours reprimanded them, they refrained from responding to these remarks. When boys and girls talked about the way other adults might perceive their behaviour, they seemed to be more concerned about the impact these people's reactions might have on their parents than about how they might be expressed through teasing, admonitions or '*el qué dirán*.' When discussing an imaginary scenario, Armando told me that the first thing he would think about, if his neighbours saw him playing with Barbies, was that they would criticise his mother and that she would feel ashamed. Pablo responded to the same situation by pointing out that he would be worried that they would inform his father and that he would 'give him a slap.'

Even though children did not protest against their neighbours' admonitions, some of them demonstrated that they recognised only their parents' authority in issuing this kind of instructions as they claimed that other villagers should not interfere with their parents' responsibilities. This was evident not only in their reactions to the enforcement of traditional expectations but also to the encouragement to cross gender boundaries. When Esteban and Carlos visited their relatives in a nearby community, they never joined their cousins [a boy and a girl] if these played with dolls. While their uncle allowed his son to play with his little sister, their father was different. Esteban recounted how his uncle once encouraged him and his brother to play dolls with their cousins but they refused because they knew that their father 'doesn't like that.' His account showed that children recognised that parents, as the most 'intimate others', had the greatest authority to regulate what kind of transgressions qualified as tolerable.

In contrast to the absence of alternative ideals about boys' and girls' engagement with aggressive behaviour, which I examined in Chapters Three and Four, in this case, it was obvious that there was more than one version of what was ideologically prescribed behaviour for boys and girls and that the expectations promoted through schooling contradicted traditional gender ideals about toys. Yet the promotion of these two sets of precepts differed in important ways and I argue that the most helpful tool for addressing this difference is the very concept of accountability. While most children clearly

identified their classmates, friends, parents, neighbours and relatives as the ones who held them accountable to traditional conceptions, the accountability to egalitarian ideals was seen as more abstract. Teachers were often cited as the source of the equality discourse but they usually did not have the opportunity to oversee children's engagement with toys and, even when they did, they rarely questioned children's practices. Policy-makers and the authors of textbooks were far away and girls and boys did not seem to perceive that anyone was interested in enforcing the egalitarian accountability regime.

Since the religious teachings which children were exposed to did not address gender issues relevant to this thesis, it was not surprising that children never invoked religious authorities to lend support either to traditional or to modern gender expectations. If asked what the local priest or Catechism teachers said about, for example, whether girls could play with cars and boys with dolls, children responded that they did not know because 'we never talk about that.' The notion of being held accountable to God or the Virgin could have proved to be particularly interesting for at least two reasons: their status as special 'intimate others' and their capacity to 'see everything.' However, when, inspired by Daniela's claim that 'God made dolls for girls and cars for boys', I asked children whether God approved of girls playing with cars and boys with dolls, most children agreed with Héctor's words: 'Who knows what's in God's head?' Children more commonly referred to God and the Virgin as a source of comfort or hope than as authorities that monitored and assessed their behaviour. The idea of God and the Virgin's benevolence and their capacity to 'do everything' captured children's attention and they occasionally shared with me their pleas. A boy once told me that he would like to accompany his mother on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe so he could pray to her for his father, who had abandoned the family, to come back home. Another boy talked to me about how he prayed for his mother to come back from the US and take him away with her.

### **The advantages of being equal**

Similarly to what I argued in Chapter Four about displaying and coping with aggression, gender-atypical behaviour in the use of toys did not emerge from the promotion of an egalitarian agenda but from tensions provoked by the clash between

strict gender divisions and the messiness of everyday life. Most children had experienced contact with gender-inappropriate toys and all these instances, in one way or another, may be referred to as contributions to ‘undoing gender.’ But, in contrast to most of these girls and boys, who had only occasionally handled gender-inappropriate objects in certain tolerable scenarios (for example, when asked by a parent to entertain a younger sibling in a cross-sex interaction) and who declared their support for egalitarian values only in individual interviews with a foreign, female anthropologist, some children contributed to dismantling the traditional accountability regime by putting these alternative expectations into practice through everyday interactions with peers and adults. Although these girls and boys were not numerous, it is worth paying attention to them since, as Gutmann rightly argues, marginal types may provide valuable clues regarding a general phenomenon (2005: 135).

I noted in Chapter Five that Itzel liked to play with ‘girls’ toys’ but she also showed great interest in toy cars. As she admitted, she could not play with cars whenever she wanted because she was concerned about the negative reactions her gender-atypical choices might provoke. At first, I looked at Itzel’s case as an example of how preoccupations with other people’s expectations undermined the process of ‘undoing gender’. However, I came to recognise that Itzel made more effort to ‘undo gender’ in toy use than most of her peers. Children’s remarks revealed that, since the exposure of a transgression to the ‘intimate others’ was not registered on one’s public record, there was more room for negotiation. Some children felt the need to renegotiate tolerable scenarios with their parents and define whether, how much, how often and in front of whom they could engage with toys that were viewed as gender-inappropriate. They occasionally acknowledged that their mothers were more flexible in regulating their play habits behind closed doors than their fathers. Although Itzel was not ready to confront her father, she expressly asked her mother to allow her to play with cars inside the house while her father was not at home. While most children showed little interest in this kind of negotiation, it should be acknowledged that those who did so actively participated in the process of ‘undoing gender’ by seeking to reduce the relevance of gender to their play habits.

Itzel’s father was often absent from home due to his working arrangements but the girl also needed to secure the complicity of her grandmother Herminia, who lived within the same house, in order to carelessly engage in one of her favourite activities. At

first, Itzel's grandmother was reluctant. She admonished the girl that she should not play with 'men's stuff' and warned her that she would denounce her to her father. The girl invoked her mother's greater authority to regulate her behaviour. Moreover, she astutely reminded her maternal grandmother of the loyalty she owed to her own daughter. 'If my mum says that I can play, then I can play. Do you want my dad to get angry with your daughter?' she responded. In the face of Itzel's determination and after a few discussions with the girl's mother Malena, Herminia accepted this arrangement. Although she warned the girl that she should refrain from playing with cars in the front yard or from taking them to the buffet where her mother worked, the girl occasionally disobeyed this order. On one occasion, there were no clients at the buffet and Malena and I were sitting and talking with Itzel and her friend Maritza. Suddenly, Itzel seemed to get bored. She took out two little cars from her pockets and proposed to the other girl to play. Maritza contorted her face and remarked: 'You know that I don't like cars.' 'Well, you propose something else then,' Itzel quickly replied.

She was aware that in this kind of situations she took the risk of censure. That day neither her mother nor Maritza commented on her proposal but, on other occasions, she confronted different reactions. A woman who lived next door once entered Itzel's home while she was playing with her brother and remarked: 'You always play with cars. You are a woman. You should play other games.' The risk of censure increased when she exposed herself to larger audiences. The girl once decided to take her brother's new little car to the school and she admitted that she felt 'very sad' when Mauricio and Yair asked her whether she was a man and laughed at her. Itzel had rightly anticipated that she could be teased if she took a car to the school and she recognised that she was scared of being ridiculed. Yet her interest in these toys clearly stimulated her to continue to defy traditional expectations.

While Diana's parents, whom I mentioned in Chapter Five, tolerated her toy preferences when she played with her cousins, they occasionally warned her that she should not forget that she was a girl and that she should pay more attention to 'girls' toys.' The girl also received remarks that drew attention to the awkwardness of her choices from other adults. Her aunt once reproached her that she spent more time playing with her male cousin and his cars than with her female cousin and her dolls. Diana usually remained silent when she heard this kind of comment or admonition from adults but she did not seem to show any interest in changing her play habits. The girl

defined her parents as ‘the best parents in the world’ and keenly talked about how she and her sister had fun with them and how her mother and father made sacrifices in order to secure her sister’s and her well-being. Yet Diana knew that there was one request that her parents were not ready to comply with. Although they were usually permissive of her engagement with gender-atypical toys when she interacted with her cousins, they did not want to buy that kind of toy for her. After various failed requests, Diana attempted to subvert her parents’ determination by wishing for a truck in her letter to the Three Kings. Diana knew that the actual recipients of the letter to the Three Kings were children’s parents. The consequent discussion between her mother and father over the acceptability of her request, which I also referred to in Chapter Five, illustrates how these acts prompted reflections upon the legitimacy of particular arrangements and upon the possibility of their renegotiation. Diana was uncertain about the outcome of her effort but she still hoped that her parents would fulfill her wish because she ‘had behaved very well’ and because she ‘really liked to play with trucks.’

However, sometimes less ‘intimate others’ turned into accomplices in hiding one’s transgressions from the most ‘intimate others.’ Carlos once told me it was ‘fun to play with dolls’ but he had a brother and there were no dolls at his home. As I noted in Chapter Five, his parents strongly opposed his interest in dolls while he was a toddler and, since then, he had carefully complied with their expectations. The boy was convinced that they would never buy him a doll and he had never been tempted to ask for one. He was reluctant to talk about his interest in dolls but, on one occasion, he briefly explained to me how he occasionally managed to gain access to dolls without confronting his parents: ‘I tell my mum, “I am going to see Diana and Rosalía [his cousins and neighbours],” and she says, “It’s alright,” and I go there and we play with dolls and my mum doesn’t find out.’ Carlos enjoyed playing ‘men’s games’ with his brother, father, male cousins and neighbours and his play sessions with Rosalía and Diana were rare but I believe that they were noteworthy. By seeking to hide his engagement with gender-inappropriate toys from his parents and other villagers, Carlos did nothing to contribute to the renegotiation of the traditional accountability regime. Yet the boy did not play on his own. He exposed his behaviour to the eyes of his cousins Diana and Rosalía while the girls’ parents were at work. Diana and Rosalía shared this with their parents but they insisted that they should not say anything to Carlos’s parents because they would get angry with the boy and punish him. ‘My parents can keep a

secret,' Diana once told me.

I have already stressed in Chapter Two that those who resisted traditional expectations and their accomplices in the performance of these acts were not necessarily united by a shared commitment to egalitarian accountability criteria. Children's anxieties about teasing suggested that, even in the most familiar spaces, the pervasiveness of traditional expectations could be invoked at any moment in an effort to shame them back into their gender-appropriate roles. This meant that, in this sociocultural setting, any exposure of gender-atypical behaviour to the gaze of others could be interpreted as a contribution to 'undoing gender.' Carlos recalled that, on one occasion, Rosalía had teased another boy for playing with a kitchen set. Yet, although nobody could guarantee that Carlos would not undergo a similar situation at some point, he took the risk of censure. These children did not challenge traditional accountability criteria only by engaging in behaviour that did not comply with dominant expectations. Carlos, albeit rarely, also confronted those who sought to enforce this regime. Although I never saw Rosalía or Diana make fun of him, the boy experienced uneasy situations even behind the closed doors of his cousins' room. On one occasion, while the children were playing, their eleven-year-old neighbour Claudio entered the room and mockingly called Carlos '*niña*.' The boy aptly used a school lesson to legitimise his own position and question Claudio's action. He told him that *profe* Rodrigo [school principal] said that everybody could play with everything and added, 'If you don't believe me, we can ask him tomorrow.' Claudio replied that he would never play with dolls and left the room. Diana was happy with Carlos's reaction. She commented that she was tired of Claudio's teasing and that 'finally someone shut him up.' This sort of reaction might have stimulated Diana's own readiness to defend her gender-atypical choices. Simultaneously, Diana's interest in playing with cars might have encouraged Carlos to seek in her an accomplice for crossing gender boundaries.

I witnessed a similar situation when nine-year-old Maribel proposed to her cousin Araceli and her neighbour Leandro that they should play with dolls. When the boy accepted, Araceli laughed at him and said, 'You are a girl.' Maribel readily responded to her cousin's remark, 'We are all equal. We can all play with everything.' Although Leandro rarely agreed to play with dolls, this time he welcomed Maribel's remark and snapped back at Araceli, 'Haven't they taught you anything at school?' Araceli herself claimed in our conversations that 'both boys and girls had the right to

play with dolls.' Moreover, she occasionally invited her brother to play with dolls before her father broke her favourite doll because he encountered the boy playing with it on his own, as I mentioned in Chapter Five. Maribel was not one of my main informants and I did not have access to her family. She told me that she did not like to play with gender-atypical toys but she had a five-year-old brother who did. From what I could observe and learn from her and her peers, she occasionally confronted those who enforced gender boundaries in toy use by reminding them that 'they were wrong' to think that boys and girls had to play with different toys and that 'we all have the right to play with everything.' Many of these exchanges occurred when she sought to defend her younger brother because he was teased for his interest in dolls.

These rare, little acts of resistance may appear to be insignificant, especially if we keep in mind the pervasiveness of the efforts to enforce traditional expectations. However, I believe that their importance should not be ignored because they bear subversive potential as they represent instances when children actually put the alternative accountability regime to work through everyday interactions. Even more importantly, because they emerge from experiences that deeply matter to the individuals who perform them. But did children who resisted traditional divisions, like Itzel, Diana, Carlos and Maribel, have anything in common and how did they differ from most of their peers who did not put the egalitarian expectations into practice? I suggest that an important point may be that all the children who enforced the egalitarian accountability regime through their encounters with others, no matter how shyly or rarely, were not driven merely by an abstract prospect of greater equality, freedom and fairness but by a longing for some more personally meaningful advantages. Children who resisted dominant expectations admitted that they felt ashamed when they were ridiculed or admonished for their behaviour. For example, although Carlos stood up to Claudio, he felt embarrassed. He told me that he was worried about what the other boy might tell his parents and other children and he avoided visiting his cousins for some time. But it seemed like these children were stimulated by the benefits they recognised in egalitarian arrangements to, at least occasionally, overcome the costs of pursuing their interests. Itzel, Diana and Carlos told me that they 'had fun' or 'liked' playing with gender-atypical toys and 'undoing gender' in toy use could bring to their lives a tangible benefit of indulging in one of their favourite activities without having to worry about being reprimanded by their parents or publicly ridiculed by peers. Maribel was not interested

in an opportunity to freely engage with gender-atypical toys herself but ‘undoing gender’ could bring to her life the benefit of saving her little brother Enrique from suffering. She was frustrated by the fact that Enrique was teased by their neighbours due to his interest in dolls and she defended him whenever she had a chance. The discomfort she felt about this seemed to inspire her to help not only him but also other children who were subject to similar treatment. ‘I know how my brother feels when they tease him. He is ashamed (*Le da pena*). I am sure that others feel the same way,’ she claimed when she sought to explain why she occasionally stood up to those who made fun of others for their toy choices.

If we look back at the examples of resistance cited in Chapter Four, we can see that, even in a domain where an alternative accountability regime was not available, acts of resistance, whether they consisted in the performance of gender-atypical actions or in verbal challenges to the enforcement of traditional distinctions, were set in motion only when children recognised personally meaningful advantages in non-traditional arrangements. Alberto and his friends did not challenge the legitimacy of different criteria for assessing boys’ and girls’ displaying and coping with aggression as long as one of them was not personally affected by this regime. When they protested in front of the principal that their friend should not be punished because the girls had provoked the incident, they were not driven to contribute to ‘undoing gender’ by the appreciation for some abstract ideals of equality and fairness but by their frustration with a concrete injustice that they were facing. Boys and girls whose behaviour did not comply with the local expectations about calmness or toughness were not inspired by the acknowledgement of the importance of some vague notion of freedom but by an intimately felt discomfort with the constraints that did not allow them to manage their everyday experiences in accordance with their actual, individual rather than expected, group predispositions. Even complicity in others’ resistance seemed to be influenced by the recognition of benefits. The boys who played football with Yaritza became ‘accomplices’ in her resistance to traditional expectations in the neighbourhood because they benefitted from her participation in that context more than in school where they had a wider range of companions available for playing football. Moreover, they were concerned that in the school playground they could be teased by other boys for inviting a girl to join them, which suggests that in this setting the costs of complicity seemed to exceed its benefits.

As I have already stressed, the ways children reasoned about and reacted to the acts of resistance to traditional gender divisions when an alternative accountability regime was absent (Chapter Four) and when it was present (Chapter Six) differed greatly. While, in the absence of alternative expectations, children justified the enforcement of gender divisions, when presented with the coexistence of different accountability regimes, they tended to critically engage with traditional norms and to legitimise behaviour that did not comply with these precepts. But if most children relied upon the alternative accountability regime to question the validity of traditional divisions only in the privacy of a conversation with a foreign anthropologist, how important was the availability of this alternative regime after all? In the light of my contention that children put to work their support for gender equality through everyday interactions only when they found personally meaningful advantages in egalitarian arrangements, I suggest that the availability of an alternative accountability regime is relevant because it may contribute to enhancing children's recognition of these advantages in at least three ways.

First, the awareness of the legitimacy of non-traditional alternatives may empower those who find advantages in equality to pursue their own interests through interactions with peers and adults by defending egalitarian arrangements more actively. Second, in this way, they may inspire others to recognise whether equality could bring any good to their lives and, if they recognise that it could, encourage them to overcome concerns about how their social environment might assess their engagement in non-traditional behaviour. Third, even though most girls and boys in Metztitlán did not put egalitarian values into practice, I hypothesise that the fact that, in the presence of egalitarian accountability regime, they readily identified the deficiencies of traditional gender divisions, suggests that the availability of alternative expectations might render them more receptive to the efforts of those who resist traditional expectations. By referring to the possibility of 'enhancing children's recognition of the advantages' of egalitarian arrangements, I acknowledge that the perceptions of these advantages are not fixed but constructed through everyday experiences in particular sociocultural contexts. For example, a child who has no interest in gender-atypical toys, through interactions with peers with different toy preferences and through the exposure to their suffering under a restrictive gender regime, may come to sympathise with her friends and relatives and recognise personally meaningful benefits of change.

## Concluding remarks

Children believed in the existence of essential differences between girls and boys in toy preferences and they interpreted the idea that ‘everybody has the right to play with everything’, promoted through the educational agenda, as a call to respect those who occasionally crossed gender boundaries or those ‘few’ who did it more systematically rather than as an invitation to dismantle gender divisions. Relying upon discourses grounded in the egalitarian accountability regime, many children supported gender equality in our private conversations and found traditional distinctions problematic because they contradicted the ideals of freedom and fairness.

However, most of them did not put these values to work either by engaging with gender-atypical toys or by confronting those who sought to enforce the traditional accountability criteria through admonitions, teasing or insults. They claimed that, in spite of the promotion of the egalitarian agenda, their peers persisted in the commitment to traditional values and that there was little they could do about that. Yet I encountered a few children who resisted traditional expectations and I observed that what they had in common was that they did not see in ‘undoing gender’ merely an abstract prospect of greater equality, fairness and freedom. They seemed to be inspired by the recognition of personally meaningful advantages entailed in egalitarian arrangements. In Chapters Seven and Eight, I will explore how villagers sustained alternative accountability regimes about economic provision and housework and seek to understand whether the benefits of change gained relevance when children negotiated both their own and adults’ involvement in the division of labour.

## Chapter Seven

### **New working arrangements and old tensions**

Fernando was lying on the couch watching cartoons when his mother Carmen shouted from the kitchen, ‘Get up and wash your pants!’ ‘Why? That’s not a man’s job,’ the boy snapped back, keeping his eyes glued to the screen. The woman came out of the kitchen and, raising her voice, exclaimed, ‘Who told you that? The one who told you that lied to you. We are all equal here! There are no men’s jobs and women’s jobs. Do you understand me?’ She returned to the kitchen. The boy rolled his eyes and carried on watching television for a few minutes. Then he got up and asked, ‘Where is the soap?’ Fernando was aware that the idea that ‘we are all equal’ had its limitations and that neither his mother nor any other adult he knew would ever invoke the ideal of equality if he expressed the intention to put on a skirt or use lipstick. But, like most of his peers, he understood that villagers’ attitudes towards many other behaviours revealed far less consensus on the validity of gender distinctions. The boy’s remark that washing is ‘not a man’s job’ and his mother’s response that ‘there are no men’s jobs and women’s jobs’ reflected discrepancies related to one of the gender issues that sparked not only the most interest but also the greatest tensions among villagers.

Many women and men referred to the division of labour both when they sought to explain to me how much gender relations among adults had changed since the times of their parents and when they attempted to illustrate how traditional values persisted in the village. In contrast to the previous chapters, Chapters Seven and Eight do not focus only on issues which children were directly involved in. In this chapter, by examining the ways adults made sense of, complied with, questioned and resisted the distinction between women as homemakers and men as breadwinners, I will show how they sustained and made available to children both the traditional and the egalitarian accountability regimes. I will argue that the efforts to enforce these competing regimes differed in different domains as people more actively promoted egalitarian arrangements in relation to economic provision than to housework. However, I will try to demonstrate that, in spite of the increasing appreciation for gender equality, traditional gender ideals

of both male and female occupational roles continued to powerfully pervade villagers' everyday experiences.

### **Winning equality by breadwinning**

Villagers believed that there had always been boys who behaved 'like girls' or girls who were interested in 'boys' stuff' and none of them ever suggested that, over the last few decades, there had been any changes in the ways girls and boys displayed or coped with aggression or engaged with toys. Yet, although they were sure that there had always been women and men who did not comply with traditional occupational roles, they clearly stated that in recent years there had been considerable changes in the ways men and women divided their duties. This is not an insignificant point as it reveals that, in contrast to the issues I dealt with in the previous chapters, people recognised that the socioeconomic and cultural changes in Mexican society over recent decades not only provided the idiom for legitimising egalitarian occupational roles but also gave rise to an unprecedented increase in this kind of arrangement.

The parents of the children this thesis focuses on believed that gender relations among men and women of their generation were far more egalitarian than those of their own parents<sup>43</sup>. According to their portrayal of traditional division of labour, the married woman was expected to stay at home, take care of the children, prepare and serve food, wash and iron clothes, keep the house clean and comply with her husband's demands, while the man was responsible for protecting his wife and their children and providing them with food, clothing and shelter. Younger villagers<sup>44</sup> insisted not only on the fact that in the past most women did not work outside the home but also that 'men did not allow them to work', which signaled the conviction that this arrangement was not grounded in mutual agreement but in the imposition of male authority. However, people knew that daily negotiations of these occupational ideals were much more complex than this apparently straightforward distinction suggested. Some older women accepted the traditional arrangements with either satisfaction or reluctance while others sought ways to make financial contributions to the household in spite of their husbands' preferences.

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<sup>43</sup> For similar perceptions of the generational gap in young people's ideas about gender in rural settings, see also Hirsch, 2003 and for urban settings see Gutmann, 2006 [1996].

<sup>44</sup> By using the expression 'younger villagers' in this chapter, I refer to the parents of the children I worked with. These women and men were in their late twenties, thirties or early forties.

Some of them assisted men in a family business; others managed to convince their spouses about the economic advantages of their activities or secretly continued to perform tasks they had engaged in while they were single. 'My mum used to be a nurse but my dad, when they got married, he did not let her work anymore. My dad used to be very *machista*. So, my mum had to go out secretly to administer injections,' Luz María recalled, explaining how her mother sought to avoid conflict with her husband without giving up on the possibility to provide an extra income for her family.

Younger men and women supported egalitarian participation in paid labour and claimed that a woman should not gain access to work by bending outdated rules but that she had 'the right' to work outside the home. The fact that younger villagers talked about economic provision more frequently in terms of 'rights' than 'responsibilities' may be related to the fact that women were traditionally denied the chance to engage in extradomestic work and that the role of economic provider compared with that of homemaker enjoyed greater social prestige. The socioeconomic situation in the country, which I referred to in Chapter One, contributed to the emergence of new working arrangements in important ways. Anthropologists who had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork before and after the great economic crisis in Mexico observed significant transformations in married mothers' activities. Hubbell explains how economic conditions in Mexico from the mid-1970s through the 1980s set the scene for changes in the division of labour:

*During my 1969/70 fieldwork in Uruapan, Michoacán, some single middle-class women worked outside their homes; married women, especially those with young children rarely did so. By the time I returned to Uruapan in 1988/89, accelerated inflation and falling oil prices in the late 1970s had intensified Mexico's foreign debt problems to the point where the government devalued the peso three times between 1976 and 1982, producing a continuing economic crisis of rising prices and increasing unemployment (...). Thus, I was not surprised to find many more middle-class women, married and single, earning full-time salaries or running their own businesses. (1993: 1-2)*

In Metztitlán, these same trends were reinforced by the promotion of the

egalitarian accountability regime based on the ideal of the same rights and responsibilities for men and women, which gained force in the last decade of the 20th century through mass media, schooling, state-sponsored programmes and growing migration (see Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Hirsch, 2003). None of the female protagonists of my informants' favourite TV shows were housewives. Most of them built successful professional careers, travelled, chaired meetings, negotiated with clients and made important decisions. The educational reform supported this image of a working woman by denouncing those who 'wrongly' believed that women 'should only be housewives.' The government of the State of Hidalgo organised free courses and workshops for adults where women were encouraged to challenge patriarchal constraints in all domains of life, including the division of labour. Meanwhile, the demands of migration to Mexico City or to the United States often necessitated the renegotiation of traditional working arrangements and, at the same time, lent support to narratives about the availability of alternative forms of dividing labour.

Most working couples in our conversations showed satisfaction with their working arrangement. This was in sharp contrast to what I observed in the households where women only acted as housewives. None of these women described this as her own preference or the result of her preoccupation about '*el qué dirán*.' Housewives did not hesitate to attribute their unemployment to their husbands' decisions and some of them admitted that they engaged in heated debates over this issue with their spouses (see also Gutmann, 1998: 136). The relevance of the distinction between different audiences emerges once again here as the women expressly reported that their access to paid labour was hindered by concerns about the preferences of their most 'intimate others' (in this case, husbands) rather than the opinions of neighbours and relatives. But in spite of the widely asserted appeal of modern gender identities, the differences between working women and housewives did not reflect merely a distinction between the pleasure of being modern and the frustration of not being so. As Hirsch noted, it is not only important to describe the conditions that shape the choices people make but also to consider 'why people make the choices they do' (2003: 15).

Villagers who showed their preference for egalitarian participation in the workforce talked to me about their disapproval of a man imposing his will on a woman but also about the economic advantages of having two incomes, about the boredom of spending the whole day at home, about having the possibility to socialise in the

workplace and the opportunities for professional growth. Many housewives cited these same advantages of participating in paid work outside the home. They clarified that, even though they were unhappy about their working arrangement, they continued to comply with their husbands' impositions because they sought to avoid conflict primarily for the sake of their children. But some of them also stressed that, although they disagreed with their husbands' ideas about the division of labour, these men also had many virtues. In contrast to most other housewives, Carmen told me that she accepted her husband's preference to be the only breadwinner because at that moment she felt comfortable with that arrangement. She readily declared that if it turned out that Ilario, who was working illegally in the United States, could not successfully provide for her and her son, she would 'send him to hell' (*mandarlo a la chingada*). Carmen had developed various strategies for obtaining what she wanted from her partner and occasionally threatened him she would 'get herself a job' if he did not send her money to buy herself a sewing machine, new clothes or to go on holiday with her son. She eventually set up her own shop.

Although in the village, as I noted in the Introduction, housewives still outnumbered employed women, villagers tended to associate the ideal of the male breadwinner with the older generation and an egalitarian economic provision with the younger, and interpreted the insistence on gendered division of labour among younger couples as the survival of an old-fashioned way of thinking. The distinction between traditional and modern accountability regimes concerning economic provision was morally charged as it was not only seen as moving to a financially more rewarding arrangement but also as a shift from unfair, oppressive and restrictive relations to more just, empowering and liberating ones. The men who did not allow their wives to work were often defined as *machistas* by their neighbours but they themselves did not like to speak of themselves as *machistas* or *machos*. Indeed, none of the men I spoke to were interested in presenting themselves in this way. In urban settings, male anthropologists have also found that 'among men in their twenties and thirties, it was rare to hear anyone to claim the title of macho for himself' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 233; Ramírez, 2008).

I often heard Manuel's neighbours define him as *machista* for not allowing his wife to find employment. His wife Mariela herself, on various occasions, complained to me in tears about the fact that, in spite of economic scarcity, Manuel 'did not let her

work.' However, when I asked the man what the word *machista* meant, his first reaction was, 'I don't know what that means.' I explained that some people in the village used that term and that I was trying to understand how different people interpreted it. 'Well, *machista* is a man who wants to boss everybody around, to have control over everything, to make all the decisions on his own. In our house it is different. We make all the decisions together,' he concluded hugging his wife. Mariela nodded and smiled. The following day, Mariela and I were alone and we discussed decision-making in her household. 'We make all the decisions together. What to buy, where to take children, how we should act if we have a problem,' she said. 'And what about your job?' I asked as the woman had already complained about this in many of our previous conversations. 'Well, I won't lie to you. He decided about that,' she replied. 'Does that make him *machista* or not?' I asked. 'Well, he is *machista* in that sense but not in other senses,' the woman tried to explain.

Mariela was not the only one who believed that machismo was not an indivisible category and that someone could be *machista* in one sense and not in another. Which one of these aspects was highlighted often depended upon the situational context and how the spouses were getting along at any particular moment. However, the situation that Mariela and her husband were going through was not the only one to provoke contradictions. When their neighbour Isabel was on good terms with her own husband Iván, she criticised Manuel for being a *machista* who 'did not let Mariela work' and praised Iván for being open-minded and supportive of her working status. On the other hand, when she learnt about her husband's latest infidelity, she told me that Manuel was a much better husband than Iván: 'He does not let her work but he respects her, he does not cheat on her, he spends a lot of time with her and their children, he never drinks.' Mariela's and Isabel's remarks about being *machista* 'in one sense but not in other senses' and about shifting appreciation of men's attributes sounded like a non-academic rendering of Gutmann's claims that 'masculinity, like other cultural identities, cannot be neatly confined in boxlike categories' (2006 [1996]: 238) and that 'the attempts, even the more sophisticated ones, at quantifying Mexican masculinity on more-macho-or-less-macho scales' are doomed to failure (2006 [1996]: 238).

However, what villagers most insistently questioned about machismo was the idea that it justified unequal power relations. Their attitudes suggested that they did not seem to believe that women and men were so different that one group should be

dominated by another. In the words of the young men Gutmann interviewed in Mexico City I found a similar belief. Since a macho was seen as a man who dominated women and a *mandilón* as a female-dominated man, many young men defined themselves as neither macho nor apron wearers (*ni macho ni mandilón*) (2006 [1996]: 221). Yet the fact that in Metztitlán people did not think that there were any differences between men and women that might justify the dominance of one sex over the other does not mean that the critique of machismo entailed the critique of gender essentialism.

### **Persistent expectations**

The conversations about adults' division of labour often occurred in front of children. Girls and boys could easily learn about where their parents and their neighbours worked, how much money they earned, who wanted to work and who did not want whom to work, who had economic problems, who was jealous of whom or who spent too much time outside the home. They could recognise how these questions were related to the economic provision of their own and others' households and notice whether the answers to these questions concerned one sex more than the other. But growing up in a densely interconnected social network, girls and boys did not have access only to their own parents' working arrangements but also to their relatives' and neighbours' and the messages they were exposed to both within the same and across different households were riddled with ambiguities as they drew on competing accountability regimes. While children witnessed actions tacitly performed by a wide range of adults, captured their emotional reactions and overheard the comments they exchanged, they usually received explicit instructions or advice either from their 'intimate others' or from teachers.

It comes as no surprise that the transformation of traditional gender arrangements and ideals is not enacted merely through the replacement of the old with the new accountability regime. In contrast to what happened in the past, women's access to the workforce was widely accepted and their status as wage-earners did not seem to trigger preoccupation about '*el qué dirán*.' Yet there were various concerns related to women's paid labour that continued to attract the public gaze. Although working couples were critical of those who enacted traditional occupational roles, their own arrangements were also rife with anxieties derived from the clash between what was perceived as the old and the new expectations. The issues working women and men

grappled with in their daily interactions were reminiscent of the ideas Melhuus identified in rural Mexico in the 1980s and I found that the following points, although renegotiated, proved to be still relevant: first, ‘a woman working seems to deduct from her husband’s manliness; his respect, reputation, and hence, his honour are threatened’ (1992: 97); second, ‘motherhood is the epitome of womanhood, so much so that to be a poor mother is to be a poor woman’ (1998: 363); third, ‘a woman, once outside of the home, should ideally be accompanied by a man’ (1992: 99); finally, a wife working outside the home is ‘not only defying her husband’s honour by making visible his inability to maintain the family, but also, by making herself available, exposing her sexuality.’ (1992: 110) I will now briefly examine each of these four points.

It has been found in various Mexican settings (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]; Hirsch, 2003; Rees, 2006) that any threat that a woman’s employment posed to a man’s honour was mitigated by framing women’s labour in the idiom of ‘help’ (*ayuda*). In Metztitlán, I never heard the claim that ‘women don’t work (*trabajar*) but merely help (*ayudar*)’ their husbands (Rees, 2006: 100). Instead, people explained that both women and men worked for their families and that they ‘shared the expenses.’ Yet the experiences working women related to me suggested that, although their work was usually neither represented as a threat nor expressly defined as ‘help’, many men did not see it in the same terms as their own economic contributions. Some men admitted that they did not like the idea of their wives earning more money than them and assured me that most of their male friends felt this way. Seeking to make sense of this idea, Roberto once told me, ‘I can’t explain why it’s like that. You may think that I should be happy if more money enters the house. I can’t tell you why exactly but it just seems more right if a man makes more money.’ The man smiled and warned me, ‘But don’t expect many men to be that honest with you.’ He was right. Few men shared this type of concern with me, even though their wives’ accounts confirmed these preferences. Moreover, many women themselves pointed out that, while they preferred to make a lot of money, they felt more comfortable if their husbands had higher salaries. Isabel explained that ‘a man feels more self-confident if he earns more than his wife and he treats her better. If he earns less than her, he feels less of a man, he is frustrated and he makes her life miserable.’ Natalia recounted that, before she got pregnant with her second child, she worked and that her husband was grumpy all the time because he felt humiliated by the fact that she earned more than him:

*If my son touched something on his cell phone, for example. He shouted at him really badly and I would tell him, ‘Don’t shout at my son. I will pay for your phone,’ and he would be like, ‘Ah, your damn money!’ He insulted me because I worked, because I had money. ‘You and your money,’ he used to say. ‘You’ll see, hija de la chingada! Your little work will end and I will see you drag yourself like a snake and I won’t give you money even for one taco’ and I would tell him, ‘I have a mother and a father. I would rather drag myself in front of them than in front of you’.*

These tensions vividly demonstrated that the process of ‘undoing gender’ in the division of labour was hindered by the persistence of traditional expectations about the affirmation of manliness through a man’s breadwinning role. Both men and women occasionally articulated this by claiming that ‘both a man and a woman have the [economic] responsibility but a man has more responsibility.’ While both Isabel and her husband worked, she advised her son Héctor that he should give his best at school and think about his future, because ‘you’re a man and you will have to support your family. A woman is born to be supported and it depends on her whether she’ll want to get a job or not, but you are a man and you have no choice. You’ll have to work to support your family!’ At a Christmas lunch with teachers, I witnessed a scene where one of these working women asked her colleague’s six-year-old son whether he had a girlfriend. The boy nodded and showed three fingers. ‘Three?’ the woman repeated with surprise and replied, ‘Boy, don’t be a womanizer (*mujeriego*)! That’s not right!’ Then, she tellingly added, ‘Can you support them?’

At the same time, the insistence on a man’s responsibility to ‘support the family’ coexisted with remarks that revealed both women’s determination to be financially independent and to contribute to the economic security of the household and men’s readiness to back egalitarian participation in the workforce. While Héctor’s working mother taught him that ‘a woman is born to be supported’, through the remarks of their aunt Rosa he and his brother Pablo were continually reminded of a radically different discourse. Although the economic conditions of her family prevented Rosa from progressing to university at the age of 18, she never gave up on her intention to pursue the professional career she dreamed of. She worked hard to finance her studies and

managed to get a bachelor's and a master's degree. She was very happy with the job she had found in Pachuca and her nephews could often hear her talk about her profession with great enthusiasm. In this way, the boys could see that there were women who both through their actions and through their words defied their mother's claim that 'a woman is born to be supported.' Furthermore, the boys appreciated the fact that their aunt's position allowed her to lavish them with generous pocket money and gifts.

The perception of men's greater responsibility for economic provision was reinforced by the centrality of motherhood to the construction of female identity. Fathers were expected to show affection and actively participate in raising their children and Gutmann's observation that among working-class men and women in Mexico City being a dependable and engaged father played an important role in 'being a man' (*ser hombre*) was also true for Metztitlán (2006 [1996]: 79). Yet the relationship between a mother and her children was regarded as the deepest imaginable bond<sup>45</sup>. The images and discourses disseminated through the media lent support to these perceptions (see Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 137). Melhuus (1992, 1996) explains that the salience of motherhood in Mexican gender imagery is grounded in the veneration of Virgin of Guadalupe. I have already stated in the Introduction that the Virgin of Refuge was the patron of the village and that the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron of Mexico, along with Jesus Christ was the most popular religious figure. During a pilgrimage to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, located in Mexico City, on the eve of her feast day, December 12th a woman explained to me why she came to visit the shrine: 'She is our mother. If you have a problem, if you are worried about something, who do you turn to? Your mother, right? A mother should always be there for you. 'Do you also turn to your mother?' I asked. 'Of course. My mother helps as much as she can but if we struggle to find a solution, we both turn to Dear Virgin (*Virgencita*),' she replied. I noticed that one of the instances when people most ardently insisted on their allegiance to Catholic church was when they discussed another villager's conversion to Evangelical (*Cristiano*) doctrine. When seeking to explain to me the differences between Catholics and *Cristianos* people most readily highlighted the fact that *Cristianos* 'do not believe in the Virgin.' While pronouncing this, they often shook their head in disbelief: 'How

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<sup>45</sup> In shanty towns in Northeastern Brazil, Schepers-Hughes shows how folk theories about mother-child bonding are shaped by economic and cultural constraints. She uses her ethnographic findings to challenge psychological theories about infant attachment and maternal bonding and the ideas of 'cultural feminists who argue for a singular conception of women's goal, interests, and moral visions' (1992: 341).

can they not believe in the Virgin? Don't they have a mother?"

If both spouses worked, grandmothers, unemployed female relatives and, more rarely, babysitters, played an important role in the care of children younger than six. The village had a nursery (*guardería*) that admitted children between the ages of one and a half and five and its working hours were from 8 am to 3 pm. Taking for granted that fathers worked, villagers usually explained to me that only the children of 'working mothers' (*madres trabajadoras*) were allowed to attend nursery. Yet people stressed that not all the working couples could afford the nursery and that only 'professionals and rich people' (*profesionistas y gente rica*) sent their children there. By *profesionistas*, they referred to doctors, engineers, economists, nurses, teachers and administrative assistants. While the nursery charged pre-established monthly fees, at the pre-school (*kinder*), a modest annual fee was accorded by parents at the beginning of the school year. The pre-school admitted children between three and five years of age and it was open between 9 am and 12 pm.

The centrality of motherhood in the local gender ideology allowed men who opposed their wives' employment outside the home to use the preoccupation with children's well-being as the most legitimate idiom to justify their impositions. Various housewives told me that their husbands usually accounted for their resistance to a woman's employment by referring not to the importance of her dedication to housework but to her children. I had never asked any men explicitly why they did not allow their wives to look for a job or, even more vaguely, why their wives did not work. The fact that I did not have a close relationship with any of these men (in contrast to their wives) coupled with the awareness of the negative connotations attached to male dominance and the increasingly positive image of female presence in the workforce discouraged me from eliciting their reactions to these questions. However, I urged some of them to share with me their opinions about working women and none of them showed disapproval.

They told me that it was alright for a woman to work outside the home but that her children should come first. 'Until they grow up, she should take care of them. You see these kids who get into drugs, who get into all kinds of trouble, they have not received proper care,' Ernesto, an accountant, once explained. His children were ten and seven and his wife Ilaria was still unemployed although she was willing to get a job. When asked whether a father should provide the same care for his children, Ernesto did not hesitate: 'That's different. A man cannot breastfeed a baby. That's why he is there to

support them [economically].’ ‘So, you mean a woman should stay at home only while her child is a baby?’ I pressed him. ‘No, you did not understand me. When I say breastfeed the baby, that’s just an example. I mean that a mother can offer to a child things that a father cannot,’ he replied. The man did not specify what kind of children’s needs could be satisfied only by mothers but he added that a mother could look for a job after her children completed their secondary education (*secundaria*, completed at about the age of fifteen).

These interpretations of what children needed were not based on men’s conversations with their children and often, as will be shown in Chapter Eight, actually contradicted what children themselves were troubled by and what they wished for. Although Gutmann did not conduct research with children, he insightfully pointed to the distinction between childhood traumas and childhood traumas ‘experienced by adults as a childhood trauma’ (1998: 145). He analysed the link between women’s increasing access to work outside the home and the rise of the folk diagnosis of *mamitis*, which referred to an affliction that infants and toddlers suffered when they were separated from their mothers for too long. He argued that, in contrast to childhood traumas such as physical punishment or abandonment, *mamitis* is suffered ‘more by some mothers and fathers than by the children themselves’ as it was used as an excuse by men who did not want their wives to work and by women who did not want to work (Gutmann, 1998: 138).

While some men tried to take advantage of the powerful association between motherhood and childcare in order to justify their resistance to female access to labour, these efforts seemed to find little acceptance in the community, especially among women. This was the case independently of the family’s circumstances, but even more so if children were not infants or toddlers and the economic conditions of the household were unfavourable. I occasionally heard villagers remark that it was wrong that ‘Ernesto kept Ilaria in the house bored to death.’ But since Ernesto’s salary and his savings from the period when he worked in the United States provided economic security to his family, his machismo was less frequently the target of gossip than Manuel’s. Manuel’s resistance to his wife’s employment drew more attention from his working neighbours because of the economic hardship his family was experiencing.

Manuel, Mariela and their sons Carlos and Esteban lived in a small but relatively comfortable, well-positioned, concrete house. However, their household was known in

their neighbourhood for their financial difficulties. Although Manuel worked in the fields for his own father, who was the owner of vast land holdings in Metztitlán, his daily income of 120 pesos (approximately £6) was equal to that of other labourers. As Mariela often stressed, her husband 'did not allow her to work.' The woman coped with financial difficulties by frequently sending her sons to neighbours' homes to ask for small loans without informing her husband. She often expressed her frustration over this situation and complained, 'He says that the children cannot stay home alone but that makes no sense. They are old enough to be able to take care of themselves for a few hours after school. If he is so concerned about them, he shouldn't let them live like this,' she concluded.

Although their neighbours never addressed this issue explicitly in front of Manuel and Mariela, most of them showed little understanding for their working arrangements and seemed to be unsure whether to blame Mariela for burdening them with constant requests for loans instead of facing her husband or Manuel for not being able to maintain his family properly and being *machista*. 'Her children are already big. I don't know why she lets him treat her and her children like that! I wouldn't tolerate a man who cannot stand up to his responsibilities,' Mariela's working friend Isabel noted. Their neighbours Francisco and Natalia, in front of their own six-year-old child, often commented on how Mariela's children looked wide-eyed when they came to visit their son and saw all his toys and good food on the table. 'Poor children!' they both remarked. Francisco expressed indignation with the fact that Manuel did not do anything to change this situation and confessed that he would not be able to bear the idea of his children living like that.

He and his wife agreed that, taking into consideration how these children were living, it was 'absurd' that Manuel appealed to their well-being to support his decision that Mariela should not work. They argued that the whole family would be much better off if Manuel 'allowed' his wife to work but they also pointed out that Mariela should have 'the courage to confront her husband instead of humiliating herself by asking for money.' Natalia complained that Mariela's requests were a great burden for her and that occasionally she did not have enough money to buy food for her own children and even less so for her neighbours.' According to traditional accountability criteria, women like Mariela were right not only to refrain from engaging in paid labour but also to comply with their husbands' decisions. On the other hand, the egalitarian discourse negatively

assessed both their failure to make economic contributions to the households and their readiness to grant their husbands full control of their lives. My informants' accounts revealed the importance of female agency and the idea that, as Daniela put it, 'nowadays a woman has no reason to let herself be a victim.' But comments by villagers about Manuel's responsibility also echoed a locally salient ideal that a man should provide for his family properly. One of the differences between modern and traditional expectations revolved around whether he should share this task with a woman or not but the male role in economic provision remained unchallenged.

The problem with Manuel was not that he did not earn much. Many men and women struggled with economic hardship. The concept of proper economic provision seemed to imply the effort more than the actual result since hard-working people with a low income were never criticised for this. Manuel was known as a hard-working person and the fact that Ernesto's opposition to his wife's employment was criticised less harshly than his own was not about villagers being more permissive with those who were financially better off. Manuel was expected to realise that his insistence on being the only economic provider could not be supported by his limited economic resources. The distinction between Ernesto and Manuel in the villagers' narratives showed that the critique of machismo did not concern only a behaviour itself and the way it reflected unequal power relations between men and women but also its impact on the whole family. However, although most villagers did not accept Ernesto's idea that a woman should not work outside the home until her children turned fifteen, the ideal of motherhood did not only gain relevance in the negotiations of occupational roles within households where men were the sole economic providers. Working women insisted much more than men on the importance of the compatibility of their working arrangements with childcare and dedicated most of their income to expenses related to children.

The appeal of the idea that men and women were equally responsible for supporting the family was obstructed not only by the power of the ideal of motherhood and its relationship with childcare but also by the persistent perception, found throughout Latin America, that home (*casa*) and street (*calle*) were gendered spaces. Safa explains:

*(...) the public-private split in Western industrial society is even stronger*

*in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean and dates back to the Spanish colonial *casa/calle* distinction, fostered by Catholicism, whereby women were relegated to the home and men to the street as a way of maintaining family honour and female virginity. This distinction was never fully followed by the poor and subordinated ethnic groups such as African slaves and indigenes, among whom women had to work to contribute to the family's survival, but it was upheld as the norm, and women's wage work came to be even more stigmatised than in more ethnically homogeneous industrialising countries because of its close association with these subordinated groups.* (1995: 45)

While women's growing contribution to supporting their families across different social classes seemed to relax local expectations about their confinement to the domestic realm and 'the stigma of women's wage labour began to fade' (Safa, 1995: 45), there was a persistent sentiment that women's absence from the home should be justifiable as necessary for the household, e.g. buying food, or picking up a child from the pre-school. Those women who were often seen in the street invited more criticism than men and their behaviour was described with the derogatory phrase '*andar de pata de perro*' (lit. walk around like a dog's leg). Most married women showed great concern with not drawing this kind of attention to themselves and gave far more information about their movements to their husbands than they received. This distinction between men and women did not imply that men's absence from the household was celebrated. A man who worked to provide for his family and, instead of going to drink with his friends, returned home to spend time with his family was well regarded by both men and women. However, the accounts which referred to this revealed that, while a woman's presence in the household was taken for granted, a man who behaved in the same way deserved special praise.

Although villagers' narratives showed that the modern version of *casa/calle* distinction was less restrictive of women's movements and that it could accommodate woman's employment, it still seemed to reinforce the idea that a man should bear greater responsibility for supporting the family. As Hirsch noted for other areas of rural Mexico, a range of motion granted to men was 'based on their gendered responsibility to support their families.' (Hirsch, 2003: 99) This remark proved to be relevant to my

field site in spite of the promotion of the increasingly egalitarian concept of economic provision. As I have already noted, many men spent a lot of time outside the home after their official working hours since they performed tasks which could secure an additional income. While they could occasionally be criticised by their wives for their continuous absence, their engagement in activities which could generate earnings for their families was usually approved by the neighbours. At the same time, working women rarely showed interest in additional working opportunities that could keep them away from home. They explained to me that, although many households needed an extra income, a man's and a woman's efforts to secure it would not be equally evaluated.

A woman's prolonged absence from home not only put into question her ability to successfully perform her tasks as mother and housewife but also drew attention to her sexual conduct. Both men and women made remarks about jealousy sparked by their spouses' interactions with colleagues but, while the impact of women's concerns did not move beyond heated discussions, men's fears occasionally affected women's actual working arrangements. Patricia, who worked as an administrative assistant, told me how she had to ask to be transferred to a different office because her husband was suspicious of the relationship she maintained with a man she shared the office with. Melhuus (1992) encountered similar tensions and reported that one woman clearly told her that she had to stop working because her husband was 'very jealous.' I do not know whether Melhuus's informant shared with her the reason her husband explicitly invoked or provided her own interpretation of his motives. In my field site, the women who, once married, were compelled to stop working by their husbands explained that these men did not justify the opposition to their working status on the grounds of jealousy. However, they were convinced that when husbands used concerns about children's well-being to oppose wives' employment, they actually sought to disguise their jealousy. Some unemployed women used to remind their daughters that they should not allow their partner's jealousy to get in the way of their professional ambitions. Elena told her neighbour Daniela in front of their daughters that her husband did not let her work because he was jealous. 'He does not want to admit that. But I know him. I know him well. He just can't stand the idea of other men looking at me all day long,' she smiled mischievously, although her daughter Araceli often saw her cry over the same issue. On various occasions, I heard the woman advise Araceli that she had to obtain a university degree and find a good job before she got married and that she should not put up with an

overly possessive husband because he would ‘make her unhappy.’

Yet it is important to note that many married women felt that their pursuit of professional opportunities was constrained not only by their husbands’ anxieties but also by the local associations between a woman’s sexual behaviour and her extradomestic activities. ‘Don’t think that the neighbours would say, “Oh, she just wants to make more money for her children”. No! Many of them would think that I am looking for an opportunity to get out of home so I can do who knows what with who knows whom. That’s what people are like here,’ Patricia once explained the prospect of following her husband’s example by looking for a source of additional income. She added that she was not so worried about what others would say as about leaving her three children Cecilia, Óscar and Jesús alone for too long. But she also bitterly remarked that there could be no equality between women and men in the village yet because, while people said that a man worked because of the merit (*por su mérito*), they ‘never say that a woman works because she’s competent but because she screws someone (*se anda tirando a alguien*).’

Information about the ambiguous coexistence of competing gender expectations was also made available to children through narratives about migration to the United States. Even the children who had never been abroad had a chance to learn a lot about the hardship that migrants, most frequently without legal US residence, had to face. They could hear adults’ conversations about how, in order to enter the US, men and women had to pay large amounts of money to the so-called ‘coyotes’, who were expected to guide them to their final destination, how they confronted hostile weather conditions, dangerous animals, migration patrols (MIGRA) and *cazadores*, migrant hunters who, as people used to say, ‘shot to kill.’ These accounts of migrants’ experiences gave children a glimpse of the hard working and living conditions related to the difficulty of obtaining a permit to legally reside in the US but also of racial and class discrimination. Discrimination was the reason most commonly cited by those who told me that they would not like to go or return to the US. When Don Alfonso said that he would never agree to ‘be bossed around in the States’, his son-in-law’s brother replied, ‘Aren’t you bossed around here too? You aren’t a boss here either. We are all bossed around everywhere.’ Don Alfonso agreed but he stressed that ‘it would be different in the US because there they would say “Lousy Indian!” Villagers also insisted that children were not as safe in the areas where migrants usually lived as in Metztitlán and

that they had to ‘go to school and return straight home.’ Yet the stories of migration did not focus only on its downside. People also talked about the life in the US as ‘more comfortable’ because one could earn more money and had more opportunities to spend it in many appealing ways as the American lifestyle offered greater availability of attractive material goods and activities at more affordable prices than in Mexico.

Gender gained relevance in the description of both desirable and undesirable aspects of migration. For example, people blamed the cases of AIDS in the village on male migrants. They told me that ‘there is a lot of entertainment over there and the men spend their dollars on women in spite of having a wife and children here.’ As Josefina explained, “*los hombres van de canijos*” (lit. men go around like dogs; change partners) in the US, come home, pass AIDS to their wives and then keep going “*de canijos*” in the village and the disease is spread around.’ On the other hand, various women happily recounted how migration made it possible for them to become economically independent from their husbands. Although international migration in Metztitlán was relatively low and men migrated more often than women, children could witness how women also migrated, worked and sent remittances to their family members and, in this way, participated in ‘undoing gender’ in economic provision. But, at the same time, through the comments villagers made about male and female migrants, children could learn that the performance of apparently the same actions continued to be differently assessed in men and women. I found that the experiences of villagers in Metztitlán coincided with what Dreby (2006, 2010) witnessed in her ethnographic research with Mexican migrants in the United States and their children and relatives in Mexico. Dreby notes that, when parents and their children were separated, ‘family members act in ways to reinforce the notion that fathers’ relationships with their children are directly related to their ability to honorably fulfill the role of economic provider for the family’ and that their evaluations of migrant mothers ‘centre on their ability to be caregivers from a distance, quite a difficult accomplishment’ (2010: 87). When her son was five years old, Carmen left him with her mother and spent a few months working in Los Angeles. Her husband, from whom she was separated at that time, left for Atlanta that same year and stayed there for three years (when he came back to Mexico, the couple got back together but the man returned to the United States a year later). Carmen recalled that she worked at McDonald’s, met a lot of new people and had a great time in Los Angeles but she admitted that she felt terribly guilty about leaving her son and for that reason she

decided to return to the village. She remembered that she called her son by phone much more often than his father did. Yet she recalled that her cousin once called her in Los Angeles to say that her husband's mother and a neighbour had told her son that, if his mother loved him, she would not have gone away. At the same time, they explained to the boy that his father had gone to the United States to give him 'a better life' and to make sure that he 'would not lack anything.'

Although locals tended to associate more traditionalist views with 'less educated' and 'economically more disadvantaged people', my observations did not always support this assumption. Some of the men who imposed the harshest restrictions upon their wives' conduct were educated and well or decently paid: a doctor, an accountant and a teacher. Indeed, economic scarcity often predicted the suppression of the traditional notion of 'breadwinner' better than high levels of education (see Stolen, 1996 for differences in the division of labour between farmers and cotton-pickers in rural Argentina). It was, nonetheless, the case that the women who agreed to leave their jobs after marriage were usually employed in low-skilled activities. By contrast, educated women asked to quit their careers often seemed to negotiate such requests in ways that allowed them to continue working. It was common that spouses from a similarly high socioeconomic and educational background made less traditionalist occupational arrangements, while all the other conjugal combinations lent themselves to a wider range of outcomes.

### **Homemakers and apron wearers**

'Undoing gender' in male and female traditional occupational roles were not parallel processes. The renegotiation of traditional expectations about women's access to the labour force in the village emerged before the renegotiation of the accountability criteria for assessing men's participation in housework (*quehacer*) and it had been far more effective. When seeking to 'determine the extent to which activities become less (or more) gendered' (Gutmann, 2006 [1996]: 148), it is necessary to pay close attention to potential contradictions between how people articulate their gender ideals in front of different interlocutors and how they put them to work through everyday interactions or, as Gutmann put it, whether changes are 'more verbal than material' (2006 [1996]: 148). However, as I noted in Chapter Two when discussing Ramírez's (2008) objections to the

dismissal of verbal manifestations of change as ‘real change’, it is not only the distinction between verbal and material changes that is relevant. What also matters is whether these verbal manifestations of allegiance to alternative expectations are expressed merely in informants’ conversations with an anthropologist or also in their conversations with adults and children from their social environment. These potential differences between verbal and material changes and between the presence or absence of verbal enforcement of egalitarian expectations through everyday interactions gain particular relevance in the examination of messages and practices children are exposed to.

In most households I regularly visited, in spite of certain tensions, I witnessed both verbal and material changes in the assignment of domestic chores to children with respect to villagers’ accounts of the past gender arrangements. Both boys and girls, independently of their parents’ occupational roles or socioeconomic background, were asked to perform certain less demanding domestic tasks. If boys protested, invoking the traditional ideals of gendered division of labour, their mothers readily responded that ‘there are no men’s jobs and women’s jobs’ and that ‘we are all equal.’ It was significant that children’s resistance to comply with their mothers’ requests was not seen only as a challenge to the gender expectations their mothers held them accountable for but also as disobedience. Yet for something to count as disobedience, there had to be an agreement between parents as to what kind of requests children were expected to obey. Fathers rarely participated actively in the distribution of domestic chores but the unhindered performance of these tasks greatly relied upon their agreement with their wives’ efforts to engage both boys and girls in housework. While men often supported their wives in the determination not to discriminate between sons and daughters in the assignment of domestic duties, some of them showed different preferences. Miles observed among rural migrants in the Ecuadorean city of Cuenca that, while children were primarily expected to perform tasks associated with their own sex, those who showed readiness to engage in cross-sex duties were ‘praised for demonstrating interest in family cooperation and an ability to engage in reciprocal relationships with others’ (1994: 144). The socialisation practices concerning domestic chores that I found in Metztitlán were different. In the households where gendered division of labour was applied to children, boys’ contributions were not celebrated but harshly discouraged. In the homes where tasks were equally assigned to boys and girls, the praise for successfully complying with

these expectations did not depend on a child's sex.

Ernesto approved of his daughter Marisa and disapproved of his son Alberto helping his wife Ilaria with household chores. Although the woman wanted both children to contribute to the realisation of some small tasks, her husband discouraged her, saying, 'My son is not *vieja*.' She admitted that she stopped asking her son to perform any of these activities in order to avoid conflict with her husband. At the same time another housewife, Elena, dealt with a similar situation quite differently. She recounted how her husband at first opposed her attempts to engage both their son Álvaro and their daughter Araceli in housework but explained that she warned him that 'he was not being fair to the girl' and that she made him reconsider his position. These tensions over the efforts to involve children in certain domestic tasks emerged not only between children's parents but also between a parent and a grandmother, uncle or another relative.

Some mothers believed that there was nothing problematic about expecting girls to be more engaged in housework. While Isabel had two sons whom she encouraged to help her, she admitted that if she had a daughter she would expect more from her because 'she would have to get married.' When I remarked that her sons would probably also get married, she smiled and responded that her son will not be an apron wearer for anyone. In some households, women themselves enacted the imposition of gender division in the engagement of children in domestic tasks quite strictly. None of my main informants lived in these families but I occasionally had a chance to visit them. These were usually economically severely disadvantaged homes, where women from a low educational background acted as housewives or worked in agriculture and men performed different low-skilled jobs. Despite the fact that, as I have noted above, in these households economic scarcity often led both men and women to engage in paid extradomestic activities, domestic responsibilities were usually shouldered by women. 'They are women. They will need this more than their brothers,' some of these women said, to explain why they did not engage their sons in housework. In many of these homes, boys roamed the streets while their sisters helped their mothers with household chores.

Bernarda had the same socioeconomic background as her relatives and neighbours in whose homes the housework was rigidly divided along gender lines among both adults and children. However, while in these other homes boys were not

encouraged to perform domestic tasks, Bernarda's sons engaged in these activities. On the one hand, these discrepancies might have stemmed simply from individual differences between villagers. On the other, such arrangements could also be related to the fact that some women had only sons and these were the only persons on whom they could rely for support in certain chores. Under these circumstances, one could be additionally motivated to renegotiate particular gender expectations. Nevertheless, while my main informants mostly encouraged boys' contributions to housework by invoking the ideal of equality, Bernarda found the practical aspects of this arrangement more compelling. Like parents who tolerated their children's gender-atypical toy choices only under particular circumstances (e.g. entertaining a younger sibling of different sex), which I discussed in Chapter Five, she challenged strict gender divisions without questioning the legitimacy of different accountability criteria for assessing male and female behaviour. When her nine-year-old son Fermín complained to her that his cousin called him “*¡Vieja!* because he saw him washing dishes, Bernarda calmed the boy down by raising seemingly self-evident concerns: ‘When you grow up and you are still not married, and you go to live, for example, to *el Norte* (lit. the North, referring to the US), who will do the housework for you? Or if you get married and your wife falls sick?’ The woman taught her sons that while little boys had to do the housework, adult men actually did not (unless they had to go to the US on their own or their wives fell sick). Her instructions suggested that, in spite of a female presence (e.g. mother), boys had to engage in housework in order to prepare themselves for the (extraordinary) cases of ‘female absence’ in adulthood. Hence, Bernarda conveyed to her sons the message that while male performance of domestic tasks in childhood was compatible with female presence, in adulthood this would no longer be the case.

Bernarda's message actually seemed to be more coherent than what many other mothers I knew conveyed to their children. In Bernarda's household, it was clear from the beginning that male and female duties essentially differed and that, while boys needed to perform certain tasks regularly in order to acquire certain skills, adult men would need to perform them only under exceptional circumstances. This meant that Bernarda's sons could not find any inconsistencies between the fact that they were expected to attend to some domestic chores, while their father was not (bearing in mind that their mother was present and healthy). At the same time, the children who were taught that boys and girls should perform the same tasks because they were ‘*iguales*’

could observe that in adulthood men and women seemed to become somewhat less '*iguales*' without much explanation about when exactly and how this occurred.

In our conversations, many adults claimed that they liked the idea of equal participation by men and women both in the economic provision of the household and in housework. They often couched this expectation in the ideal of fairness since the change in only one of these domains would imply relief for one sex and a double burden for the other. However, most villagers were aware of the fact that this undesirable scenario was well underway since working women performed most household chores, a phenomenon known in the Spanish-speaking countries as '*doble jornada*' (double day). Not only did fewer men participate in domestic chores than women in paid work but there was also less consensus about the legitimacy of these transformations of traditional gender roles. Various people I talked to believed that no innate differences could justify men's and women's unequal engagement in the housework and that they should have the same responsibilities in the household. However, this sort of discourse about adults was not promoted at home. For most villagers, as has been found in other areas of Mexico and Latin America, it was 'impossible to imagine' (Olavarría, 2003: 337) men permanently taking charge of household chores and none of them suggested that 'the couple held joint responsibility for domestic work' (Hirsch, 2003: 140). Most women claimed that they would 'find it weird' if men shared all the domestic tasks with them equally and that they did not expect that level of involvement. Although people were confident that both men and women were equally capable of acquiring skills necessary for the completion of domestic tasks, the persistence of the *casa/calle* distinction contributed to hindering the realisation of these predispositions.

But women's claim that they did not expect their husbands to be involved in the housework to the same extent as they were was not merely a rationalising strategy through which they sought to come to terms with their husbands' lack of interest in sharing domestic chores or evidence of commitment to traditional values. Some of the women I knew seemed to be interested in preserving the distinction between men's and women's duties because gendered division of labour left more room for exchange between spouses and allowed them to obtain the goods or services they could not or did not want to secure themselves (e.g. driving without a driving license). The experiences of some women suggested that men's active engagement in the housework threatened to undermine their negotiating power in daily decision-making. Irene once observed a

revealing connection between her husband's contribution to domestic chores and their relationship dynamics. 'When I used to iron his shirts, whenever I asked him to take me to Pachuca, he did so. He suddenly started ironing his own shirts and now he always finds an excuse when I want to go to Pachuca,' she explained. She added that while in the past she used to leave ironing shirts to the last minute, now she did it as soon as they were dry so she could iron them before her husband.

The fact that in our conversations, in spite of their declared appreciation for egalitarian division of labour, most villagers did not call for the same participation of men and women in housework was apparent to children in daily interactions most frequently through casual comments among adults. In contrast to how they framed women's employment, villagers continually used the idiom of 'help' to refer to men's participation in the housework. The accountability criteria for assessing men's and women's contributions to the housework greatly differed both among those who approved of and those who objected to men's involvement in these tasks. While a woman's performance of all domestic chores was taken for granted and an occasional failure to complete particular tasks was subject to criticism, even rather modest, sporadic efforts could earn a man the reputation of a cooperative husband, among benevolent observers, or an apron wearer, among traditionalist critics.

Most women did not show interest in talking about their husbands' contributions to housework with their friends and neighbours. They expressed dissatisfaction with their partners' behaviour by criticising their infidelities, drinking or coming home late but rarely complained about '*doble jornada*.' Isabel admitted that she had her routine and preferred no one to interfere in 'her things.' 'I know that no one can do it better than me so I prefer to do it myself,' she told me in front of her children and two neighbours. Just as I found in women's interpretations of machismo, when encouraged to evaluate the extent of their husbands' involvement, women seemed to be influenced by the current state of the relationship between them. Hence, depending on the situation between a husband and a wife, the same woman either commented that her husband 'didn't do almost anything at home' or eagerly pointed out that he ironed his shirts, prepared himself breakfast or washed dishes if she was busy with other chores or with children.

Among my informants, one of the few men who participated actively in home chores on a daily basis was seventy-three-year-old Don Alfonso. This energetic and witty man, who lived with his daughter, his son-in-law and his grandchildren, performed

all kinds of domestic tasks, such as washing dishes and clothes, sweeping, ironing and cooking. He explained that he had become used to these activities when at the age of thirteen he left for Mexico City, where he had lived for more than forty years. Although Don Alfonso skillfully conducted different chores and prided himself on not being *machista*, he occasionally joked by saying, often in front of his four-year-old grandson Miguel, ‘You see! They keep me here as a *mandilón*.’ The old man’s playing with traditional labels while effortlessly continuing to perform housework, in a way challenged the traditional expectations. However, it still called the attention to the extraordinariness of a male presence in housekeeping. His young grandson regularly encountered Don Alfonso’s dedication to housework, on the one hand, and his father’s, his other grandfather’s and his uncles’ lack of availability to perform domestic chores. Their attitudes ranged from his father’s silent avoidance of domestic tasks or remarks that ‘he had no time’ to help his wife to his grandfather’s harshly defended distinction between ‘men’s’ and ‘women’s things.’

Josefina recalled that a 17-year-old female neighbour once told her defiantly, ‘I saw your husband washing dishes. He’s an apron wearer.’ Josefina remarked that she admired Diego for ignoring such comments and continuing to occasionally assist her with some chores because, as she put it, ‘it takes a lot of self-confidence to resist that pressure and to not be bothered by *el qué dirán*.’ The explanation Josefina gave to her daughter Rosalía, when she was curious to know what her neighbour meant by calling her father *mandilón*, was that ‘that’s a word ignorant people use because they don’t know that times have changed and that we are all equal now.’ Other ethnographic studies of Mexico have also shown that people invoked this notion of ‘ignorance’ to account for the survival of traditional gender ideals. Hirsch noted that her informants ‘see the macho as backwards, ignorant, unaware that his old strengths are useless in the modern world’ (2003: 151). Josefina’s comment was grounded in a similar logic. Not only a macho was seen as ‘ignorant’ but all those who embraced macho ideals. The ignorance of Josefina’s neighbour derived from her unawareness that men’s ‘old strengths are useless in the modern world’ and that their new strengths involved the appreciation for gender equality.

Traditional labels, however, persisted and not all the men joked at their own expense as Don Alfonso or showed the same endurance under the burden of social pressure as Diego. While a woman’s absence from paid labour was commonly blamed

on the preferences of ‘intimate others’, a man’s absence from housework was more readily, although not exclusively, associated with the fear of ‘*el qué dirán*.’ Fabiola, who had recently returned from the United States, recalled that her husband Patricio shared all the housework with her in their flat in Atlanta but that a few months before they arrived in their homeland, he warned her, ‘Don’t expect me to do this back in Mexico.’ While the distribution of their social network and the spatial properties of their household rendered Patricio’s actions invisible in Atlanta, the vicinity of their social group and the accessibility of their house in Metztitlán exposed him to traditional social labelling and he felt no need to show off how he had redefined his male identity in the context of migration.

What is particularly relevant to my account is the fact that one of the main advantages men and women mentioned about migration to the US was the fact that they felt more relaxed because their new experiences allowed them greater anonymity and, in this way, mitigated the concerns about ‘*el qué dirán*.’ This revealed that people were convinced that, in spite of the existence of alternative accountability regimes in the village, traditional expectations continued to powerfully pervade their lives. In contrast to Patricio, there were men who maintained at least some of their newly acquired habits and made modest contributions to the housework. However, as their wives noted, the fact that they became more cooperative usually did not mean that they were less concerned about what others might say as most of them were careful to undertake these chores only behind closed doors. People agreed that migration led men to gain more experience with housework but this was not unequivocally welcomed. One woman admitted that, although she was happy about the fact that her husband ‘helped’ her with the housework more since he returned from the US, she did not like to go around and praise him in front of their neighbours. She believed that some villagers might appreciate her husband’s new attitude but she was sure that there would also be many who would ridicule him.

### **Telling right from wrong**

The contradictions entailed in children’s everyday experiences of adults’ working arrangements were ideologically evaluated through the educational agenda by subjecting them to egalitarian accountability criteria. The official discourse was

apparently more homogeneous and continually sought to downplay the social relevance of gender differences and to promote the ideal of ‘the same rights and responsibilities.’ Exposure to the school staff itself, composed predominantly of married women, gave children who came from different family backgrounds an opportunity to interact regularly with working women. Yet Withers’ ethnographic study about Oaxacan teachers showed how the teaching job blurred the boundaries between paid labour and reproductive work since it consisted in reproducing ‘students who are appropriately cultured, socialised, nationalised, and gendered’ and was seen as an extension of the work of their mothers (2009: 103). The identification of women as ‘nurturing reproducers of future generations’ (2009: 103) in Metztitlán becomes especially apparent in the fact that the work with the youngest children was clearly gendered: no male teachers worked with preschool or first- and second-grade primary school pupils. This pattern was not the result of any official policy but it might have reflected what Withers defined as a ‘blurring’ line between women’s roles in ‘paid productive work and reproductive labour.’

During my fieldwork, the curriculum and didactic materials were undergoing important changes. While some textbooks had been recently introduced (2008, 2009), most of them dated back to 2000 and corresponded to the curriculum established by the educational reform implemented in 1993. The aspirations of that reform were expressed in terms of meeting the demands of a changing social reality by ensuring the formation of human resources qualified for competing in a new economy (Zorrilla Fierro and Barba Casillas, 2008: 9) and gender issues had already emerged as a relevant social concern. However, although the educational agenda had shown interest in challenging traditional gender ideals, the textbooks created in that period only sporadically reflected these efforts. They often represented stereotypical division of labour through texts and images without critically engaging with the ideas these arrangements rested upon.

The latest educational reform was presented as an effort to foster analytical skills and critical thinking in children. A lot of emphasis was placed on preparing teachers for contributing to the nourishment of the right values in children and on ensuring that pupils drew connections between the attitudes and values they acquired in Civic and Ethical Formation classes and other subjects. The attention to the salience of gender when dealing with a range of different issues, from history to language and natural sciences, comfortably fit into the logic underlying this project. In contrast to the old

textbooks, new books more systematically promoted modern gender ideology and invited readers to critically reflect upon traditional expectations. Recently published textbooks, activity sheets and teacher's manuals explained that 'unfortunately, there are still many persons who think that girls should only play with dolls and be housewives; but they are wrong, because women can be engineers, doctors, astronauts, governors and presidents' (SEP, 2009a: 16) and contained activities that invited children to think about whether they 'recognised and defended egalitarian treatment between men and women' and whether they 'identified and avoided expressions that showed discriminatory treatment towards women' (SEP, 2008: 50).

Teachers usually followed the guidelines recommended by the authors of textbooks in the design of classes and they paid more attention to raising the relevance of gender issues when they were explicitly encouraged to do so (which was the case with the new textbooks). The message they sought to convey about the division of labour, especially from the fourth grade onwards, boiled down to the idea that women and men only differed in their anatomical and physiological traits and that they should have the same responsibilities and rights. Children were taught to appreciate the fact that in the past these premises were not recognised and that Mexico was a male-dominant society where women were treated as radically different beings from men, their capacities undervalued and opportunities limited. As the textbooks noted and teachers readily repeated, those who believed that a woman could and should only be a housewife were 'wrong' and it was 'unfortunate' that such ideas 'still' existed. As with the evaluations of traditional restrictions in toy preferences, these interventions were clearly morally charged and they unambiguously transmitted to children the perception of the undesirability of gendered division of labour. These statements were expected to provide children with conceptual tools to critically engage with their social reality and attach the connotational values promoted by the educational agenda to the practices and ideas they encountered in their households and neighbourhood.

Some mothers were concerned that, although traditional occupational arrangements were explicitly challenged at school, the fact that the frequency of the treatment of these issues was limited to a few lessons scattered across the academic year diminished its efficacy. However, my observation of interactions between teachers and their pupils revealed that many took advantage of different kinds of situations to address and promote the idea of gender equality. When during a lesson Claudio commented that

‘men should not cook because cooking is for *viejitas*’, teacher Virginia promptly reacted, ‘No, that’s not right, Claudio. How come your dad makes pizzas then?’ ‘That’s different. That’s his job,’ the boy did not hesitate to reply. ‘It doesn’t matter. You say that men should not cook and your dad’s case shows you that that’s not right,’ the teacher insisted.

Teachers required pupils to sweep their classrooms and throw out the rubbish when classes finished and boys and girls rigorously followed a schedule that ignored gender in the allocation of cleaning tasks. Although most children accepted these duties without complaint, some boys occasionally protested as they suggested that, independently of whether cleaning was performed as housework or in school, it was not an appropriate activity for boys. Both male and female teachers challenged such remarks and readily provided explanations that promoted participation of both boys and girls in these chores. ‘There are no men’s jobs and women’s jobs. We all make a mess, so we should all clean up,’ I heard teachers reply with determination.

Teachers occasionally complained that many children were ‘instilled with machismo’ in their homes and that it was ‘difficult to make them see certain things.’ However, some of the examples they used to promote modern gender ideology were not really grounded in the official equality discourse. After criticising the ‘*ideas machistas*’ about the housework that he commonly encountered among the villagers, a teacher appeared to take pleasure in recounting how, if one of his male pupils protested that sweeping was not for men, he used his real life experiences to illustrate the validity of men’s engagement in this kind of task. Yet the stories about his performance of household chores ‘when he was alone in the US’ and ‘when his wife was sick’ were more in line with the arguments some mothers used to encourage boys’ participation in housework without challenging the legitimacy of traditional accountability criteria, which I have already mentioned in this chapter, than with the egalitarian school agenda. When gender was not the focus of teachers’ attention but spontaneously emerged while discussing other issues, some teachers drifted even further away from modern ideals. On one occasion, in a natural sciences class, while explaining how different cells of a human body were specialised for different functions, a teacher felt the need to render this idea more comprehensible to ten-year-olds by comparing the body to a household. ‘A mother is in charge of the housework, a father is in charge of supporting the family, children are in charge of studying,’ the man noted without critically engaging with the

premises of the division of labour he had just referred to. In this way, the rather homogeneous official discourse that was grounded in the egalitarian accountability regime intertwined with spontaneously produced messages that relied upon traditional expectations.

### **Concluding remarks**

Children in Metztitlán were growing up in a sociocultural context where women's and men's occupational roles were actively renegotiated. Unlike Melhuus who in the 1980s observed that in her field site there was 'no apparent opening for a critical discourse, which could ultimately imply change' (1992: 208), I encountered a tense coexistence of competing accountability regimes. People readily distinguished between traditional and modern expectations and many of them were careful to position themselves as modern individuals who defied the constraints imposed by a gendered division of labour. However, their everyday experiences showed that these presumably 'old' and 'new' arrangements were more closely intertwined than this distinction suggested. In contrast to the past, working status itself did not provoke concerns about '*el qué dirán*' but working women and their husbands still felt anxieties about the threats to men's respectability and women's caregiving responsibilities, fidelity and sexual reputation. While the opposition to women's access to paid labour was attributed to 'intimate others', men's absence from housework was often linked to the protection of their public record.

Although an egalitarian accountability regime was more actively enforced in wage-earning than in homemaking, both realms were permeated with tensions that exposed children to conflicting messages about the legitimacy of different working arrangements. In Chapter Eight, I will explore how children's attitudes towards these contradictory expectations translated into reactions to their own and adults' participation in different activities. I will seek to understand whether children needed to recognise personally meaningful advantages in egalitarian arrangements in order to resist gender divisions even in the absence of social pressure to conform to traditional expectations and whether the recognition of tangible benefits could drive them not only to resist traditional norms themselves but also to encourage adults to do the same.

## Chapter Eight

### **Children, breadwinners and homemakers**

Mariela and I were sitting at the kitchen table. The woman was crying and telling me about the latest dispute with her husband over his opposition to her finding employment. The family faced significant economic hardship and Mariela often sought to convince her husband to reconsider his position. Her son Carlos complied with her request to go out and play but it was not long before he came back. He hugged his mother and listened in silence to our conversation. When Mariela stood up to get herself a glass of water, the boy suddenly interjected, 'Mum, why doesn't dad let you work? Can't he see that we don't have money?' That was not the first time Carlos expressed concerns about his father's reluctance to 'let' his mother get a job. He and his brother Esteban, on various occasions, questioned the legitimacy of their father's decision and showed great interest in encouraging their mother to 'convince him to let her work.' Various mothers and children told me of many similar situations. At the same time, I never learnt of any children who urged their fathers to participate in the housework or advised their mothers that they should demand that men be more cooperative.

In this chapter, I will show that children's everyday experiences were marked by contradictions derived from the availability of the traditional distinction between men as breadwinners and women as homemakers and the egalitarian occupational ideals. I am particularly concerned with how children's attitudes towards the division of labour were enforced through situations in which the distribution of tasks between girls and boys or men and women actually occurred. By exploring the assignment of domestic chores to children, I will demonstrate how girls and boys pursued different goals and how the fact that girls recognised more tangible benefits in change led them to show greater readiness to promote egalitarian expectations than boys. At the same time, I will show that girls and boys did not manage the situations involving adults' division of labour as future women and men with competing agendas, but as children joined by a shared commitment to their current needs. I will argue that different perceptions of how much 'undoing gender' in economic provision, on the one hand, and housework, on the other,

might contribute to fulfilling these needs gave rise to discrepancies in their readiness to encourage adults to resist traditional expectations in these two domains. I will point to the risk of asymmetrical contributions to ‘undoing gender’ and suggest that children’s efforts to encourage women’s access to paid labour without encouraging men’s participation in housework contributed to the maintenance of gender inequalities.

### **Moving between contradictory expectations**

The findings of the National Report on Gender Violence, published by SEP and UNICEF in 2009, suggest that Mexican children demonstrate allegiance to a traditional division of labour. The authors of the study sought to ‘learn about the perceptions pupils had of particular traditional gender roles’ (2009: 145) and found that 59.8% of sixth-graders expressed their approval of the claim that ‘A woman should dedicate herself to the tasks proper to her own sex, such as taking care of her children and husband’ and 77.3% of them agreed that ‘a man should be more responsible for bringing money to the household.’ Considering these quantitative data, the researchers concluded that ‘the number of children who keep holding traditional perceptions of gender roles is still considerable’ (2009: 145) and that ‘the majority of pupils maintain traditional perceptions of gender roles. So, most of them agreed that a woman should dedicate herself to taking care of her children and husband and that men should be the economic providers of the household’ (2009: 157).

Some ethnographic evidence I collected in Metztitlán lends support to these conclusions as it shows that girls and boys often demonstrated their commitment to a gendered division of labour. When children playfully acted out family relationships, they usually reproduced traditional roles. Boys would set off to work, while girls stayed at home and dedicated themselves to cleaning the house, preparing food and taking care of the children. This tendency emerged at an early age. On one occasion, four-year-old Miguel told his five-year-old pretend-wife Cecilia, ‘I want my milk to be ready when I come back from work’ before he left their imaginary home. Young villagers seemed to enjoy creating tensions in the relationships they represented so they were often involved in heated disputes over a husband who came home drunk or a daughter who tried to sneak out of the house while her parents were sleeping. But, interestingly, these clashes rarely concerned the distribution of tasks. Even the girls who most confidently defended

the ideals of equality in interviews were likely to calmly comply with the demands of their domestic role through pretend play.

The persistence of this appreciation for the traditional division of labour could also be found when I encouraged children to engage in different kinds of activities. I occasionally set up a stage and proposed that they perform a puppet show for me and their mothers and, in these performances, even children whose both parents worked assigned traditional occupational roles to their dolls. While dads went to work, mums stayed at home taking care of children and doing housework. I designed a task that involved showing children photos of nine anonymous people (five women and four men) and invited them to guess which three (occasionally four) of these '*personas*' (gender neutral 'persons') performed particular activities (e.g. drives a tractor, supports the family, played with dolls during childhood, washes clothes for the family, washes dishes, sweeps, runs a big company, etc). Although I never mentioned any gender-marked words (e.g. man, woman, boy, girl, she, he), children quickly identified the relevance of gender to the task. After responding to a few questions, Alejandra felt the need to reorder mixed photos of men and women and to divide them into two same-sex groups. When I asked her why she had done so, she explained that it was easier to identify the right persons if their pictures were split in this way. Children's responses to the questions that explicitly related to the performance of the role of economic provider and the completion of domestic chores predominantly relied upon traditional expectations. So, when I asked, for example, who 'sweeps the house every day' or 'washes the clothes for the family', I often obtained responses that did not include even a single man (e.g. a child showed the pictures of four women). Yet this pattern was less consistent among the oldest children, ten- and eleven-year-olds, who were most intensely exposed to the school discourse on gender equality.

When I showed the pictures to nine-year-old Genaro and asked him to guess which three of those persons 'go to work to earn money and support the family', he pointed at two men and a woman. As soon as Genaro touched the photograph with a female character, his classmate Fernando mockingly remarked, 'Are you stupid? How can a woman support a family? A woman is born to be supported.' 'Women also work,' responded Armando. 'Of course, my mum works,' added eleven-year-old Irene. I asked nine-year-old Eddie what he thought. After a moment of reflection, the boy responded: 'Women also work but dads have greater obligation because when they get married,

dads have to promise that they will support the family and mums don't have to promise that,<sup>46</sup>.

In the discussion with Genaro, Fernando reproduced the claim that 'a woman is born to be supported' and Eddie the one that 'dads have greater obligation (to support the family)', both of which could be heard, although the former more rarely, among adults. At the same time, some children who defended this position, most commonly boys, turned to more creative explanations. These boys argued that a woman should not work because 'she could get hurt if she dropped something heavy on her foot' or she could even 'be kidnapped.' In group interviews, girls readily responded to these comments, so when nine-year-old Ricardo noted that, if a box started falling onto his head, a man would catch it and a woman wouldn't be able to do so, his classmate Maleni replied ironically, 'Oh, yeah, sure! A woman would just stand there like, "Oh, no, what should I do?" and wait for it to fall on her head.'

In spite of the apparent commitment to gender division that children showed through these activities, I found that the egalitarian remarks like the ones made by Maleni, Armando and Irene were far from exceptional and that the ways children grappled with the ideas of modern and traditional division of labour through their everyday interactions were permeated with ambiguities. Genaro's pointing at a woman as breadwinner triggered in Fernando the invocation of the idea that 'a woman is born to be supported.' Yet he encouraged his mother to get a job and received her decision to start her own business with delight. While Armando on this occasion defended female access to labour, in one group interview he complained about the possibility of earning very little money because, as he stated, 'how would I support my wife then?' When playing at 'families' with her neighbours, Maribel calmly engaged in 'housework' after her 'husband' told her that he was going to work and that he would come back for lunch. At the same time, in individual and group interviews, she was one of the most confident advocates of women's rights. 'A woman should have her own money. She is not a man's slave. Men and women are equal,' she told me once. Although Maribel was particularly outspoken in her defence of egalitarian working arrangements, her position actually echoed the attitudes of a vast majority of her peers across all the ages I focused

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<sup>46</sup> The idea of men's greater responsibility as family breadwinners was also found among children in the US. Sinno and Killen reported that their young respondents 'reasoned that it was the mother's personal choice to want a job, whereas for fathers children judged that it was necessary for financial reasons' (2009: 24).

on. When children discussed different occupational roles, they usually claimed that 'both men and women should go to work' and that 'both men and women should do the housework.'

These observations suggest that the attitudes of Mexican children may be much more complex than the report published by SEP and UNICEF indicates and that the vision of their overwhelming loyalty to traditional gender ideology may derive from methodological limitations of research. By seeking children's agreement or disagreement with particular claims, the authors of this study clearly aimed to elicit children's own attitudes rather than merely their awareness of local gender stereotypes. Yet the very formulations of the questions posed to children raise certain concerns. It is questionable to what extent expressing approval for the claim that 'a woman should dedicate herself to tasks proper of her own sex, such as taking care of her children and husband,' actually implies that children believed it was appropriate for a woman to dedicate herself solely to these activities without having the opportunity to combine these duties with paid work outside the household. The fact that pupils agreed with the idea that 'the man is the one who should be more responsible for bringing money to the household' reveals little about their attitudes towards the possibility of men and women sharing the responsibility for the economic provision of the family. It would have been useful to examine whether children interpreted this claim as an alternative to the idea that 'a woman should be more responsible for bringing money to the household' or that 'a man and a woman should be equally responsible for bringing money to the household.'

Seeking to formulate questions which could more successfully tap into children's attitudes towards different working arrangements, I directly asked boys and girls, 'Which one of these families do you like more? Which one do you think is better? The family 1) where the dad goes to work to earn money and the mum stays at home to do housework, or 2) where the mum goes to work to earn money and the dad stays home to do housework.' As I had expected, when offered only these two options, children confirmed the preference for a male breadwinner. 78% of second-graders<sup>47</sup> and 90% of third-graders chose the first family. However, when I added a third option: 'the family where mum and dad go to work to earn money and both of them do housework', 65% of

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<sup>47</sup> 43 second-graders and 21 third-graders responded to this survey.

second-graders preferred this more egalitarian family, and only 30% chose the first and 5% the second; the effect was even stronger among the pupils in the third grade, where 95% opted for the third and 5% for the second family.

### **Domestic chores and competing agendas**

While both traditional and modern ideals pervaded children's daily lives, the responses to the survey I administered and our everyday conversations about the division of labour showed that girls and boys expressed more support for the egalitarian accountability regime than traditional occupational ideals. But how did these attitudes translate into reactions to actual situations in which tasks were assigned to boys and girls or women and men? Lancy coined the phrase 'chore curriculum' in order to account for children's gradual incorporation into tasks that are scaled in difficulty, usually differentiated by gender and expected to be mastered by a widely agreed upon age. He notes that in traditional societies this process unfolds with very little adult intervention as children are usually motivated to fit in and emulate those older (2012: 24) and 'keen to help out and to demonstrate their nascent skill' (2010: 158). While in Metztitlán the academic skills which children of the ages I worked with were expected to master were clearly defined through the 'school curriculum', there was little consensus on what domestic chores they ought to be familiarised with. Children's acquisition of different working skills depended on their parents' occupations and expectations. For example, when parents ran or worked in small shops, boys and girls from an early age often witnessed their parents' interactions with customers. Although in family shops primary school children were usually not expected to help their parents, many of them were knowledgeable about products, prices and commercial routines. If a father worked in agriculture, during school holidays he sometimes took his children, especially boys, to the fields in order to familiarise them with the tasks he engaged in. Yet, as some mothers noted, children usually ended up running around and playing more than assisting their fathers.

Children in the village were not usually expected to participate in the economic provision of the household. Very few of the children I knew engaged in paid work and none of them performed these activities on a daily basis. Some of those who lived in the most disadvantaged households from time to time accompanied their parents or relatives

to the fields to collect nuts for a wage; others walked around the village selling ice-cream, *buñuelos* or hand-made items. Both girls and boys were involved in these tasks and they proudly boasted of the amounts of money they earned. They claimed that they shared some of it with their parents while they usually spent the rest on sweets. Most adults I spoke to were opposed to boys and girls working since they felt that this would distract children from their school obligations, which were seen as a priority at this stage of child development.

While children rarely made economic contributions to the household, many of them were engaged in the performance of simple domestic chores from the age of six or seven<sup>48</sup>. Younger children were not expected to contribute to these tasks but they sometimes voluntarily joined their older siblings or mothers. I once observed how four-year-old Miguel picked up a broom and started to sweep the floor. His grandfather - who actively performed domestic chores himself - and his mother smiled and praised the boy. 'Way to go, my son,' his grandfather encouraged him, 'you are not going to be machista like your father and your other grandfather.' 'Well done, Miguelito! You are sweeping better than your grandad,' his mother remarked laughingly. On a different occasion, two-year-old Laura took a duster out of a drawer and started using it to wipe a table. Her parents expressed their approval and her mother jokingly instructed her, 'Over here, over here, these shelves are full of dust.' While in some households both boys' and girls' interventions of this kind provoked encouragement and amusement, in others even very young boys were discouraged from engaging in these activities. Yet, as children grew older, not only those whose efforts were rebuked from the earliest age but also other boys and girls showed little interest in advancing their mastery of domestic skills. I knew a few children who encouraged their fathers to take them to the field and to teach them how to perform some less demanding agricultural tasks or who begged their mothers to allow them to, for example, sell ice-cream so they could make some money. But none of the boys and girls I regularly visited seemed to be enthusiastic about participating in housework.

The waning of children's interest in performing domestic chores beyond their

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<sup>48</sup> Researchers have found in diverse sociocultural contexts that children provided considerable help with domestic chores but also that there were significant differences in the types of tasks boys and girls were engaged in and the amount of time they dedicated to the housework (Whiting and Whiting, 1975; Klein et al., 2009; Cunningham, 2001; Porter, 1996; Hilton and Haldeman, 1991; Draper, 1975; Blair, 1992; Cogle and Tasker, 1982).

early efforts to emulate the performance of these activities is reminiscent of one aspect of Michelet's (2013) analysis of the Mongolian 'chore curriculum.' While the social experiences of children in Metztitlán and Michelet's informants differed greatly, her observation of how children's motivation to participate declined as their perceptions of certain tasks shifted from playing to working proved to be relevant to my ethnographic material. She notes that 'learning makes performing chores fun' and, while children managed their participation in particular activities freely, they identified these tasks with playing. But, as they grew older and became more competent in the performance of different chores, they understood that adults no longer saw their contributions as voluntary interventions but entertained stricter expectations. In the light of this, 'participation alone did not seem rewarding enough to motivate their voluntary and reliable involvement' and some children occasionally sought ways to escape these responsibilities (Michelet, 2013: 216-217). Michelet referred to the instances when children's ideas of how they should be spending their time differed from their parents' because she was interested in how overcoming these tensions contributed to the educational process of transforming children from 'little kings', whose every desire was fulfilled, to competent, reliable and useful members of the community. Yet the relevance of the point about children's lack of enthusiasm for participating in chores to my work is different. What I seek to show is how, given the fact that both boys and girls I worked with found housework unappealing and preferred to engage in other activities, such as playing or watching television, they took advantage of the coexistence of different accountability regimes to pursue their interest in minimising or avoiding workload. This meant that, while girls supported egalitarian expectations in order to secure their brothers' cooperation, boys sometimes attempted to escape domestic duties by relying upon traditional gender ideals.

I learnt from conversations with various children in the school playground and from occasional visits to some economically disadvantaged families that there were households in which the strict division of labour between men and women was also applied to children. While boys were not expected to engage in any domestic chores, girls regularly assisted their mothers and other female relatives in the performance of these activities. Yet, in the homes of my main informants, as I noted in Chapter Seven, children of a certain age were expected to perform some tasks, such as sweeping, making beds, folding laundry or setting the table, regardless of gender. Gender was not

the only category that played a role in the construction of expectations about children's involvement in these chores. Accountability criteria often relied more heavily upon age. For instance, a ten-year-old boy was usually required to provide more help with housework than his six-year-old sister (see Punch, 2001: 804, for a similar observation with reference to Bolivia). Some older children were occasionally also requested to wash their socks or pants and to wash up. In contrast to, for example, an adult woman who was not expected to comply uncritically with her husband's decisions about her working arrangements, children of all the ages I focused on were seen as immature, dependent beings who were expected to obey their parents' requests. If they failed to do so, they could be reprimanded or sanctioned with different kinds of prohibitions or physical punishment.

Boys were usually not teased for their contributions to housework by peers who participated in these activities themselves. At the same time, those who were never requested to perform tasks at home readily pronounced derisive remarks about another boy's engagement in domestic chores. Some of these activities, such as sweeping the front yard, were more exposed to 'outsiders', while others, such as washing dishes, occurred behind closed doors. Boys occasionally asked their mothers to postpone a particular activity in order to avoid the gaze of a particular adult or child, and women acceded to these requests although they usually accompanied them with a comment defending gender equality. 'There's nothing to be ashamed of, my son. We are all equal. Don't pay attention to ignorant people,' Mariela once told her son. Yet the occasional clashes about domestic chores between children and their parents did not result from children's concerns about how 'outsiders' might react to their contributions as much as from their lack of interest in participating in these activities. In Ecuador, Miles found that this reticence to assist with domestic chores was 'a source of real consternation' to children's parents and was interpreted as 'a major character flaw' because it demonstrated 'an unacceptable lack of concern for their family' (1994: 144). In Metztitlán, adults sought to instill in their children the idea that laziness is reprehensible and criticised and punished disobedience but, as long as girls and boys only occasionally sought ways to escape housework, they showed understanding for these attempts since they interpreted them as motivated by children's innate interest in play.

Most boys who were involved in housework at home agreed with the claim, shared by the majority of girls, that 'both boys and girls should help with housework.'

However, when confronted with their mothers' actual demands for assistance with domestic chores, many of them occasionally defied their mothers' efforts to enforce egalitarian expectations by invoking the legitimacy of the traditional accountability regime. Fernando's exchange with his mother in the introductory vignette in Chapter Seven illustrates this type of reaction. Various mothers recalled how their sons attempted to get away with doing some unappealing tasks in a similar way.

In contrast to boys who sometimes sought to 'redo gender', girls seemed more interested in lightening their own domestic burden by 'undoing gender.' Araceli's mother convinced the girl's father that it was not fair to assign domestic chores only to the girl and the man finally accepted that both children should assist with housework. Although Araceli believed that her mother distributed tasks equally, she told me that, whenever they went to visit their grandmother, the old woman expected her to help with everything while the boy spent the whole day eating and watching television. On various occasions, Araceli complained to her mother and the woman once protested in front of her mother-in-law without much success. I heard similar stories from a few girls who were not my main informants and who claimed that they had confronted their mothers with the remarks that they were less demanding with their brothers than with them. Girls also showed their appreciation for egalitarian arrangements, when mothers reprimanded boys that 'we are all equal', by defiantly grinning at their brothers or by making fleeting remarks in support of their mothers' positions. At the same time, it was not surprising that boys never promoted egalitarian expectations by complaining to their mothers that they were less involved in domestic duties, or by encouraging them to assign them the same share of housework as to their sisters. The negative perceptions of housework meant that, in this case, gender equality for those who traditionally did not participate in these chores entailed a burden rather than freedom. I suggest that these discrepancies revealed that girls and boys had competing agendas, which lends support to my argument about the importance of finding tangible advantages in change in order to enforce the egalitarian accountability regime. If boys and girls were driven to act by some abstract, rather than personally meaningful ideal of equality or fairness, both of them should be equally likely to show readiness to resist traditional expectations.

Mothers were usually in charge of assigning domestic tasks to children and the way they positioned themselves with respect to different accountability regimes determined boys' and girls' everyday experiences in important ways. Yet not only

mothers and children participated in these negotiations. Although fathers were often absent from the household while these activities occurred, they played an equally important role. Some of them easily agreed, others clashed with their wives over what they expected from boys and girls and over how they should enforce these expectations. Grandparents also tried to influence these arrangements with more or less success. If there were any frictions between parents, some children sought to take advantage of them by forging alliances with the parent whose position was more compatible with their interests. Ilaria eventually stopped asking her son Alberto to help after various disputes with her husband who angrily protested that his son was not '*vieja*.' The woman recalled that, on one occasion, her son complained to his father that, while he was at work, Ilaria made him wash his socks, which provoked another heated discussion between the couple.

It may be argued that in these interactions what mattered was not accountability but constraint. Children usually received orders and clear instructions about what kind of activities they were expected to perform so their participation in domestic chores was apparently not a result of anticipating that they were held accountable for the completion of particular tasks, and acting in accordance with their readiness to comply with these expectations. If children were requested to contribute to housework, even those who were reluctant to do so were constrained to complete these tasks because adults had the authority to punish disobedience in various ways. But what is accountability if not an arguably more subtle form of constraint after all? One is always held accountable by someone else and a failure to meet other people's expectations rarely comes without consequences. The explicitness of an order a child may receive does not leave her with less choice or freedom to act than, for example, an adult man who is expected by his neighbours not to participate in housework.

### **Unequal benefits of equality in homemaking and breadwinning**

In contrast to children's reactions to their own participation in housework, I observed that a child's sex membership did not determine his or her reactions to the parents' division of labour. I argue that children approached adults' occupational roles neither as future women and men with competing agendas nor as girls and boys united by the commitment to newly promoted, abstract egalitarian values. Rather, they did so as

children who were deeply concerned with their current, concrete necessities. The ways children engaged with women's access to paid labour, on the one hand, and men's participation in housework, on the other, revealed great discrepancies and I will try to show that these were related to their different perceptions of how changes in economic provision and housework might (or might not) contribute to fulfilling these necessities. I found that a longing for economic security often spontaneously emerged through girls' and boys' daily interactions with peers and adults and that children regarded men's and women's egalitarian participation in paid work as conducive to the fulfilment of this goal. I suggest that this perception drove them to show readiness to contribute to 'undoing gender' by encouraging their mothers to resist traditional expectations.

I repeatedly heard testimonies and witnessed scenes that demonstrated that children positioned themselves as very concerned and motivated, although discrete, interlocutors in the negotiation of the division of labour between their parents. While girls and boys addressed the issue of division of labour far less spontaneously and frequently than adults in their everyday conversations with peers, it was obvious that their lives were strongly affected by adults' distribution of tasks. Mariela's and Manuel's children, for example, were exposed to their mother's complaints and their parents', occasionally rather heated, disputes over Manuel's opposition to the possibility of Mariela finding a job. But even more importantly, they were constantly reminded of their family's economic hardship and, consequently, of their mother's exclusion from the labour market through their poor diet, the impotence they felt when seeing the toys some of their friends received on the occasion of different festivities and the embarrassment when their mother sent them to neighbours' houses to ask for small loans, without their father's knowledge. On the other hand, the lack of men's disposition to participate in domestic chores, such as cooking, sweeping or washing, did not seem to provoke as much upheaval in the household or to affect children in the same way.

Gutmann's (1998) research with adults showed how women and men in Mexico City invoked their interpretations of children's afflictions and needs to make sense of their own anxieties and justify their opposition to modern socioeconomic transformations. Similarly, as I noted in Chapter Seven, some men in Metztitlán sought to legitimise their opposition to their wives' work outside the home by raising the

incompatibility between women's employment and their children's needs<sup>49</sup>. This argument was grounded in the assumption that children's best interest inevitably clashed with a modern division of labour. But girls and boys in the village demonstrated that they did not share this idea not only through a declared support for egalitarian participation in paid work but also through their everyday interactions. Children of unemployed women who struggled with financial problems suffered over the frustration of their mothers who often unsuccessfully sought to convince their husbands to allow them to look for a job. Although girls and boys never directly confronted their fathers or showed any ill feelings towards them for this reason, they encouraged their mothers in intimate conversations and expressed disapproval of their fathers' prohibitions. Some women vividly related to me these emotional exchanges with their children seeking to render more compelling their aspirations by pointing out not only that 'even a six-year-old child' understood their position but also that children experienced the consequences of this arrangement as their own plight and supported their mothers' access to paid work. In this case, children did not couch their challenges to traditional divisions in the ideal of equal rights but openly insisted on its practical benefits. Elena recalled various situations where her son Álvaro and her daughter Araceli questioned her status: 'They see that there are some women who work and ask me, "Mum, why don't you work?" and I tell them, "You know that your father doesn't want me to work" and they keep telling me that I should convince him to let me work because we need more money.' Mariela told me that she had overheard her older son Esteban asking Carlos what toy he would ask their mother to buy for him if she got a job.

According to Nayeli, a nine-year-old girl, with whom I frequently interacted at the school, her mother felt more comfortable as a housewife and was reluctant to look for professional opportunities. At the beginning of our conversation about the division of labour the girl confidently argued that a man should work while a woman should stay at home doing the housework. She explained that her father wanted her mother to work but that she refused because she was afraid that she could do something wrong and get fired. However, as the interview unfolded, new details emerged that revealed that Nayeli was not so satisfied with her parents' working arrangements as she initially suggested

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<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the men in Metztitlán, some of whom claimed that women's employment was incompatible with childcare until children turned fifteen, some of Gutmann's informants articulated their anxieties about women's work through the folk diagnosis of *mamitis* while children were infants or toddlers.

and that she had not hesitated to share these concerns with her mother.

*Z: So you said that you would like to be a teacher, but how will you work if you said that it is better if a woman doesn't work?*

*N: But we learn and then we learn how to be teachers.*

*Z: Ah! So, you will learn and you will be able to be a teacher. And what about your mum then? Has she learnt something?*

*N: She's learning only now.*

*Z: What is she learning?*

*N: She is learning to write her name. My granddad showed her. Because she didn't know anything. And he showed her to write little squares. But he passed away.*

*Z: Really? So, can your mum write now or not?*

*N: More or less.*

*Z: And where did she learn?*

*N: My older brother, he showed her.*

*Z: He taught her?*

*N: Yes.*

*Z: And does she say why she didn't learn when she was little?*

*N: Because she didn't go to school.*

*Z: She didn't go.*

*N: Only my dad.*

*Z: And why didn't she go?*

*N: I don't know . . . because she was taking care of her goats. And they did send my dad to school.*

*Z: And what do you think? Should both boys and girls go to school or just boys?*

*N: Boys and girls.*

*Z: Both?*

*N: Yes.*

*Z: Okay, my love, so she's already learnt. She can read, too?*

*N: No, she can't read yet.*

*Z: Not yet. But she's learning?*

*N: Yes.*

Z: *What do you think? For example, if in a family, a mum knows how to write and read, is it better for the mum to work too or not to work?*

N: *Not to work. She should learn to write and read.*

Z: *But if in a family, for example, where there is a dad, a mum, children, both dad and mum can already write and read, they learnt when they were little, because both of them went to school, for example. And in that family, do you think it is better if both of them work or if only dad works?*

N: *Only dad.*

Z: *Why?*

N: *Because mum has to do the housework and if we come home and we want to eat, there would be nothing to eat.*

Z: *And who taught you that, my love?*<sup>50</sup>

N: *My mum.*

Z: *What did your mum tell you?*

N: *That she doesn't want to work.*

Z: *And did you ask her why?*

N: *Yes and she says that because she's afraid.*

Z: *She's afraid to work. And you did ask her?*

N: *Yes.*

Z: *What did you ask her?*

N: *I asked her: "Why don't you want to go to work, mum?" and she also says that my dad tells her not to go.*

Z: *He tells her not to go?*

N: *Yes. And I told her to go and she doesn't want to go.*

Z: *And why did you want her to go?*

N: *Just like that. We could go to see her after the school.*

Z: *To where she works?*

N: *Yes, to see how she works.*

Z: *To see how she works. So, if mum also worked, would that be better?*

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<sup>50</sup> I occasionally asked children the questions 'Who taught you that?', 'Did someone tell you that?' or 'Where did you hear that?' not out of the conviction that they were unable to develop and articulate their own perspectives and that everything they said was learnt from someone else but because I found it useful to elicit whether children associated particular ideas to other social actors or sources (e.g. parents, teachers, peers, television) or not. Actually, in response to this question, children often responded: 'Nobody, I realised it myself.'

*N: (Nodding).*

*Z: Yes? Why would that be better?*

*N: Because in that way we would make more money.*

Other children agreed with Nayeli's idea that it would be better if their mothers worked because it would allow the family to have more money and explained in what ways they showed support and encouragement to their mothers. Carlos admitted that he saw his mother cry because his father told her that she could not apply for a job at the shop near their house and that he consoled her by saying that when he got married, he would let his wife work. Araceli remembered that after her parents quarreled over her mother's desire to get a job, she approached her mother and reassured her that her father would 'soon realise that he is wrong and he will let you work.' Fernando shared with me his joy when his mother Carmen decided to start her own business. The boy knew that the outcome of his requests for sweets and toys did not depend only on his mother's good will but also on the availability of the remittances his father sent on an irregular basis from the United States, where he worked illegally. 'I am happy because my mum will have her own money now. We won't have to wait for my dad,' he clarified a few days after his mother opened a small shop. Carmen also told me that the boy was very excited about her project because he hoped that their financial situation would become more stable.

While parents were held accountable for their children's behaviour, children were not held accountable for the way their parents acted. Mothers and fathers were accountable for their own division of labour both by 'outsiders' and 'intimate others' and among the latter children themselves played an important role. I learnt from conversations with mothers that their children's expectations were deeply important to them. When some girls and boys encouraged their mothers to 'convince men to allow them to work', they reminded women that, although some villagers, including their husbands, held them accountable to the traditional conceptions of the female role, many others, including their children, expected them to expand their activities. They conveyed the message that a woman was no longer expected to submit passively to a man's authority but to actively take part in the renegotiation of her status. At the same time, the suggestion that they should 'convince a man to allow them' rather than question his right to allow or prohibit her anything still reflected ambiguities between traditional and

modern expectations.

But children's interest in the economic benefits of women's employment was not expressed only in households where women were not engaged in paid work. While Josefina and Isabel were telling me about the financial hardship of their neighbour Mariela's family and criticising the fact that Mariela's husband did not allow her to work, Josefina's daughter Diana was carefully listening to our conversation. The girl suddenly remarked, 'Mum, we are lucky that my dad is not like Carlos's [Mariela's son] dad!' Like many working mothers, Josefina explained how happy Diana was when she got a job and concluded that 'even such small children [her daughter was four years old when Josefina started to work again] can see that a family lives better with two salaries.' Isabel nodded and recalled that, when she found a job at a shop, her son boasted in front of a neighbour whose mother had been working for many years, 'My mum is also working now.'

From an early age, boys and girls were often exposed to adults' conversations about the acquisition, distribution and expenditure of economic resources and confronted with remarks that there was 'not enough money' for many of the items they showed interest in, whether sweets or toys, mobile phone top-ups, video games or movies. Most children were given small amounts of money every morning to pay for lunch at the school canteen and many of them also received a couple of additional *pesos* to buy sweets or crisps at the stall located in the school playground or from street vendors. Children showed great interest in the financial aspects of their daily lives and I often heard them discuss the features of appealing products they saw either on television or with one of their peers, which they knew were not easily affordable within their parents' budget. It was striking how well informed they were of the prices of the articles they were interested in. They learnt about the prices when mothers sent them to the nearby shops to buy food, when they dropped by the shops with toys to browse on their way back from school, when they accompanied their mothers or parents to the Sunday market and through hearsay. 'Where did you get these sneakers? How much did you pay for them?' children occasionally asked me. 'My cousin paid about 1500 *pesos* for a camera like this,' they remarked in passing. They readily recalled the prices of toys, electronic devices and accessories they possessed and the ones that remained on their wish-lists. Whether I talked about my intention to purchase a movie or a music CD at the market or had a sudden whim for Ferrero Rocher chocolates, my young friends

could provide me with accurate information about how much I should expect to spend.

Some older children were even familiar with currency exchange rates. After a few rounds of playing video games on a machine installed at the pharmacy, Alejandro, Carlos, Esteban, Pablo, Iván and I were sitting on a bench, observing passers-by. ‘Have you seen the console Fernando got from the US?’ Esteban asked. ‘It’s so cool! Leandro bought it in DF and it cost about 3000 pesos but it’s cheaper in the US,’ Iván explained. ‘Yes. In the US you can get it for 150 dollars,’ Alejandro added. ‘One dollar is about 15 pesos now,’ Iván clarified and asked me, ‘How much is one euro?’ Girls and boys also showed great ability to memorise prices. On one occasion, Carolina happily announced to Karina and Malena that her parents were going to take her to Pachuca over the weekend and that she would have lunch at McDonald’s. Malena had visited Pachuca a couple of months earlier and she warned her that ‘it’s very expensive there.’ She remembered how much her mother had paid for a meal, for cinema tickets and for a taxi ride from Metztitlán to Pachuca and back.

Children’s interest in the economic aspects of their lives is supported by previous research. Dreby’s study of Mexican migrants in the United States and their children clearly demonstrated the importance of these concerns to children’s conceptions of their experiences. When explaining how mothers paid more attention than fathers to preparing children for their departure, she reported some very telling exchanges between mothers and their children. After one mother was compelled to briefly visit Mexico, she consulted her children about returning to the US: ‘I said “Okay, now what do we do?” They said it was okay (to go back), because we needed the money.’ Another mother said, ‘I told them a few months ahead of time that I was going to the United States to work with their father. The youngest boy said, “It’s okay, Mommy. Go and work so that when you come back you can bring us a pizza.”’ (Dreby, 2010: 74) She also noted that in the phone communication between parents and their sons and daughters ‘the youngest children talk mostly about material goods and migration.’ (2010: 63)

The educational agenda built on children’s interest in money and, in order to make mathematical exercises more amenable and accessible to children, teachers improvised a shopping activity where children were encouraged to sell and buy priced items. A teacher praised the school reform for encouraging children to study by offering contents and proposing activities they could easily relate to their everyday experiences.

The example he provided to illustrate these efforts was learning mathematics through shopping. He explained, 'Children like to buy things, they manage money skillfully. You can't fool them, they will notice even if only one *peso* is missing. That's perhaps because we send them to buy things from an early age.' This finding coincided with Guberman's (2004) claims about Latin American children's engagement in activities involving money in his study of the impact of children's out-of-school experiences on their mathematical skills. He found that Latino children in the US participated in monetary activities approximately twice as often as Korean American children and that Latin American parents involved children in commercial transactions of greater arithmetical complexity than did Korean American parents (Guberman, 2004: 137). He also noted that Latin American parents emphasised that the engagement of children in this kind of activity fostered 'the development of healthy, responsible adults committed to their families' (2004: 141).

Indeed, the way children in Metztitlán justified their concerns about money did not reflect materialistic aspirations but the preoccupations of children 'committed to their families.' They did not show interest only in toys and sweets and usually explained that money was important for covering basic needs, such as education, food or clothes. 'Money is important for living but it is not the most important thing. The most important thing of all is family unity and love,' I heard again and again during interviews with young villagers. Most children stressed that 'the best thing is not to be either poor or rich but in the middle.' 'If you're rich, they can rob you or kidnap you. Who wants that?' a girl once told me, echoing the voices of many of her peers. This family orientation did not emerge only in children's responses to my questions about the importance of money in their lives. On a few occasions, I heard children exchange remarks about the hardship some of their peers were facing and the issues that provoked deepest distress and sympathy did not concern poverty but parental neglect, mistreatment or abandonment. These concerns also gained relevance when children spontaneously sought to explain why some of their peers were violent and likely to cause trouble at school. The arguments they formulated never attributed these inclinations to one's economic background but tended to relate this sort of attitude to a lack of parental love. I was sitting next to Esteban in a fifth grade class while the teacher was scolding Mauricio, who was known as someone who was aggressive with his classmates and disobedient and rude with teachers. 'This boy lacks love' (*A este niño le*

*falta cariño*), Esteban whispered in my ear. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked curiously. The boy told me that Mauricio previously lived in Mexico City and that he suffered physical and emotional abuse. His parents eventually abandoned him and his uncle brought him to Metztitlán to live with his family. Although Esteban admitted that Mauricio’s uncle and aunt treated him well, he believed that the boy would be ‘full of rage’ (*lleno de coraje*) for the rest of his life because his own parents did not love him.

Bearing in mind children’s appreciation for harmonious family relations, it was probably significant that their interest in the financial advantages brought by egalitarian participation in paid work did not seem to clash with this important aspect of their lives. A majority of children believed that both a woman and a man should give more weight to the parental role than any other role in their life but they usually perceived the mother as the primary caregiver. Yet, as I suggested in the Introduction and as illustrated in the excerpt from my conversation with Nayeli (i.e. We could go to see her after school (...) to see how she works), the kinds of jobs available to women in the village were usually not seen as imposing an excessive separation between mothers and their children. I occasionally heard Esteban express his dissatisfaction with his father Manuel’s insistence that his mother Mariela should stay at home so she could take care of him and his brother. Although he never raised this issue in front of Manuel, he told Mariela, ‘We are big now. Nothing will happen to us if we stay alone for a while.’ The benefits they expected from this arrangement seemed to exceed its costs.

At the same time, children showed reluctance to promote men’s participation in housework. Although children, especially the older ones, interpreted the performance of domestic tasks as complementary to the shared effort of contributing to the economic well-being of the family and, if both parents worked outside the home, saw the egalitarian division of housework as ‘more fair’, they never translated their declared appreciation for this arrangement into action through their daily interactions with adults. Neither did the idea that they heard at school and expressed in interviews that ‘we all make a mess, we should all clean up’ seem to gain much relevance in their everyday lives. I admit that the renegotiation of housework and economic provision in the village differed in various ways. Children could witness women’s participation in paid work much more commonly than men’s in housework. The idea of a working woman was more widely accepted than the one of a man engaged in domestic chores. Even when children claimed that men should do housework, few of them imagined a scenario that

involved both partners equally participating in all the tasks which women undertook. A man's contribution was more commonly conceived of as occasional help with certain chores rather than regular performance of the same activities. When encouraged to cite examples of what a man and a woman were expected to do, the representations usually differed. While a woman had to cook, clean, wash and iron, the man's role was usually limited to tasks such as setting the table, sweeping or washing the dishes. However, in their everyday interactions with adults, children never sought to promote even these minimum expectations either by encouraging their fathers to engage in domestic chores or by convincing their mothers to demand greater involvement by men. I suggest that this may be related to the observation that children's everyday experiences did not reveal the existence of any intimately felt preoccupations that they believed could be solved through men's and women's egalitarian contributions to housework. In contrast to the link between economic security and egalitarian access to labour, housework apparently did not promise any personally meaningful advantages to children.

This may be dismissed as a bold claim if we take into consideration the fact that, on the one hand, mothers usually shouldered the greatest burden of domestic work and, on the other, that children deeply loved their mothers and were greatly concerned about their well-being. The tangible advantage of promoting a mother's well-being by encouraging a father's greater involvement in housework is apparently straightforward. However, as I stressed in Chapter Six, the recognition of advantages of change is constructed through everyday experiences in a particular sociocultural setting. In Metztitlán, both working women and housewives performed their domestic chores with apparent ease and very rarely complained about the workload in front of their children or protested about men's reluctance to engage in domestic tasks. Women occasionally received help from children, mothers, mothers-in-law or sisters, depending on the composition of the household. These observations might have led children to assume that women could easily cope with domestic chores without men's contribution and that even if they needed assistance, it did not depend on men's availability. Children in the village were very sensitive to their mothers' suffering and I often learnt of intimate exchanges through which girls and boys provided support, encouragement or consolation to these women. Their conversations often concerned their fathers' behaviour as children showed solidarity with mothers who were struggling with their husbands' infidelities, drinking, neglect or violence. However, I never heard of cases

where men's reluctance to engage in housework received any attention either in mothers' testimonies to their children or in children's expressions of support.

These findings lend validity to the contention that children resisted traditional gender arrangements when they recognised personally meaningful benefits in equality. Yet they also point to the dangers of failing to simultaneously resist both men's and women's traditional roles. As feminists have argued for many decades, in order to achieve equality, changes in women's access to paid work are to be accompanied by men's participation in the housework. This means that the discrepancies in children's readiness to encourage men and women to resist traditional occupational roles show that, in the context of assymmetrical contributions to 'undoing gender', the very concept of equality is rendered problematic. By encouraging the egalitarian participation in the workforce without calling for the egalitarian participation in the housework, children inadvertently contributed to the maintenance of gender inequalities. I suggest that this derived from the fact that locally salient discourses minimised women's anguish about 'double day' and, in this way, hindered the recognition of tangible benefits of men's contributions to the housework.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although the ways children dealt with the division of labour through play and casual comments among peers were often riddled with ambiguities, most children, in our conversations, expressed support for modern occupational arrangements. But these attitudes did not automatically translate into resistance to traditional gender ideals in response to the actual situations involving distribution of tasks. When they themselves were assigned domestic chores, girls and boys pursued different agendas. Boys occasionally sought to escape these responsibilities by invoking the legitimacy of traditional occupational roles while girls showed more interest in supporting the egalitarian accountability regime. At the same time, when engaging with adults' division of labour, girls and boys were united by a shared commitment to what they apparently identified as their current needs. I suggested that the perceptions of how egalitarian economic provision, on the one hand, and housework, on the other, might contribute to fulfilling these needs led them to show more readiness to promote women's access to paid work than men's participation in domestic chores.

In the households where boys and girls were expected to participate equally in the housework, they did not face social pressure to conform to traditional norms. Neither did they feel this kind of pressure when they reacted to adults' division of labour. Yet they still needed to recognise the advantages of equality as personally meaningful in order to resist traditional arrangements. This observation may be significant as it suggests that children needed to find benefits in equality not only to feel motivated to overcome concerns about social pressure and take the risk of censure, but even to wish for something different in the first place. When they did, they not only resisted the traditional accountability regime themselves but also encouraged adults to do so. Finally, I pointed out that discrepancies in the readiness to resist women's traditional roles, on the one hand, and men's, on the other may contribute to the maintenance of gender inequalities. Young villagers showed me that England's claim that 'almost no men and precious few women, even those who believe in "equal opportunity", have an explicit commitment to undoing gender differentiation for its own sake' (2010: 161) also rings true for girls and boys in rural Mexico. The failure to recognise this puts at risk any attempt at gender reform.

## Conclusion

Over the last few decades Mexican public institutions have actively promoted efforts to challenge traditional gender ideology and the educational agenda has been seen as an important site of reform. The authors of official publications aimed at teachers insisted on the importance of gender equality, which could be achieved only by ‘changing values, beliefs and attitudes that the society has considered to be inherent in each gender and that turned into stereotypes which determine what men and women “should be” like.’ (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 19) They were confident that, although this complex process of transformation required patience and a firm commitment to promote pertinent public policies, ‘once it is put into practice, the benefit of a more just and egalitarian society will be obtained.’ (SEP and INMUJERES, 2003: 19) These brief citations from a document published by the Secretary of Public Education summarise the premises on which gender reform was grounded and, at the same time, point to the central concepts of this thesis: accountability, ‘undoing gender’ and benefits or advantages of change. Firstly, the relevance of accountability is illustrated by the reference to the fact that gender stereotypes translate into traditional expectations about what men and women ‘should be’ like and through the idea that different expectations should be promoted. Secondly, ‘undoing gender’, as a process that entails contributions to reduce gender differences, is implicit in the intention to dissociate men and women from what was traditionally seen as their inherent attributes. Finally, it is expressly claimed that gender reform is worthwhile because it will bring benefits to Mexican society.

I was interested in children’s readiness to participate in this process of ‘undoing gender’ by resisting the accountability regimes based on traditional gender ideals and I found that their resistance did not come for free. Yet what seemed to drive them to action was not the somewhat abstract ‘benefit of a more just and egalitarian society’, anticipated by their teachers, but a longing for more tangible advantages resulting from change. As I mentioned in Chapter Six, Héctor and Esteban once advised me that I should not buy a car for a girl whose birthday I was going to attend because they were convinced that she would not like it. I recounted this situation to a few boys and girls with whom I chatted in the school playground and asked them whether they believed

that my friends' advice was sound. 'They told you the right thing. If you come to my birthday, I will be happier if you don't bring me anything than if you bring me a doll,' said Juan José. But Patricia quickly reacted that 'every rule has its exception.' She recalled that she visited her cousins in another community and that their neighbours were so poor that they had no toys at all. 'If someone gave them a doll, for example, they played with it no matter whether they were boys or girls because they had nothing else,' she assured us. Juan José promptly commented, 'I'd rather play with mud than with dolls.' 'Perhaps some day you would become fed up with mud,' Armando insightfully replied. While Patricia used this story to illustrate an exceptional case she encountered in another community, I came to realise that what I identified as the thrust of her account could not only be easily applied to girls and boys in Metztitlán but that it was fundamental for making sense of how they generally negotiated the contradictions inherent in the coexistence of traditional and egalitarian gender expectations.

In this thesis, I have argued that children in Metztitlán showed readiness to resist traditional gender divisions and to contribute to 'undoing gender' if they recognised personally meaningful advantages in egalitarian arrangements. In Chapter Four, I showed that children's resistance to the expectations about boys' and girls' different abilities to display and cope with aggressive behaviour emerged from their efforts to overcome the constraints and the injustices that this distinction provoked in interactions among peers. In Chapter Six, I demonstrated that the girls and boys who resisted traditional expectations were those who recognised that dismantling gender divisions in the use of toys would allow them, or the people they cared about, to engage in their preferred activities without exposing themselves to criticism or public ridicule. In Chapter Eight, I argued that girls were more interested than boys in supporting their mothers' efforts to enforce an egalitarian allocation of domestic chores to children because they stood to benefit more from changes to the traditional division of tasks. At the same time, both boys and girls more actively encouraged their mothers to resist the traditional division of labour than they did their fathers because they seemed to expect more benefits from their mothers' access to paid labour than from their fathers' contributions to housework.

Children's interest in more tangible advantages of equality did not mean that they were indifferent to the 'benefit of a more just and egalitarian society.' Indeed, they

seemed to find the ideals of equal rights, freedom and justice quite appealing. Thus, in the course of our conversations, children were quick to criticise the enforcement of gender divisions and to support egalitarian values when discussing the domains in which egalitarian expectations were actively promoted, primarily through schooling, such as the use of toys (Chapters Five and Six) and the division of labour (Chapters Seven and Eight). However, one of the central points of this thesis is that they did not put their egalitarian attitudes to work through interactions with peers and adults unless they recognised more personally meaningful benefits in equality. At the same time, in the absence of alternative, egalitarian expectations, even though resistance occurred, children in interviews justified the enforcement of traditional distinctions (Chapters Three and Four).

These observations led me to pose a question about the importance of the availability of egalitarian accountability regimes. Did the promotion of alternative expectations increase children's support for gender equality only in conversations with the anthropologist or did it actually contribute to their readiness to resist traditional norms through everyday interactions? I have suggested that the availability of egalitarian alternatives can stimulate resistance to traditional gender ideals in at least three ways. First, the awareness of the legitimacy of gender-atypical choices may empower those who already find advantages in alternative arrangements to pursue their interests by defending egalitarian arrangements through daily interactions with peers and adults more actively. Second, in this way, they may inspire others to recognise whether equality could bring any benefits to their lives and, if so, encourage them to overcome social pressure to conform to traditional expectations. Third, the fact that, when egalitarian gender expectations are actively promoted, most children readily identify the disadvantages of the traditional regime may render them more receptive towards the efforts of those who resist traditional norms.

But why does the recognition of tangible benefits seem to be so important for resistance? My ethnographic data have demonstrated that, in spite of the increasing popularity of gender equality, children's compliance with traditional gender ideals in some aspects of their lives was carefully monitored and strictly enforced (Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six). In these cases, recognising the advantages of change could serve to encourage girls and boys to overcome concerns about social pressure. However,

in order to embrace egalitarian arrangements, children had to see them as advantageous even when they did not face pressure to conform to traditional gender divisions (Chapters Seven and Eight). This indicates that the recognition that there were benefits in equality empowered children not only to take the risk of censure when standing up for what they longed for, but also inspired them to long for something different in the first place.

In the final chapter, I also pointed to the importance of simultaneously resisting both men's and women's traditional roles. I argued that, since children's efforts to support women's access to paid work were not accompanied by efforts to support men's participation in housework, they inadvertently contributed to the maintenance of gender inequalities rather than to 'undoing gender.' I suggested that this asymmetry emerged from the ways in which the locally salient discourses engaged with the issues that were relevant to the recognition of benefits of changing men's and women's occupational roles.

### **Thinking and rethinking gender**

I have endeavoured to show that greater ethnographic interest in children may reinvigorate long-standing anthropological debates about gender arrangements among Mexicans by calling attention to some often unheeded gender issues (Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six) and to new perspectives on old themes (Chapters Seven and Eight). Furthermore, I have contributed to cross-cultural research on children's gender relations by seeking to provide fuller insights into their social lives. A large body of ethnographic research about children and gender is based on studies conducted in schools. This often means that researchers do not 'know' their informants well (Francis, 2001: 71) as they do not have the opportunity to become more familiar with their daily interactions with peers and adults in different domains of life. This prevents researchers from finding out whether the attitudes children express in interviews translate into action through everyday experiences. By developing close relationships with children and by learning about their lives, preoccupations and aspirations, I was able to identify such discrepancies (or the lack of them) and to gain insights into how they emerged.

However, in this thesis, I have also sought to contribute to reflections about the

concepts of ‘accountability’ and ‘undoing gender’ as analytical tools for engaging with both adults’ and children’s experiences. In particular, by using the concept of accountability I have sought to deconstruct the ‘black box’ of ‘cultural expectations.’ I have done so by exploring how these ‘cultural expectations’ were actually made available to children through what their parents, siblings, friends, neighbours or teachers expected from them and how boys and girls dealt with the expectations of these different audiences. A few days before I started to write this conclusion I received a chain message from a friend in Metztitlán. Chain messages with declarations of love or friendship, motivational phrases or jokes were commonly exchanged among friends in Mexico. This one was about ‘true friendship’ and one of the sentences that defined ‘a real friend’ (*una verdadera amiga*) read: ‘She supports you in public, she defies you in private’ (*Te apoya en público, te reta a solas*). These words point to a distinction to which I have paid particular attention in this thesis. In contrast to the unnuanced way in which the concept of accountability is often used – whereby what counts are the expectations of generalised ‘others’ – I have distinguished between ‘intimate others’ and ‘outsiders’. I have defined ‘intimate others’ as those who were regarded and regarded themselves as personally interested and involved in the protection of one’s well-being and reputation. ‘Outsiders’ were those who had no stakes in one’s reputation and who felt free to add information or critical assessment to one’s public record. While some social actors permanently occupied one of these positions, others shifted along what I have called the ‘audience continuum’ depending on situational contexts. ‘A real friend’, according to the text message I received, is expected to always occupy the position of an ‘intimate other’ and protect one’s good name.

In my analysis, I have shown how these different audiences continually participated in obstructing or facilitating children’s contributions to ‘undoing gender.’ I have also demonstrated how girls and boys negotiated gender boundaries by managing their exposure to the gaze of these different kinds of others and by weighing up the importance of their expectations and assessments. While sometimes children took the risk of censure by engaging in outright resistance to traditional gender ideals, they more frequently sought to find ‘accomplices’, either among ‘intimate others’ or ‘outsiders’, with whom they created spaces where the risk of censure was minimised. These ‘accomplices’ were united by a tacit agreement to temporarily ignore traditional

accountability criteria, rather than by a shared commitment to egalitarian values. Nonetheless, I have suggested that the resistance to traditional norms that occurs within these interactions might gradually contribute to more profound and permanent changes in dominant expectations. Since accounts of changing gender relations among Mexicans often emphasise how people accommodate new practices within old expectations and in this way preserve the traditional accountability regimes, the concept of ‘undoing gender’ may allow them to shift the focus and recognise the subversive potential of little, everyday acts of resistance.

The idea of ‘undoing gender’ may also be productively used in cross-cultural research on children and gender, where behaviour that does not comply with dominant gender expectations is usually examined as a manifestation of ‘alternative masculinities’ or ‘alternative femininities.’ I have argued that this approach locks the analytical tools into binary divisions that hinder researchers from appreciating the possibilities of challenging accountability regimes based on gender dualism. Moreover, by using the concept of ‘undoing gender’, I have equally acknowledged the importance of different kinds of challenges to traditional expectations by pulling together instances of enacting gender-atypical behaviour and supporting the performance of these acts or responding to their derision. These instances have been usually dissociated in cross-cultural studies of children’s gender relations and the latter have received little attention.

### **Directions for future inquiries**

Researchers who have shown interest in the benefits of transforming traditional gender ideologies claimed that men benefit from ‘the patriarchal dividend’, which is defined as ‘the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women’ (Connell, 1995: 79). Given that men and women are differently positioned within the traditional gender order and that their interests in changing gender relations inevitably differ, it has been assumed that men are less likely to support gender equality than women. The relevance of power relations between different groups to differences in the recognition of the advantages of gender reform should not be ignored (see Browner, 1986b). As shown in the case of children’s participation in domestic chores (Chapter Eight), boys’ and girls’ readiness to resist traditional gender arrangements may, indeed, be influenced

by their pursuit of competing agendas based on different group interests. Yet it has also been recognised that men and women do not represent homogeneous groups. Among men there are men who are ‘patriarchs and losers’ (Messner, 2004), and not all women are equally affected by the constraints imposed by patriarchal rule (Connell, 2009). The findings of this thesis suggest that, despite the fact that traditional gender ideology rests upon the premise of male privilege, a shared interest in change may emerge from common experiences of frustration, suffering and injustice to which both girls and boys are exposed as traditional gender constraints are imposed on them.

Connell rightly notes that ‘men and boys are most likely to support change towards gender equality when they can see positive benefits for themselves and the people in their lives’ (2003: 4). This theoretical insight has been supported by the experience of those whose job is to implement gender reforms. For example, Browne, a consultant working in Australia on boys’ education, masculinity and gender relations, found that the most effective way to convey the message about equality was to ‘educate and inform so that the students, themselves, chose to alter their behaviour because they could see the benefits of change.’ (1995: 83) This suggests that what applies to children in Metztitlán – the finding that they were prepared to challenge traditional gender attitudes when they recognised tangible advantages in more egalitarian arrangements – may be relevant to different sociocultural contexts. I believe that anthropological research on gender, both among children and adults, should explore this possibility when seeking to understand how people transform gender relations.

I sought to identify what kind of advantages children recognised in equality by paying attention to their interests, strivings and preoccupations and to their everyday practices. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the recognition of personally meaningful benefits of equality directly translated into readiness to resist traditional gender ideals. Indeed, even those children who cared about change, took the risk of censure relatively rarely. It is thus important to pay close attention to the clash between perceived costs and benefits and to how the tension between them may affect resistance. For example, in Metztitlán, boys were more harshly reprimanded and more readily ridiculed for gender-atypical toy choices than girls. The fact that girls were somewhat more likely to cross gender boundaries in toy use than boys indicates that children might have been prompted to evaluate, not necessarily in a conscious manner, the costs

and benefits of gender nonconformity. Concomitantly, despite the same interest in dismantling gender boundaries, boys and girls may not show the same readiness to resist traditional gender arrangements if the social pressure to conform to traditional norms is stronger for one gender than the other. In this thesis, I have not referred to the costs of resistance as explicitly as to the benefits or advantages. Nonetheless, I have explored them by looking at, for example, children's concerns about public ridicule or parental admonitions. Yet in future research it would be useful to engage more systematically with both costs and benefits and to examine their interplay. Furthermore, such inquiries could be productively related to an examination of whether children actually see any harm in egalitarian arrangements.

Children's evaluations of costs, benefits and harm of equality are constructed through social experiences and may change over time. In a longitudinal study of youth and poverty, Ames showed how socioeconomic transformations in rural Peru affected the evolution of boys' and girls' educational aspirations. A decade ago, boys' education was highly valued while girls and their parents 'saw little point' in girls going through schooling (Ames, 2013: 277). Nowadays, both girls and boys see education as the most desirable path for their present and future well-being and adults increasingly support this kind of ambition in both sexes. Ames also notes that young women began to see education as an opportunity to escape not only from poverty but also from oppressive gender relations. This kind of findings reveal the importance of longitudinal studies in tracing the emergence of the idea that a particular gender arrangement, as Connell (2009) put it, 'does more harm than good.' While the project Ames participated in was primarily concerned with poverty, it provided useful glimpses into changes in gender expectations. However, if we are seeking to understand how gender equality policies can become more effective, which seems to be the goal of most studies dedicated to children's understanding of gender, it would be useful to engage in longitudinal studies that focus explicitly on how children construct the costs, benefits and harm of alternative gender arrangements. For example, in Metztitlán, according to many of my older informants, children's insistence that it was better if both parents worked so that the family would have more money, according to many of my older informants, was not part of children's discourses a few decades earlier. Of course, I could not verify whether what adults recalled actually reflected how they felt about the division of labour when

they themselves were children. However, I am confident that a longitudinal study of their evaluations of traditional and modern occupational roles might have identified interesting links between changes in social circumstances and children's prioritisation of family's economic well-being over traditional concerns about female domesticity.

In the chapters on the division of labour, I showed that children recognised the advantages of new gender arrangements not only with reference to their own behaviours, but also when considering adults' practices and arrangements. I argued that, by encouraging adults to resist traditional expectations, they contributed to 'undoing gender.' Dreby's research with Mexican families in the context of transnational migration similarly showed that 'children are not powerless' (2010: 33; 2007: 1062) and that parents 'often adjust their goals and aspirations in reaction to their children's negative experiences of family separation, and children are able to influence their parents' subsequent migration decisions' (2010: 4-5). It would be useful to build upon these insights to try to understand how children may shape adults' gender identities and arrangements. As suggested by my findings, it is possible that their 'negative experiences' of the traditional division of labour (e.g. reduced access to desirable goods, their mothers' distress) may actually influence men's and women's negotiations of their occupational roles. The socioeconomic background of my main informants did not greatly differ. Future research may try to identify which kind of family environments are more likely to favour children's open and active resistance to traditional norms across larger cohorts from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

I suggest that one of the advantages of an approach that acknowledges the importance of children's recognition of the benefits of egalitarian gender expectations is that it reveals how fragmented and diversified people's interest in 'undoing gender' may be. I have shown how a child who resisted traditional distinctions in, for example, displaying and coping with aggressive behaviour could strictly comply with gender divisions in the use of toys. Cross-cultural research on children's gender relations has demonstrated that children who engage in gender-atypical behaviour in some domains may come to 'accentuate' compliance with dominant gender expectations in others as a compensation mechanism (Francis, 2010: 486). The attention to children's perceptions of the advantages of alternative arrangements may help us understand how children navigate these different domains of their everyday experiences. It may be productive to

examine how girls' and boys' readiness to enact gender-atypical behaviour correlates with their disposition to defend others' engagement in similar acts within the same and across other domains. But, at the same time, future research should look at how children's contributions to 'undoing gender' influence their peers' ideas and practices. Girls and boys who witness their friends' enactment or defence of gender-atypical behaviour could provide helpful information about the reactions this kind of resistance provokes in them.

### **The prospects of 'undoing gender'**

At the beginning of this thesis, I emphasised that I would be mostly concerned with how children negotiated changing gender ideals in Mexico as children rather than as 'future adults.' Yet the recognition that children are social actors in their own right should not discourage us from reflecting upon their future trajectories and their role in the transformation of gender ideologies. In Metztitlán, children, especially those older than seven years of age, regarded traditional gender divisions as problematic and expressed strong allegiance to the ideal of gender equality. Those who found more tangible advantages in egalitarian arrangements were even prepared to resist traditional norms through everyday interactions. However, it would be misleading to suggest that this is evidence of how these girls and boys will talk about gender and behave as men and women as they move into adulthood. People's strivings, concerns and priorities are subject to change throughout the life course and the evolution of their gender identities cannot be easily predicted. What is certain is that, when the current generation of children reaches adulthood, the ideal of gender equality will not be a novelty for them and they will have gone through many years filled with opportunities to experiment with what good or harm egalitarian arrangements might bring to their lives. I cannot predict what kind of conclusions they will arrive at and how strictly their parents will continue to enforce gender divisions in the meantime. On the basis of my findings, however, I feel confident in proposing that, if educators were to encourage girls and boys to recognise that equality could bring personally meaningful benefits to their lives, children's readiness to 'undo gender' would grow.

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