

Chapter 36

Gender, Household Structure, and Accommodation for Young Adults in Urban Mexico

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In research on gender and housing the usual definitions of "traditional" and "non-traditional" households have been reversed: "female-headed" rather than nuclear households dominate the literature. There is a danger of rendering women in "traditional" nuclear households, once again, invisible. It is important not to *restrict* discussion of gender and housing to the problems facing single mothers or women living alone.

This paper approaches "non-traditional" housing arrangements in urban Mexico in a different way. "Sharing" occurs when two or more households occupy the same plot of land: one household owns the plot, allowing the other/s to live there rent-free. Sharing mostly involves the adult sons or daughters of the plot owners, and may be regarded as a variation on the extended household structure. Sons are more likely to be allowed to bring their wives to their parents' home, whereas daughters are more likely to leave. Women living with their in-laws lack security of tenure and there is often conflict between wives and members of their husbands' family of origin, particularly their mothers-in-law. The anthropological literature has identified male-dominated authority structures as the source of conflict between women in extended households. Sharing reduces the potential for conflict by giving the younger household greater autonomy. Furthermore, concern for their daughters' welfare leads many parents to offer accommodation to married daughters as well as to sons. Single mothers, however, are more likely to live as part of their parents' household than to share. In this respect, the nuclear household norm is reinforced, since sharing seems to be a privilege accorded only to those who are married.

Traditional and Non-Traditional Households in Research on Gender and Housing

Women's housing needs do not seem to attract much attention. They do not figure prominently in the housing literature, as can be seen, for example, from the contents of journals such as *Habitat International* or *Housing Studies*.¹ Similarly, housing has received little attention in the gender studies literature. There are relatively few books on the subject. Notable exceptions, in recent years, include Sophie Watson's (1988) book on Britain and Australia, *Accommodating Inequality: Gender and Housing*, and the collections on *Women, Housing and Community* and *Women, Human Settlements and Housing*, edited by Willem Van Vliet (1988b) and Caroline Moser and Linda Peake (1987), respectively.² In comparison with other subjects, there are few entries on housing in Janet Townsend's and Sarah Radcliffe's

(1988) bibliographies on women in developing countries, and the authors surveyed tend to take "squatter settlements" as a context for their study rather than focusing on housing *per se*.³

How can we explain this? In part, it may result from unwillingness to accept the relevance of gender: "most authorities responsible for development planning have only very reluctantly recognized gender as an important planning issue" (Moser, 1991: 84). In their introduction to Lloyd Rodwin's edited collection on *Shelter, Settlement and Development*, published to mark the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987, Rodwin and Bishwapriya Sanyal call for special attention to be paid to the shelter needs of women and especially of female-headed households. But there is no chapter on this subject. The United Nations/TYSH leadership decided that it "should be dealt with in other ways" (cited in Varley, 1989: 116).⁴

But what of feminist scholars? Could their apparent reluctance to work on housing stem from the fear that they will be criticized for suggesting that "a woman's place is in the home"? Such fears would not be groundless. In his foreword to *Women, Housing and Community*, Willem Van Vliet deprecates "the limited scope of feminist critiques that have juxtaposed the private home and the public community as a dichotomy of female and male spheres" (Van Vliet, 1988a: ix). This criticism is misdirected: feminist writers have played a central role in exposing the ideological nature of the supposed dichotomy between public/male and private/female spheres, work and home, production and reproduction (Hayden, 1981; McDowell, 1983; Harris, 1984; Watson, 1988; Jelin, 1991a). Nevertheless, given "the empirical foundation to this dualism" (Harris, 1984: 151), it is all too easy to reinforce the notion of home and work as separate female and male spheres rather than recognizing their interdependence (McDowell, 1992). Rather than trying to "reconceptualise the links between home and work" (*ibid.*: 19) it may (deceptively) seem safer simply to steer clear of the domestic sphere. As Janet Momsen (1989: 119) has written, "recent work on women in Third World countries has, in most cases, concentrated on moving the research focus from women's reproductive roles to their productive contributions," emphasizing paid employment outside the home.

Unconscious anxiety about upholding an unacceptable ideology may also explain why research on gender and housing in developing countries has largely portrayed women outside the confines of the nuclear household. The literature emphasizes, first, "female-headed

households," and, second, women as "community managers" mobilizing around housing construction or the introduction of services to their settlement.⁵ Most chapters in the Moser and Peake collection, for example, focus on female-headed households, and a series of parallel projects on women householders in Africa has led to several publications (Larsson, 1988, 1989; Schlyter, 1988, 1989). The theme has also been taken up in a Latin American context (Falú and Curutchet, 1991).⁶ Regarding women as community managers, all but two of the case studies in *Women, Human Settlements and Housing* are concerned with housing/upgrading projects, and Moser's chapter on Ecuador documents women's struggle for services. An emphasis on specific housing projects is also apparent in the other studies cited (see also Volbeda, 1989).

There is a clear rationale for work on female-headed households. First, as they tend to be more common in cities, continuing migration and urbanization increases their numbers (Brydon and Chant, 1989). Second, female-headed households are likely to be among the poorest members of society, although this is by no means universally or inevitably the case (Townsend and Momsen, 1987). Third they have been neglected by planners (Buvinic *et al.*, 1978; Moser, 1991). In particular, they have been marginalised by the way in which "housing policy and provision ... assumes, and is structured around, the patriarchal family form" (Watson, 1988: 21). Thus, an emphasis on female-headed households is intended to redress a general imbalance, and specifically to expose discrimination against women (see Machado, 1987; Nimpuno-Parente, 1987).

However, the emphasis on female-headed households may have some rather unfortunate consequences. There is a danger of exaggerating the quantitative importance of female-headed households, surely not a good way to convince the planning community of their importance. And there is a danger of rendering many women (the majority?) once again "invisible."

It has become almost commonplace to argue that "one third of the world's households are now headed by women" and that "in urban areas, especially in Latin America and parts of Africa, the figure exceeds 50 percent" (Moser, 1987: 14; see also Chant and Ward, 1987; Smith, 1988; Muller and Plantenga, 1990; Sayne, 1991; Wilson, 1991).⁷ Given the difficulties of working with National Census data on household structure (Youssef and Hetler, 1983), information on household structure is often based on small-scale surveys of particular locations. Taking Mexico as a case study,

Table 1: Percentage of Female-Headed Households in Mexican Cities, 1981-91

	Single women/ mothers only*	All female heads**	N		Single women/ mothers only*	All female heads**	N
VARIOUS 1980S+				PUEBLA 1986			
Low-income settlements	7	12	9,464	Young self-help settlement (owners) C	2	5	100
				Older self-help settlement (owners) D	6	14	76
				Older self-help settlement (tenants)	11	15	80
MEXICO CITY 1981-82				Inner city rental area (tenants)	9	12	115
Young self-help settlement (owners) A	16	16	25	PUERTO VALLARTA 1986			
Older self-help settlement (owners)	0	4	25	Young self-help settlement (owners)	13	17	23
Young self-help settlement (owners) B	16	16	25	Older self-help settlement (65% owners)	9	20	69
Older self-help settlement (owners)	0	4	25	LEON 1986			
MEXICO CITY 1991				Young self-help settlement (96% owners)	4	9	23
Older self-help settlement (owners) B	8	15	78	Older self-help settlement (72% owners)	6	11	54
Older self-help settlement (owners) A	6	11	72	QUERETARO 1982-83			
GUADALAJARA 1985-86				Young self-help settlement (owners)	9	14	92
Young self-help settlement (owners)	5	12	102	Young self-help settlement (owners)	8	10	52
Older self-help settlement (owners)	9	13	64	Young self-help settlement (owners)	10	15	100
Older self-help settlement (tenants)	10	16	96	OAXACA 1990			
Inner city rental area (tenants)	15	19	120	Older self-help settlement (66% owners)	18	42	50
PUEBLA 1991							
Young self-help settlement (owners) C	0	5	55				
Older self-help settlement (owners) D	12	33	33				

Sources

Various, 1980s: Selby *et al.*, 1990 (plus own calculations)

Mexico City, 1981-82: Varley, 1985

Mexico City and Puebla 1991: Questionnaire survey, summer 1991 (author)

Guadalajara and Puebla 1985-86: Gilbert and Varley, 1991

Puerto Vallarta, León, Querétaro: Chant, 1991b

Oaxaca, 1990: Willis, 1992

Notes

+ Mexico City, Mexicali, Mérida, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Tampico, Villahermosa, Mazatlán, Reynosa, Oaxaca.

Definition of female-headed households: see note 5. Percentages for different cities are not strictly comparable. Chant (1991b: 235) excluded male-headed one-parent households, single-person households, households shared by adolescent siblings, and households with sharers. The Mexico City, Guadalajara and Puebla data include such households, where found. All figures based on random sample questionnaire surveys.

* Excludes extended households headed by women.

** Includes extended households headed by women.

"Young" self-help settlements are those in which most of the households interviewed had arrived within the last 15 years. In Guadalajara, Puebla, León, Pto. Vallarta, and (with one exception) Querétaro, these areas were 2-7 years old; in Mexico City and the third Querétaro settlement, they were 10-12 years old.

"Older" self-help settlements are those over 15 years old. In León, Pto. Vallarta, Querétaro and Mexico City, these areas were about 20 years old, whereas the one in Oaxaca was about 30 years old, the one in Guadalajara about 35 years old, and the Puebla one, about 40 years old (1985-86).

A, B, C, D - letters identify the same settlement surveyed in different years.

Table 2: Percentage of Female-Headed Households in Various Latin American Cities 1968–1990

Country and town/city	Type of area	Percentage of households with female head	Year	Source
Brazil, Belo Horizonte	Various, all income groups	17	1983 1983	Merrick and Schmink
Brazil*	Various	18	1984	Goldani 1990
Brazil, Sao Bernardo do Campo	Housing project	13	1980s	Volbeda 1989
Brazil, Córdoba	Housing project	16+	1988–90	Falú and Curutchet 1991
Colombia, Pereira	Various self-help areas	20	1987	Gough, 1992
Costa Rica, various	Low-income	14–15	1989	Chant 1991a
Ecuador, Manta	Low-income	13	1970s	Middleton 1991
Honduras, various	Various	33	1970s	Cited in Chant 1991b
Mexico, Oaxaca	Self-help area	18	1968–72	Higgins 1974
Mexico, Oaxaca	Low-income	22	1977	Hackenberg, Murphy and Selby 1984
Mexico, Mexico	Various	17	1969–70	García, Muñoz and de Oliveira 1982
Nicaragua	Various	48	1975	Vance 1987
Venezuela	Various	20–25	Various	Cited in Chant various 1991b

Notes

* Figure from 1984 National Household Survey, which includes some rural areas but is more representative of the urban areas (Goldani, 1990: 536).

+ See note 9. It should be remembered that some housing projects may discriminate against female-headed households (Machado, 1987).

One-half of the Nicaraguan population lives in Managua.

Table 1 presents the results from various micro-surveys and one larger study of Mexican cities in the last decade. In only two cases does the figure for women-headed households reach one-third of all households.⁸ The findings for tenants are particularly significant. Female-headed households face particular difficulties in building their own home. They may therefore be underrepresented in self-help settlements, but not in rental accommodation (Gilbert and Varley, 1991; Chant

and Ward, 1987; Volbeda, 1989). If, therefore, fewer than 20 per cent of tenant households are headed by women, it is unlikely that female-headed households constitute 50 percent of urban households. Earlier Mexican work and other Latin American studies also suggest that the proportion of female-headed households is lower than has been proposed. Figures below 20 percent are often reported (see Table 2 and note 7).⁹

The significance of female-headed households is, as I have indicated, not merely a question of statistics. But a legitimate concern for the housing needs of single women should not lead us to neglect the housing problems facing women who live with male partners. Otherwise, there is a danger that many women will once more be rendered "invisible"—this time, ironically, by feminist scholars. Discussion of the housing strategies of female- and male-headed households, for example, easily slips into a comparison of "women" and "men," as if there were no women in the (so-called) male-headed households.

It is tempting to see the gender and housing literature's emphasis on single women as an example of the irony identified by Anne-Marie Goetz:

the liberal feminist language of *integration* has been based upon a *separating* out from the context of development of the category "women" as a self-contained identity.... The effect has been to ignore the importance of relations between men and women ... with the result that women, seen as separate rather than central, have been added into the process of development *at the margin* (Goetz, 1991: 140; my emphasis).

If the archetypal gender-and-housing study concerns female-headed households in a housing project, the danger of marginalization is increased by the change of emphasis in World Bank thinking, with ramifications for national housing policies. Individual projects such as sites-and-service schemes are no longer in favor.¹⁰ Instead, city-level attempts to unblock housing markets characterize the new emphasis on shelter delivery/urban management systems or *programs* rather than *projects* (Rakodi, 1991; Burgess, 1992; Fiori and Ramirez, 1992).¹¹ This change should be acknowledged in research on gender and housing. A land tenure legalization program, for example, is likely to influence far more women's lives, for better or for worse, than all the sites-and-services projects in the country. We need to understand the housing problems facing low-income women from both "traditional" and "non-traditional" households, and not only those headed by women. The next section tries to put this principle into practice.

The Provision of Accommodation for Young Adults in Urban Mexico

The housing problems of Mexico City, with a population of some 20 million people, and Puebla, Mexico's fourth largest city, with over 1 million inhabitants, are well

documented.¹² The economic crisis of the 1980s aggravated a situation in which two-thirds of the population was already denied access to ownership via the conventional private or public housing markets (Ward, 1990; CIDAC, 1991). Extensive areas of self-built housing had grown up since the 1940s, but the pressures on incomes, land prices, and building material costs in the 1980s created further difficulties for people seeking to house themselves in such areas. Mexico City and Puebla already had an unusually high proportion of tenants and the recession of the 1980s seems likely to have increased the number of families unable to gain access to ownership (Gilbert and Varley, 1989, 1991; Coulomb, 1988).

One response to such difficulties is to share accommodation with kin. As here defined, "sharing" refers to two or more separate households occupying the same plot: one household owns the plot, and the other/s live there rent-free as a result of kinship or friendship links with the owners.¹³

Table 3 provides basic information on sharing in four self-help settlements of different ages and degrees of consolidation: two in Mexico City, and two in Puebla.¹⁴ Overall, one in three owners currently shares a plot with at least one other household (excluding tenants). Most sharers are the sons or daughters of the owners. They are "married" and around 30 years of age, with an average of two children (see also Gilbert and Varley, 1991; Coulomb, 1990; Gilbert and Ward, 1985).¹⁵

Table 3 also reveals that plot owners tend to let their sons share more often than their daughters. About two-fifths of sharers are women.

If, instead of living as separate households, the members of these families all lived together, they would form extended households. As the literature on extended households is highly relevant to the following discussion, Table 4 provides some information on extended households in the case-study settlements to complement Table 3. The finding which I wish to underline concerns the proportion of those still living with their parents who are women. Overall, women with a husband or child are as likely to form part of their parents' extended household as their male counterparts; but if single parents are excluded, the proportion falls to less than two-fifths, the same as for sharers.

These findings suggest that providing accommodation for young adults in this way is characteristic of what

Table 3: Basic Information on Sharing in Case-Study Settlements

	MEXICO CITY		PUEBLA		ALL
	Loma de la Palma	San José	El Salvador	Veinte de Nov.	
Percentage of owners who share their plot with other household(s)	37	38	7	27	29
Mean no. of sharer households*	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.8	1.6
N	78	72	55	33	238
<i>Of sharers:</i>					
Percentage who are daughters/sons of owners	85	77	75	100	84
N	47	44	4	16	111
<i>For sharers who are daughters/sons of owners:</i>					
Median age (years)	29	29	26	33	29
Percentage who are women	33	44	67	38	39
Percentage with spouse + child/ren	95	85	100	94	91
Percentage with spouse but no children	5	12	0	6	8
Percentage with children but no spouse	0	3	0	0	1
Mean no. of children	2.3	2.1	1.7	2.3	2.2
N	40	34	3	16	93

Source: Questionnaire survey, summer 1991.

Notes

In El Salvador, there are as yet few sons/daughters of plot owners forming their own families; hence the very small number of sharers.

"Sharer": within the sharing household, the person with the closest blood relationship (or friendship) with the owners of the plot.

* Only for plots with at least one sharer household.

anthropologists have described as the patrilocal "stem" or "grand" family (Selby *et al.*, 1990: 101; Lomnitz and Perez-Lizaur, 1991: 124).¹⁶ These multi-generation households are formed when, rather than moving to a new house on marriage, sons bring their wives to live with their parents. Later, older siblings and their families may move to independent accommodation. Such households have been found in "peasant communities in state societies" (Lamphere, 1974: 104), including Latin America, China and India (Croll, 1978; Sharma, 1978; Wolf, M., 1974; Wolf, A.P., 1984). They have often been mentioned in studies of rural Mexico (Foster, 1967; Chiñas, 1973; Whitecotton, 1977; Gross, 1978; Ingham, 1986; Stephen, 1991).¹⁷

Some authors have argued that patrilocality is no longer significant in urban Mexico. Selby *et al.* (1990: 101) argue that the tendency to live with the man's parents "has disappeared from urban households," and Lomnitz and Perez-Lizaur (1991: 126) find that "instances of patrilocality are not substantially greater than those of matrilocality." However, in the case study on which this statement is based, Lomnitz (1977: 119) argued that "patrilocality is predominant in the shantytown," although it declined over time as married children moved away from their parents' home. Thirty-five percent of households was classified as patrilocal at the time of study, compared with 25 percent which was

Table 4: Young Adults Living as Part of Their Parents' Extended Household in Case-Study Settlements

	MEXICO CITY		PUEBLA		ALL
	Loma de la Palma	San José	El Salvador	Veinte de Nov.	
Percentage of owners with an extended household including daughters/sons with spouse/child	9	18	15	151	4
Mean no. of daughters/sons with spouse/child in these households*	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.0	1.1
N	78	72	55	33	238
<i>For daughters/sons with spouse/child living in their parent's household:</i>					
Median age (years)	21	24	27	24	24
Percentage who are women:					
Overall	25	67	33	60	49
Excluding single parents	14	50	25	60	36
Percentage with spouse + child/ren	38	47	67	80	54
Percentage with spouse but no children	50	7	22	20	22
Percentage with child/ren but no spouse	13	47	11	0	24
Mean no. of children	1.0	1.3	1.9	1.6	1.4
N	8	15	9	5	37

Source: Questionnaire survey, summer 1991.

Notes

The table refers to extended households including one or more daughters/sons with spouse/child.

* Only for households extended in this way.

matrilocal (giving a ratio almost identical to the one noted above) (*ibid.*: 120).¹⁸

In this study, information was sought about the housing status of *all* living children of the people interviewed. If there is a tendency to patrilocality, those living with their in-laws should display the opposite pattern from the one described above: more women than men should live with their in-laws. Table 5 shows that this is indeed the case. Again, the patrilocal bias is not dramatic, but it is noticeable: whereas the ratio of men to women is about 3:2 for those living with their parents, the ratio is reversed for those housed by in-laws.¹⁹

Further evidence comes from people's accounts of how they decide which of their children should share their

plot. In one house in La Palma, one son was sharing with his parents. Another son, who now owned his own home, also used to share; but their two married sisters were both tenants and had not shared with their parents since marriage. The explanation for this was that "*se las llevaron*": the daughters' husbands had taken them to live elsewhere. This phrase was echoed by other people interviewed. It is a husband's responsibility to house his wife, particularly when, as this phrase hints, the couple eloped. (The custom by which a young man "steals" his girlfriend from her parents, sometimes with the explicit support of his own relatives, has been widely documented in rural areas [Foster, 1967; Chiñas, 1973; Whitecotton, 1977] and is also, apparently, common in the cities.) Other people interviewed were quite clear that sharing is a privilege granted to *sons*. Parents may

Table 5: Young Adults Relying on Their In-Laws for Accommodation

	MEXICO CITY		PUEBLA		ALL
	Loma de la Palma	San José	El Salvador	Veinte de Nov.	
Percentage of those sharing with their in-laws who are women:	50	89	100	0	68
N	10	9	2	1	22
Percentage of those living with their in-laws' extended households who are women:	71	57	60	—	63
N	7	7	5	0	19

Source: Questionnaire survey, summer 1991.

Notes

The table includes the daughters/sons of interviewees who share with their in-laws or live as members of their in-laws' extended household.

In all, 379 sons/daughters of interviewees who were over 15 and had a spouse/child were recorded. Of them, 171 (45 percent) of them shared/lived with their own parents/their in-laws, and women constituted 47 percent of this latter group.

build additional accommodation in anticipation of their sons getting married, or a man may build a room on his parents' plot to set up a home with his girlfriend.

The Implications of Sharing and Extended Households for Women's Housing Options

The effect of the patterns observed is to increase women's dependence on others in their efforts to accommodate themselves and their children. Tenure has been identified as a key concern in women's access to housing: "For women, tenure rights are a strategic gender need which ensures protection for themselves and their children" (Moser, 1991: 93). The problem of tenure becomes particularly acute for a woman whose right to her home depends on her relationship with a man who does not himself have any right to the house, and whose family may view her with hostility (see below).²⁰ If the relationship breaks down, she will probably have to leave, as the owners are likely to support their son, and continued co-residence is likely to be distasteful to all concerned.

The difficulties facing women-headed households wishing to build their own home have already been noted. On separation from her husband, a woman who has been living with her in-laws would seem to have few

options but to return to her own parents' home, or to move into rental accommodation. Regular rent payments pose particular problems for families with only one earner, when the children are still young (Volbeda, 1989).

On the other hand, women who live with their husband's family may find themselves upwardly mobile in the housing market. The full implications for their subsequent housing histories cannot be addressed here, but there is evidence to suggest that sharing can help people become owners (Gilbert and Varley, 1991). It enables them to save money that would otherwise have gone on the rent, until they have enough for the deposit needed for their own plot.²¹ Later, they can dedicate a larger share of their income to purchasing building materials than tenants would be able to do.

The Problems of Living with In-Laws

Shared accommodation entails living in close daily proximity with one's in-laws. To date, studies of the extended household in urban Mexico have tended to argue that it has positive implications for women, because of the opportunities for cooperation which it allows. But this is only half the story: there is also considerable potential for conflict.

Larissa Lomnitz (1977) sought to counter the derogatory aspects of some writings on urban marginality by analyzing the mutual support networks enabling people to cope with extreme poverty. In her book, she wrote:

one will find no stress on the more sensational aspects of poverty: the filth, the promiscuity, the arguments and fights between people who must live together in a tiny space (Lomnitz, 1977: 31).

The social resources mobilized by people in their efforts to survive included networks of reciprocal exchange and institutions such as *compadrazgo* (*ibid.*: 3). Although networks could be based on friendship as well as kinship, "kinship is the most common social foundation for reciprocity networks" (*ibid.*: 156), and extended or "joint" household structures played a key role in these networks.

Sylvia Chant (1984, 1985, 1991b) also emphasizes cooperation in extended households. Women in extended households can "share and/or delegate gender-assigned duties" (Chant, 1991b: 156) more than women in nuclear households. They therefore face fewer restrictions on their ability to enter the labor market (see also García *et al.*, 1982; González de la Rocha, 1988; Selby *et al.*, 1990). Decisions on household budgeting become more democratic, housework is shared, "the full-time mother-wife role tends to become redundant" and women seem to have "far greater personal liberty" (Chant, 1985: 22). In short, extended households "reduce some of the excesses of patriarchy" (*ibid.*: 26).

Chant (1991: 144-53) examines different types of extension to the household in support of her arguments, particularly those involving the inclusion of women's sisters or mothers. The focus of this paper is narrower, since it is restricted to the incorporation of sons- or daughters-in law; this is, however, the most common pattern in household extension and sharing. The literature on patrilocal extended households suggests that this type of extension is likely to lead to conflict between female relatives rather than cooperation:

The authority structure of the patrilocal, patrilineal extended family, where father has authority over son and husband over wife, brings about conflict rather than cooperation between women in these groups (Lamphere, 1974: 105).

Since authority is in men's hands, women have to manipulate their relationships with men—their husbands, and later their adult sons—to gain influence.

Mothers- and daughters-in law therefore have conflicting interests. The stem family "introduces in the role of daughter-in-law a woman whose only hope of personal autonomy is division of her husband's natal family" (Wolf, A., 1984: 281). The consequences of this for daughters-in-law have been documented, for rural China, by Elisabeth Croll (1978) and Margery Wolf (1974), and for rural India by Ursula Sharma (1978), although they stress that daughters-in-law are not without resources (including women friends) in dealing with their mothers-in-law. The emphasis women place on strong relationships with their sons and the consequent strains between mother- and daughter-in law are summarized by Croll (1978: 50):

It was by forming and nurturing ties with her son which were personal and exclusive that women cultivated a source of power in a social structure dominated by men. Any potential threat to this relationship by the daughter-in-law was felt deeply. Trapped all their lives, women, with the authority of being the mother-in-law, appeared to compensate for their own former suffering and impotence as outsiders by repeating the very same process of domination.

This type of conflict has also been reported in rural Mexico (Stephen, 1991: 40-62; Chiñas, 1973: 59; Ingham, 1986: 64).²² Although the context of modern urban Mexico is a very different one, tension between in-laws is still a significant problem, for which gender relations are ultimately responsible.

The fundamental emotional significance of sharing was highlighted by one woman who answered my question why her married children (all daughters) didn't live with her by saying "all my children hurt me a great deal." She was referring, not to a family quarrel, but to the pain of childbirth. In a cultural context in which girls are seen as inherently less "valuable" than boys (Díaz-Guerrero, 1990: 35; Stephen, 1991: 49), a certain resentment of daughters, a feeling that they should stand on their own two feet just as their mothers had to do, can sometimes be detected, and probably helps to explain the gender bias in sharing. One woman who thought neither sons nor daughters should live with their parents *particularly* disapproved of married daughters bringing their husbands home, because they would expect their mothers to cook for them.

Women's attitude to their sons is different, reflecting the privileged nature of the mother-son relationship in Mexico (Díaz-Guerrero, 1990; Leñero Otero, 1987). In Puebla, a woman who blamed Mexican mothers for their

men's *machismo* said that when a son marries, his mother will use all kinds of emotional blackmail to get him to bring his wife to live with them, including pretending to be ill, and fainting. In this context, it seems almost inevitable that mothers will dislike their daughters-in-law. One woman (whose own children were all still single) summarized the problems of sharing in these terms:

supposing your son comes home drunk one night, and you go out to tell him off about it. Then, his wife comes out and starts having a go at you for scolding her husband: she tells you to lay off and mind your own business.

To avoid such problems, she thought it better that children should find their own place to live: "I love you a lot, but you have to go.... As another woman put it: "I don't like having the daughters-in-law around. They [her sons] had better not bring the wife here to my house."

The misery that these problems can cause, for the older woman as well as the younger one, had become apparent during my earlier work in Puebla. An old woman spontaneously approached me in the street one day, and started to tell me about the wickedness of her daughter-in-law; another was locked out of her house by her daughter-in-law; and one 86-year-old woman without children of her own preferred to live alone in a *vecindad* rather than living with her godson and his wife, because the two women didn't get on.²³

For a woman sharing with her in-laws, the problem may be not only her husband's mother but also his sisters. It is common for some single daughters still to be living with their parents. If, for example, a child is hurt in a fall, her mother may be blamed and made to face the opprobrium of being a "bad mother" by her sisters-in-law as well as their mother: they react as though it is *their* child that has been hurt. Moreover, it may not be easy for women who are sharing to develop friendship networks to help them counteract such pressures, insofar as such networks depend on friends having access to each other's homes. Friends of whom the owner disapproves are unlikely to be welcome on the plot, and grounds for disapproval could readily be found by a hostile mother-in-law. Shopping or other work performed away from the home may provide some opportunity for women to resist such restrictions; but spending too much time "in the street" (which has strong sexual implications) can give a prying relative the chance to tell tales to a woman's husband.²⁴

The House of Two: Responses to the Problems of Dependence and Conflict

The kinds of problem outlined above are widely recognized by people in low-income settlements in urban Mexico. What, then, can they do about them?

In the first place, sharing may be seen as a way of trying to reduce the potential for conflict associated with the extended household. Work in rural Mexico has shown the importance of having separate cooking facilities "as a focus of identity" (Whitecotton, 1977: 254); the so-called extended household is actually composed of two or more nuclear households, undermining the notion that the extended household is the basic unit of domestic organization (Gross, 1978). The importance of having separate accommodation and facilities also emerged in the case-study settlements in Mexico City and Puebla. Tables 3-5 show that sharing is more common than living as part of the parental household. The reason for this was explained by one woman in Puebla. Her mother, she said, had taught her that "*casados*" ("married") meant "*casa [de] dos*" ("house of two"). In other words, married children must be given some independence. Although they might have little option but to live with their parents for a while, every effort should be made to provide somewhere for them to be together, in private. Even if the room was so small that they could push the door shut from the bed, the important thing was that they should have a door to shut behind them.

Thus, sharing can be seen as an attempt to avoid some of the problems associated with the patrilocal extended household.

Second, conflict between women is not a structural necessity. Instead of vying for their son's/husband's affections, women *can* cooperate with each other to resist the exercise of patriarchal authority. As Chifñas (1973: 59) notes in her study of the Isthmus Zapotecs:

A surprising number of wives do adjust remarkably well to living with their mothers-in-law ... and sometimes very strong bonds of affection form between them over the years. Frequently mothers-in-law side with the wife against their own son, especially when his behavior is obviously at the root of the trouble.

Nash (1969: 2/9) also talks of relationships between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law which are "characterized by mutual cooperation." At the least, a conscious intention *not* to interfere was apparent on the part

of many of the women I interviewed. Several women stressed that it was up to their sons and daughters-in-law to choose where they wanted to live, even if their personal preference would be to have all their children close at hand. One widow with five married sons and daughters living elsewhere said she would happily evict her three tenants to make room for them, but accepted with philosophical resignation that "daughters-in-law don't want to live with you...." Once married, as another woman put it, sons "will live wherever their wives like—because they *don't* always like [to live with their in-laws]." Thus, many parents respect their children's need for autonomy, whatever their own feelings in the matter.

Third, the fact that almost two-fifths of sharers are women indicates that parents also recognize their daughters' needs. In particular, they are concerned about the consequences of their daughters' marriages breaking down. One man, who expressed the idea that sharing is for sons, not daughters, more clearly than anyone else, nevertheless stated that, in addition to the accommodation he was building for his two (as yet unmarried) sons, he was also trying to make room for his daughters as well. He would like to be able to help them if their marriages didn't work out well and they were left with nowhere to live. The daughter of this man's neighbors had just left her parents' plot. According to her mother, she wanted one of her married sisters to take her place, because "her in-laws are being right so-and-sos with her." And in Puebla, one woman, aged 22, was sharing with her parents. After getting married, she had spent a short time with her in-laws, but after problems with her mother-in-law she and her husband had moved to her parents' plot.

Conclusion

I have argued that, in research on gender and housing in developing countries, the notion of "traditional" and "non-traditional" households has almost been reversed: women-headed households have held a prominent place in such studies. While there was clearly a need for research on the housing needs of women as single parents or single-person households, there is a danger of rendering women in nuclear households, once again, invisible. Therefore, it is important not to *restrict* discussion of gender and housing to the needs of female-headed households.

Forms of domestic organization involving patrilocal extended households or the sharing of accommodation

may have negative consequences for women. These include women's dependence on their husbands' relatives for a roof over their heads, and the potential for conflict between wives and members of their husband's family of origin. As Lamphere (1974: 112) concludes: "women quarrel with or dominate other women when it is in their interest to do so; they share and exchange with other women when it suits their own goals." When women see their interests as involving the manipulation of their relationship with their sons or husbands, rather than solidarity with other women in resisting male authority, then conflict rather than cooperation is likely to result. It is not, however, an *inevitable* outcome.

Thus, to understand the implications of sharing as a housing strategy, we must take gender relations into account. Moreover, it is also important to remember that the home is *not* a separate sphere: state regulations permeate and circumscribe the supposedly private sphere. The next step in the exploration of sharing as a housing strategy should perhaps be to ask how the state intervenes in the interaction among gender relations, household structure and the housing process.

Finally, to return briefly to the question of "traditional" and "non-traditional" households: while married daughters as well as married sons were recorded sharing with their parents, single mothers were, in all but one case, counted as part of their parents' extended household. It seems that it would be regarded as inappropriate for them to *share* their parents' plot as a separate, independent household. Sharing therefore reinforces the patriarchal norm of the nuclear family, insofar as it is a privilege accorded only to those who are "married." If, moreover, women without a partner are more likely to rent or to depend on their parents for accommodation, whilst sharing leads to home ownership, then the patriarchal norm is also reinforced by material rewards for those who ascribe to it. In this sense, sharing is a highly "traditional" housing strategy.

Notes

¹ A study evaluating research on low-income housing found that only 13 of 126 studies reviewed provided any information on the particular problems faced by women (Van Vliet, 1988: x).

² A number of specific issues have received more attention. Housing design has been addressed, in a British context, by the Matrix Collective (1984) and Marion Roberts (1991); for the U.S.A., see Hayden (1981). Homelessness is a growth area in the literature as well as on the streets. It is examined, for Britain, by Watson and Austerberry (1986), Miller (1990) and Dibblin (1991); for the United States, see Stoner (1988) and Golden (1992).

³ Housing is mentioned, but not analyzed in any depth, in several recent studies of gender and the environment (Rodda, 1991; Dankelman and Davidson, 1988; Sontheimer, 1991; Levy, 1992).

⁴ An IYSH seminar on "Women and Shelter" was held in Harare in December 1987 (Schlyter, 1989).

⁵ Despite the unsatisfactory implications, this paper follows the convention in the literature of describing households in which there is no resident male spouse as female-headed households. The term "community managers" is used by Caroline Moser (1987, 1991).

⁶ The United States and United Kingdom literature also emphasizes single women and women as single parents (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Wekerle, 1988; Mulroy, 1988; Sprague, 1991; Golden, 1992).

⁷ The source of these figures is often given as Buvinic *et al.*, 1978; but in two-thirds of the Latin American countries analyzed in that study, women are described as *de jure* heads of between 10 and 20 per cent of all households. The only figures over 30 per cent are for Chile (32 per cent) and Panama (40 per cent) (Buvinic *et al.*, 1978: 87–88; figures mostly for the 1970s).

⁸ The temporary absence of men working illegally in the USA could account for under-reporting of *de facto* women-headed households; but in surveys in ten Mexican cities, Selby *et al.* (1990: 201) found that only 11 percent of households had members working overseas.

⁹ The traditional concept of the household (usually defined as a residential unit sharing food and at least some budgetary resources) has been criticized as too static and too concerned with boundaries. Methodologically, it is argued that questionnaire surveys elicit responses falsely depicting a "normal" conjugal family (Fonseca, 1991). Such problems have led some authors to uncover *de facto* or "hidden" women-headed households, doubling the overall proportion reported (Falú and Curutchet, 1991), or to emphasize the importance of mother-child units in situations where "the overwhelming majority of households are normally nuclear" (Fonseca, 1991: 135). Unless the criteria used for defining *de facto* female-headed households are clear and consistently applied (following, perhaps, the categories proposed by Youssef and Hetler, 1983), there is a danger of playing *cherchez la femme* in some of these approaches.

¹⁰ They were, in any case, never of great importance compared with the vast areas of "spontaneous" housing in Latin America.

¹¹ The shift to a broader institutional level of intervention is unlikely to decrease discrimination against women unless specific safeguards are introduced. Brion and Tinker (1980) and Watson (1988) have shown how women in Britain and Australia are marginalized by housing allocation and finance systems, although Munro and Smith (1989) argue that particular patriarchal outcomes cannot be assumed, because of the intervention of labor market variables.

¹² For Mexico City, see, for example, COPEVI, 1977; Connolly, 1982; Gilbert and Ward, 1985; Michel *et al.*, 1988; Schteingart, 1989; Ward, 1986, 1990. For Puebla, see Mele, 1984; Universidad Autónoma de Puebla DIAU-ICUAP, 1986; Jones, 1991; Gilbert and Varley, 1991.

¹³ Most sharers make some contribution to the costs of services consumed. Although the literature often fails to distinguish between extended households and sharing (see below), the question "*cocinan juntos o aparte?*" ("do you cook together or separately?") clearly makes sense to people, and generally elicits a direct, clear response to questions seeking to establish the number of households present.

¹⁴ Fieldwork in 1991 included participant observation in a young self-help settlement on the eastern periphery of Puebla and a questionnaire survey in areas already studied in 1981–82 (Mexico City) or 1985–86 (Puebla). *Loma de la Palma* developed in the 1970s on a hill in the north of Mexico City. Legalized in 1976, it received water and drainage in the 1980s and was being paved by the residents in summer 1991. *San José de los Leones* is a regularized and consolidated settlement in the west of Mexico City; it dates from the late 1960s. *El Salvador* is a ten-year old illegal settlement on the eastern periphery of Puebla. The streets are unpaved and many plots still unoccupied. *Veinte de Noviembre*, founded in the late 1940s as an illegal subdivision of private lands in north-west Puebla, now has a complex mixture of owner occupation, renting and sharing.

¹⁵ Although the words "married," "wife" and "husband" are used, no distinction is made between couples who are legally married and those living together in a consensual union.

¹⁶ Arthur Wolf (1984: 281) defines a "grand" family as having a minimum of *three* nuclear units – two married siblings and their parents. He defines a stem family as having only two nuclear units. If sharing is to be described as a variation on this theme, it is clear that there are both stem families and grand families involved.

¹⁷ In an interesting exception to the rule, Nash (1969) found that in Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas, where recently married couples used to live with the bride's parents, they were now equally likely to live with either set of parents.

¹⁸ The figures for "initial residence" were 46 percent and 29 percent. The implication is that nuclear households were in the minority: "the extended family prevails in the great majority of households" (Lomnitz, 1977: 100). This finding is contrary to most studies of Mexican urban households, although it is difficult to draw comparisons between Lomnitz's household classification scheme and those used by other authors. Many of the households she classifies as extended are more easily enumerated as nuclear sub-groups (*ibid.*: 102). Sharers as defined in this study are found in Lomnitz's "single-roof" and "single-plot" extended household categories rather than what she classifies as "jointed households."

¹⁹ More daughters and sons are recorded as living with their parents than with their in-laws; this calls for comment. It may reflect under-reporting; but there is another explanation. Whereas almost all owners in the case-study settlements have enough space to accommodate another family, this is not necessarily true of their children's in-laws, who will come from a variety of housing types. Some, for example, will be tenants, who are more likely to lack the space to accommodate any other relatives (Gilbert and Varley, 1991).

²⁰ The additional problems facing a woman whose husband has children from a previous marriage was discussed by one woman in Mexico City. Her sister's step-children had become extremely hostile at the time of legalization, arguing that she had no right to the house and threatening to throw her out. For this reason, the woman interviewed said that she and her husband, both of whom had children from previous relationships, would *not* consider letting them share.

²¹ Gilbert and Varley (1991: 112) suggest that the deposit, rather than the regular monthly payments on a plot of land, is one of the key elements dividing persistent tenants from prospective owners.

²² Interestingly, Croll (1983: 83) notes that tension between mother- and daughter-in-law was the most common cause of divorce in 1980s Beijing.

²³ Interestingly, in her study of a village in Chiapas, where married children can live with either set of parents, Nash (1969) found apparently more harmonious relations between in-laws.

²⁴ As Selby *et al.* (1990: 91) write "Living alone is almost unthinkable in urban Mexico," particularly for a woman in her eighties.

²⁵ The phrase "subir y bajar" ("to go up and down") is used in two contexts: to-ing and fro-ing (as in visits to a government office in search of documentation, for example) and sleeping around. Women may be expected to take a child with them on "legitimate" outings.

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