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# Social Welfare in the 1990s in Mexico: The Case of “Marginal” Families in the Mazahua Region

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“poverty, as beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder”

“la pobreza, como la belleza, está en los ojos de quien la percibe” —Mollier Orshansky<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In Mexico, the official discourse associates social welfare with development opportunities that so-called marginal families are expected to take advantage of. In the Mazahua region, these families commonly are headed by women. To fulfill the official discourse and related bureaucratic demands, the women must fit into organizations and take on new social responsibilities. In this paper, I will examine an initiative from the public sector (PROGRESA) and show that such programs change the household dynamics of families, generating feelings of resentment due to the inclusion/exclusion dynamics involved. Another of the paper’s objectives is to assess how the program’s execution creates new mechanisms of social control.

**Keywords:** social welfare, PROGRESA, social control, poverty, Mazahua, women

**Résumé :** Au Mexique, le discours officiel associe le bien-être social à des opportunités de développement dont les familles dites marginales se doivent de profiter. Dans la région mazahua, ces familles sont souvent dirigées par des femmes. Pour satisfaire à ce discours et aux exigences bureaucratiques qui l’accompagnent, ces dernières sont désormais tenues de s’intégrer à des organisations et d’endosser de nouvelles responsabilités sociales. Dans cette communication, nous examinerons une initiative du secteur public (PROGRESA) et montrerons que ce n’est pas le niveau de vie qui change avec un tel programme mais bien la dynamique domestique des familles, en produisant des ressentiments chez les familles, dites aussi pauvres, exclues du programme. Finalement, j’essaie de mettre en question les nouveaux mécanismes de contrôle social à partir de la mise en œuvre du programme.

**Mots-clés :** bien-être social, PROGRESA, contrôle social, Pauvreté, Mazahua, femmes

## Introduction

The increase of the proportion of households in extreme poverty in Mexico, which are located mainly in rural and indigenous areas, reflects the social impact of the structural adjustment policies carried out in the 1980s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), counter-reforms to constitutional Article 27 (the agrarian reform law), and, in general, Mexican neo-liberal policies of the last decade. In order to address this situation, President Ernesto Zedillo’s government has turned to the welfare state model—despite the general orientation of a diminished state role in social policies—by implementing a social emergency program aimed at improving the “opportunities for the personal development and productive agency of the members of poor families, so that the use of these opportunities enhances their standard of living and their general social integration” (PROGRESA, 1997: 1).

The purpose of this paper is to assess, on one hand, to what extent the procedures set forth in the Program of Education, Health and Nutrition (PROGRESA), which respond to a social well-being policy, try to “benefit” the “marginal families” without knowing either their reality, or the logic of those strategies of subsistence. Also, on the other hand, to assess how that Program becomes a mechanism of social control to promote the development of human capital for the growth of a liberal economy.

My ethnographic fieldwork in the Mazahua community of San Miguel de la Labor, within the municipality of San Felipe del Progreso in the State of Mexico, allowed me to observe several changes in the domestic dynamics and in the individual and collective behaviour of those who were selected and became beneficiaries of PROGRESA during the program’s first stage.

The article is divided in three parts: in the first part, I discuss theoretically the role of the “benefactor State” and the adaptation of social policies oriented towards the assistance of “marginal” societies within the contexts of economic liberalization, policies which also correspond to the design of the external mechanisms of social control. This section supports my analysis of the instrumentalization of PROGRESA in the second part of the article, underlining above all the internal mechanisms of the program’s fulfilment. Finally, in the third part, I describe the program’s social outcome.

## Official Discourses: State, Poverty and Social Welfare

More than any other factor, the crises of the 20th century, characterized by an atmosphere of generalized social and economic instability, have led to the consolidation of a benefactor or welfare State. According to Hecló (1981: 35), the associated perception of instability, vulnerability, and risk ensures that the objectives of the welfare state (security, invulnerability and freedom) seem adequate for regulating the functioning of both society and the economy. Following Shalev (1983) this apparent “complicity” has a well-defined role: to protect capital through a perception of social security. Shalev holds that the welfare state appears, rapidly grows and is structured to develop labour to increase capital accumulation, even under regimes that subscribe to social-democratic ideals (1983: 11). Therefore, social policies aimed at protecting the interests of labour, such as education, health and nutrition, even if they are not the only policies of the welfare state, are at the heart of public interest. In other words, social policies are those that furnish social security or establish programs that favour target populations (Meny and Thoeing, 1989: 374).

In the 1990s, the crisis of the state—a term that has been extensively used in the last 20 years to explain situations of inequality, marginality and social change—seems to threaten the bases of a social protection system considered by the population as a guarantee of economic prosperity. The welfare state itself is seen as a partial cause of its own crisis, due to the combination of two factors (Hecló, 1981: 374). The first factor is that target populations are the evidence that the welfare state could amplify the different situations of insecurity, inequality, marginality and exclusion of minorities (gender, race, ethnicity and class) that justified, in fact, its social policies. The second is that the ideological conflict of the welfare state obliges the state to reconcile itself with a refurbished ideology: “democracy.” Both phenomena lead to a conjunctural adjustment to the role of the welfare state,

but the latter’s policies continue to have an “objective” public role. (Meny and Thoeing, 1989). In this regard, do public policies constitute the politics of the modern state? Or do politics instrumentals policy? To answer these questions is not the purpose of this paper, however, reflecting upon the first question will lead us to illustrate the role of social policies in Mexican politics.

Currently, even in times of economic readjustments and commercial liberalization when the market acquires the highest rank among social regulation agencies (Hayek, 1983), social welfare still is at the core of the continuity of the welfare state, through three discursive practices that underlie the role of the state: proselytism, moralist paternalism and a convincing discourse.

In the first place, the welfare state continues to be supported by classical political science, regarding elections and political parties. This explains why elections in Mexico are preceded or followed by social emergency programs that counter the direction of economic cycles: their implicit rationale is to pander to the electorate. Hence, the party in power, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), creates programs of social assistance on the eve of the elections, aimed at enhancing or consolidating its credibility. Moreover, it uses its party emblems to identify these programs with the party, in order to consolidate future electoral campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Most of these programs are transitory; they either disappear once their political mission is achieved or are replaced by similar ones but under a different bureaucratic structure. Consequently, workers, peasants, indigenous people, and women become the focus of emergency social assistance policies, as they are simultaneously the target populations of social assistance programs and the electoral base that keeps the party in power. It would be naive to regard PROGRESA as the exception to the rule because of its permanent character - despite the official social welfare discourse. The latter holds that the income transfer toward marginal families (*familias marginadas*) should not be temporary or occasional; instead, its continuity will help to break the vicious circle that links poverty to malnutrition, low productivity and poor school performance. The seriousness of the problem represented by the growth of the proportion of families suffering from extreme poverty leads to the fast implementation of programs, in order to have positive short term results. It is customarily assumed that political benefit, which translates into votes for the party in power, is implicit in public investment. Not even its redefined form, given the continuous participation of the target population and the basic capability of the individual to profit from opportunities, excludes proselytize discursive practices.

Secondly, assuming that the discourse is an exercise of power and social control, and that this can only be exerted through practice,<sup>3</sup> the official discourse of social welfare is supplemented, to great extent, by ideological and cultural discursive practices that have prevailed through Mexico's history. Among these practices, the paternalism of the welfare state is the one that partially explains the strategic practices of social policy. For example, the Catholic Church in Mexico has always stressed that charity is a obligation of the state towards poor communities and the dispossessed. In the same connection, to charge the welfare state with the well-being of the poor does not involve just a populist and paternalist ideology; it is also based on a moralist discursive practice, according to which someone (the state, in this case), must do something to alleviate poverty, as a social compensation of sorts.

Thirdly, it includes, ideologically speaking, both aspects, as it deals with the discourses on the fight against extreme poverty, which are set within a global concern with the world order. Yet, it should be asked: (a) who are the people who are suffering from extreme poverty? and (b) why is the fight against poverty a concern for countries with low levels of poverty? Above all, "extreme poverty" is a social category used and defined within discursive practices of development, and it is perceived as a world problem. On the one hand, the UN defines extreme poverty (namely, individuals who lack the means for living in dignity) on the basis of qualitative indicators such as life expectancy, literacy, access to sanitary services, drinking water and nutrition (PNUD, 1990, 1997). On the other hand, the World Bank uses a quantitative indicator to differentiate "moderate" from "extreme" poverty: anyone with a daily income lower than \$1US is considered as experiencing extreme poverty (World Bank, 1999). Combining both types of indicators, extreme poverty can be defined as the predicament of population sectors who have been left behind in the process of economic growth (hence the category of marginal families) and who, therefore, cannot participate in the market without the help of social programs aimed at developing human capital (PNUD, 1990).<sup>4</sup> By identifying extreme poverty and promoting universal values of equality of opportunities and freedom, the UN, the World Bank and the IMF have agreed upon a general strategy to fight against it—or at least to reduce its impact. This strategy has been synthesized by Mestrum (2000) in the following three points:

- Economic growth achieved through structural adjustment, trade liberalization and the use of the labour force potential of the poor;

- Basic social services (education and health);
- Focussed social programs for the poor who are not able to participate in the market, social assistance programs that enable the poor to absorb conjunctural impact.

This strategy betrays the economic emphasis of the fight against poverty (Mestrum, 2000), reducing social policy to social intervention in the interest of the world's economic powers.

The discourses that prevail in national and international contexts assert the responsibility of all actors to eradicate poverty; international organizations depict themselves as defenders of the common interest at the world level (Escobar, 1995). However, institutions are increasingly concerned solely with the economic dimension of poverty, as financial institutions seek, above all, to create conditions of social security in order to acquire and to expand their markets. Mestrum (2000) points out that poverty is discursively constructed as a danger against the world order. On the one hand, poverty constitutes the axis of all the interdependencies that threaten peace and social, political and economic stability, not only among countries with high incidences of extreme poverty, but worldwide, as the demographic growth of the poor has the potential to increase migratory flows from the countryside to the cities and from poor countries to rich ones. On the other hand, these discourses assume that migratory flows are caused by environmental "degradation," human "pressure" on resources and the lack of opportunities for living with dignity in the local communities. But these discourses, revealing a worldwide concern, stress that demographic controls are not enough to eradicate poverty, as *productive participation* is what holds the key to generalized growth and political and social stability. However, the politics implemented by international organizations to eradicate poverty do not include economic policies fostering re-distributive justice or real wage increases; they set their goals within the parameters of "compensation" and "assistance." It is a well-known fact that the population experiencing poverty has grown in parallel to the increase of inequality in terms of income distribution in Mexico since the implementation of structural adjustment and NAFTA (1984-96) (Raygoza and de la Torre, 2000). In such a context—in which the state, moreover, is forced to reduce its social expenses by eliminating high-cost programs and programs that provide "limited direct benefits" to the target populations—assistance programs are left as the only available tool of social policy for addressing the economic, social and political dimensions of poverty.

On this dimension, the public actions of PROGRESA must be considered as determined by the means and not by the goals to eradicate poverty. These determinations will legitimate the consequences of government intervention. In other words, the social change that is expected from PROGRESA is implicit in its objectives, and the program's implementation and the execution of its actions will attest its truthfulness. In fact, the results that are expected from PROGRESA are manifested in the declarations of public officials, who repeatedly express how PROGRESA must help to fulfil the basic needs of "familias marginadas." Most official declarations stress the quantitative reach of a social program, rather than identifying the social changes that it will cause; even less important is to question the efficiency of its means and actions. Apparently, the evaluation of the program is only based on the indicators of the number of families covered, probably due to the customary graft funds that characterize Mexico's social development and assistance programs. Hence calculating the number of clients per allocated social expenses becomes another discursive practice of truthfulness and transparency. A case in point is the recent assessment, undertaken by PROGRESA, of the program's results (PROGRESA, 1999). This assessment stressed—naturally—not only a wider coverage of communities and homesteads, but the improvement of its indicators (conditions prevailing before and after the program's introduction); that is, a higher number of boys and girls attending school (access to scholarships and purchase of school materials); increase in the number of consultations at the local health centres; and increase in the consumption of basic foodstuffs (baby food supplements). This preliminary assessment stresses, as well, the efficiency in the direct allocation of resources to the clientele through money transfers or in cash (86.4% of the total social expenses allocated to the Program) and the Programs' low operation and implementation costs (13.6% of the total budget) (Scott, 1998: 54). These results depict, not an institution devoted to fostering social changes based on equity and social justice, but, rather, that the program is held to be successful as long as it implements strategies based on: integrity (respect), de-centralization, inter-institutional co-ordination, social participation and according priority to backward regions. These strategic guidelines are not separated from the discursive practices of the fight against poverty; to the contrary, they are precisely the ones that create a field of power and social control. So, new mechanisms of social control are deployed through the institutional management of human capital (PROGRESA).

Monitoring the social indicators is, clearly, a control instruments, used not only to define a given situation in order to set a policy, but also as an instrument of social classification, and this is how social indicators establish, to a large extent, the normative framework of social policies. The problem with indicators is that they are abstract tools; interpreting them in concrete terms poses problems to the evaluation of social change, and their normative nature is subject to a partial or total invalidation of the program (Cazes, 1970). With regard to the categorization of the people who should benefit from the program, it should be pointed out that the target population is not a passive entity, nor an inert subject created by the discourse; on the contrary, social practices allow the subjects to modify the discourses which emanate from those practices (Morales, 1998). From an anthropological perspective of social change, this means that the public problem (extreme poverty) should be considered as a social construction, which, besides its social adequacy, involves a shared responsibility with regard to its goals.

As a matter of fact, the implementation of PROGRESA requires a set of individual and organizational activities on the part of the target population, these activities modify their behavior within a prescribed normative framework, established by the public authorities, which are responsible for carrying out the program. These mechanisms of execution open up a field of intervention and social control. This is the topic of the following section.

## Objectives of PROGRESA

In the period following the structural adjustment program of the 1980s, in Mexico as well as in other countries that followed this program, the budget allocated to both peasant production and to fostering social and economic development among the less privileged groups diminished. However, the budget allocated to social programs aimed at alleviating and improving poverty increased.

Were the budgetary and public expense adjustments the root of the social problem, generating public intervention? Drawing on Becker (1964), a social demand is not originated by the objective needs of a given society, but by the subjective perception of what is labeled as a social problem. Social demands and the needs that these are supposed to satisfy or to mediate are constructed within a public sphere without the possibility of an actual transfer. Even if social demands are held as real through discursive practices, the direct link between the social and the political is not clear. This means that needs are not defined or enunciated in a totally transparent way; rather, this is a selective process. Given that

the concept of need is very delicate and even dangerous when it refers to a demand of a given population, social needs are generally defined by experts, analysts and politicians.

Every social policy or social assistance program must justify its intervention from the very start, therefore, social needs are defined within a normative framework. Hence, the diverse scenarios that justify an intervention are carefully enunciated, in an effort to sensitize public opinion, which provides the final validation for the intervention. The arguments, namely the general view of the social problem and the associated demands are formulated by other social actors who are not involved in the social problem. This often leads to presenting causes as effects, eschewing the social causation of the problem.

Providing social protection to the poor is a discursive practice that works as a targeting strategy that not only causes the stigmatization of the so-called marginal population; it is also presented as the only alternative in times of reduced budgets. Clearly, a lower family income has an impact on the nutrition, health and educational levels of the household, making household members more vulnerable to global economic changes.

The context in which the population living in extreme poverty has increased in Mexico is constituted by the following phenomena: (a) the gradual withdrawal of the state from production<sup>5</sup>; (b) privatization; (c) the disintegration of CONASUPO<sup>6</sup>; (d) the reforms to Article 27 of the Constitution (which eliminated the ejido<sup>7</sup> as a juridical social identity); (e) the liberalization of tortilla prices, (f) the price increase of foodstuffs and basic goods; (g) low world oil prices; (h) slowed economic growth; (i) a lower budget allocated to the eradication of poverty (despite the fact that it has increased, from 0.10 to 0.18 of Mexico's GDP).<sup>8</sup> These have contributed to child malnutrition, illiteracy, school absenteeism, marginality and exclusion of women. This situation is viewed by PROGRESA as lack of opportunities for improving the standard of living of the population living in poverty.

The idea of equality of opportunities has been widely debated in "liberal" societies. Scott (1998) argues that, in this framework, *formal* (legislative) opportunities should be distinguished from *actual* opportunities.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, the equality of access to health, education and food is under the constraint of the social capacity of resource use; in a wider perspective, this stems from the customary asymmetry of the country's income distribution, as well as the gap between developed and "underdeveloped" nations. In other words, Mexico's post-revolutionary politics has expressed its allegiance to the promotion of equality of opportunities, however, this has

not been based on effective measures to foster an equitable distribution of income (Cordera, 1998; Lomeli, 1998). In this regard, Scott (1998) argues that the idea of equality of opportunities, even if it implies "eliminating, as much as possible, the conditions that limit the access of the population to equitable conditions...would mean, in Mexico, the achievement of basic opportunities ensuring universal access to a minimal bundle of productive human capital" (47).

The lack of opportunities—or their improvement—is established, on the one hand, in the rationale for the existence of PROGRESA. Because of its focus-oriented nature in local contexts, this program becomes a medium for deriving benefit from opportunities. Despite the fact that the program does not guarantee introducing changes for future generations, it is one of the few organisms that presents an "alternative" that alleviates poverty in the present time. According to Nora Lusting, director of the Interamerican Development Bank's Department of Assessment of Poverty and Inequality, as she expressed it at the "Seminar on the analysis of PROGRESA, Mexican strategy to fight poverty" (*La Jornada* newspaper, December 11, 1998): "Turning our attention to the problem of poverty, it is generally accepted that marginality problems are structural, conjunctural and budgetary, hence the renewal of Mexican social policy is presented as a coercive strategy called fight against poverty policy." To this end, PROGRESA combines the three essential components of social welfare: education, health and nutrition. No government would put into question the urgency of a public intervention in these domains.

The three basic components which constitute the general objectives of the program are socially accepted. They are:

- To foster, in the communities in which the Program operates (or the neighbouring communities whose population is reached by the Program), the development of adequate basic educational services, and the improvement of the quality of these services through teacher training; to stimulate school attendance through scholarships, as well as providing school supplies to the low-income families benefiting from the Program.
- To consolidate the provision of medical services and to improve their quality in the communities where the Program operates (or the neighbouring communities whose population is reached by the Program), through access to equipment and formation to the health workers; to detect and to address nutritional deficiencies among children and pregnant and breast-feeding women suffering from poverty.

- To foster the improvement of the nutritional intake of participant families through cash grants (PROGRESA, 1997: 1).

Theoretically, this type of intervention should offer access to opportunities. But in rural Mexico, the peasant “marginal” families’ access to food resources in their daily life is reduced or absent. This is even more the case for the indigenous families. Limitation or lack of access to food resources forces them to take part in strategic games which somehow will allow them to subsist (Hewitt de Alcántara, 1994; De Teresa y Cortéz, 1996).

To illustrate this situation I refer to the interview I held during the summer of 1998, with a member of a Mazahua family, Justina. Justina, 29 years old, mother of six children under 14, and resident of San Miguel de la Labor, had to stop sending two of her daughters to school. On the family’s half-an-acre common land, corn is cultivated depending on the rain. Since their harvest only lasts for six months, to complement their yearly food requirements, the entire family relies on the income generated from activities other than growing corn, especially the husband’s wages. Justina’s husband is 32 years old. He works as an assistant to a travelling salesman, spending most of his time outside of the community. It is he, however, who decides who will and who will not go to school when there is not enough money for daily expenses. Justina thinks that it would not be fair to send her daughters to school without a “taco” in their bellies, and, given that it is easier to send them to work where they can help in daily tasks such as doing domestic chores for better-off families, and where they would thus earn their lunch, it is her sons who end up going to school and eat the spare “taco”:

I would like my children to work, to try hard, to get a little house, to work their land. Well, I don’t want my son to turn into a bad young man, or into somebody who doesn’t know how to think. I don’t like that. I don’t. I want them to work the land; or that they know...for example, that if they study, that if they finish a career...even if it is short, that they would know how to work; that they use what they learned, because I see youngsters that don’t know how to take advantage of what one is doing to help. They can help their Dad. I studied but only for 3 years. I became an orphan. I failed while studying in grade school. My mother got very upset, and I not sent anymore to school. And now, my youngster is the smartest! He is good in school and he also likes to work. But my girls, Hermelinda and Rocio, they are not studying right now. There is need for them to work. I sent them to Mexico to work as housemaids.

But when there is money, then they stay here to finish their schooling. (Justina)

The PROGRESA program accords a privileged place to girls—*la mujeres progresas*—in order to facilitate their incorporation to human development capital so that they eventually become agents of change (Nahmad, Carrasco, Sarmiento, 1998: 92, 93). However, the subsistence of peasant and indigenous households is still based, to a large extent, on the labour force of young girls, who, because of their low educational level and the asymmetric wage relations obtaining among genders, tend to accept badly remunerated jobs (Mestrum, 2000). It can then be inferred that within the official discourse of the Program, which is supposedly “uncoupled from the labor market structure” there is a stubborn resistance represented by the social practices of the benefit holders, at least regarding the incorporation of young girls in the assistance component of the program.

Despite the fact that not all the cases of school dropout or absenteeism are similar to the case mentioned above, and that it is not always girls who end up without an education, most of the time it is closely related to the conditions of access to the resources and not to lack of opportunities, as PROGRESA claims. However, for Justina to reject the “offer” of a scholarship for her children, which entails some help in food, would amount to losing the opportunity to pay a debt, to purchase some corn, a chicken or another animal, to collaborate for a religious celebration, or simply to help someone in need. Accepting the scholarship, however, implies the duplication of her domestic work, as her daughters’ school attendance (with or without a taco in their bellies), reduces the amount of time they will help her around the home.

Like Justina, many other women and most men know that education is one way to access the labour market, and even if PROGRESA underestimates this factor, it still considers it among its objectives. A similar situation exists in the fields of health and nutrition, as the lack of information limits the nutritional potential of the resources. But Justina, like the rest of the population, is aware that to have an elementary education is not enough to procure well-balanced “tacos” (meals) every day, and that a visit to the doctor will not prevent them from the diseases associated with the lack of water in the community. In San Miguel de La Labor, *a source of employment is what is needed, as well as improved local wages, not to mention a source of clean drinking water.*

The following programs will be replaced by PROGRESA:

- Milk Distribution Social Program (LICONSA),
- Subsidy for the Consumption of Tortilla (FIDELIST),
- Ministry of Education scholarships
- Scholarships and food warehouses of the National Indigenist Institute (INI)
- Food warehouses of the Program of Family Social Assistance (PASAF) of the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF)

The last three programs listed above operated in the community of San Miguel de la Labor. PROGRESA is the only social welfare alternative left, as its objective is not to create opportunities, but to combine health, education and nutrition actions so that opportunities can be improved. From this perspective, opportunities are reduced to the ones that exist in the community. For San Miguel de la Labor, this would mean using the three elementary schools, two kindergartens and a technical high school. Besides the health center, there is also an indigenous shelter that assists the poorest children so that they can attend school; its future is also in jeopardy.

As a final objective, PROGRESA aims at improving women's condition, recognizing and supporting the decisive role that they play fostering family and community development. They will be provided with information and knowledge that will foster their personal development and the fulfillment of their capacities. It is regrettable that, in addition to the inequality that implies living in poverty, generally women undergo harder conditions of marginality and exclusion, which they experience from an early age (PROGRESA, 1997: 2).

The inclusion of an objective aimed at improving the well being of poor women can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation would regard it as a result of the pressure of international organizations toward the recognition of the role of women in the families' social well being; this recommendation is accompanied by a vigorous pressure for birth control. In fact, the World Bank (1993) and other financial agencies stress the condition of including an efficient birth control program, aiming at reducing the birth rate - and also, at potential migration of the poor to other countries (Morales, 1998; Vizcarra, 1997).

The second interpretation, which does not exclude the first one, is based on the recognition that the equations "woman-nutrition," "woman-health," "woman-nature" and "women-children" are the result of social constructions and that a gender perspective raises the visibility of women in scientific discourse producing scientific knowledge about women as subjects. This suggests the existence of different interpretations of social life within social policies (Couillard, 1996). Scientific

knowledge is used then by government institutions to comply with external social regulation (birth control) or to elaborate strategies of action aimed at modifying or producing social change in the living conditions of women living in extreme poverty. These actions turn into social control and power manifestations. CEPAL's studies on poverty in Latin America (1997 in Mestrum, 2000) for example, are based on a gender perspective (*gendering poverty*). Its researchers denounce the extreme vulnerability of women experiencing poverty to the impact of recent crises, stressing that, "most measures to eradicate feminine poverty" have been merely of the assistance type, and that projects have not been "set within development policies, or have not been linked to the market nor provided with enough capital to allow them to survive" (15). On the other hand, the presence of women experiencing poverty in CEPAL's discourse does not include them in the lowest categories (the poorest of the poor) in two key aspects: as mothers (reproductive role) and participants in the labour market (productive role); instead, it links women's poverty to social equity and economic development, providing them with spaces of resistance and a considerable capacity for reaction.

Through these discursive practices, scientific knowledge about women in poverty not only stresses their vulnerability to the crises and values their responsibility as mothers, homemakers and environmental guardians, but also acknowledges their potential for social mobility. When women stop being on the receiving end of social policies, they become subjects who are capable of sharing responsibilities, organizing themselves and participating in the social policies that will benefit them and their families. These would be the real women participating in PROGRESA (*mujeres progresas*).

### Choosing a Community and a Target Population

The method for choosing a community and the participant families constitutes a strategy of social control and validates public intervention in the so-called "marginal" communities. To PROGRESA, all Mexican families living in conditions of extreme poverty are considered the target population (14 million people in 1998). The implementation of the program was to proceed by stages and gradually incorporate families suffering from poverty. In its initial stages, PROGRESA was oriented to marginal regions and communities in rural areas (PROGRESA, 1997: 3). The selection of marginal communities was based the existence of the minimum infrastructure requirements to make possible the program's coordination, such as a community health centre

and an elementary school. The selection of marginal communities and families suffering from extreme poverty followed objective criteria and rigorous procedures to ensure an overall comparative base at the national level.

San Miguel de la Labor is one of the communities that form the Mazahua ethnic group. Anthropologists and historians have not shown much interest in the Mazahua group—because their prehispanic ancestors did not build large ceremonial centres and because they were often subordinated by the neighboring *otomies* (Cortez, 1988)—the Mazahua region, predominantly in the municipalities of San Felipe del Progreso and Villa Victoria del Estado has been of great political interest for social assistance and integration policies.

The few existing studies of this region consider the Mazahua culture to be heterogeneous and fragmented; it is viewed as a culture that has experienced severe proletarianization due to increasing migration of its population to the country's capital, and to its integration in the wage-earning market (Arizpe, 1980; Cabrera, 1979; Chavez, 1979; Cortez, 1988; Margolies, 1975; Romeau, 1979). Nevertheless, their language, their subsistence strategies based on the corn monoculture and the supplementary wages as agricultural day laborers, and their affiliations and ethnic customs, but above all their marginality, have translated their persistence into becoming a subject of interest for new ethnographies (Vizcarra, 1997, 2001; Korbacek et al., 1999), for agricultural studies (Arriaga et al., 1990; Woodgate, 1994), and for the state and federal government.

### Criteria Followed by PROGRESA in Choosing San Miguel de la Labor

CONPROGRESA, or the co-ordination of the program, chose in its initial stages, the Community of San Miguel de la Labor under two criteria: its marginality and its institutional infrastructure.

1. San Miguel de la Labor is a community with a high rate of marginality, according to the index of marginality defined by CONPROGRESA:
  - High mortality rate (12/1000 per year, the national average being 4/1000).
  - High demographic pressure on the resources (4300 inhabitants live in 536 households: 8 inhabitants per household, of which only 26 households have access to running water and 7 with sewage drains to a creek; 392 have access to electricity. The community has 650 hectares of rain-fed agricultural land, specially in corn monoculture).

- High rate of child malnutrition (4.5 out of every 10 children present some degree of malnutrition; of these, 1 out every 10 is a serious case).
  - High rate of absenteeism, school desertion and illiteracy. 1127 people above age 6 do not read or write.
2. San Miguel de la Labor is 1 of the 27 communities, of the 193 in the municipality of San Felipe del Progreso, which has a public health service and 3 basic education schools. This was a key requisite for the community's selection.

It should be stressed that the second criteria is the most decisive for the selection of the community, as a high level of marginality does not ensure selection; the community must have a public health service or have one in its vicinity. Some families from neighboring communities that were selected (Guadalupe Cote and San Nicolás Romero) were also selected as participants in PROGRESA. It is understandable that a bureaucratic infrastructure already in place is needed for carrying out the program. However, these measures are more exclusionary than inclusive, as they cause resentment among the communities that are not chosen to participate in the program.

### Criteria Followed by PROGRESA to Choose the Program's Beneficiary Families

As for the participant families, these were identified according to the following "impartial, rigorous and objective" criteria: a survey on the Socioeconomic Household Characteristics (ENCASEH) was coordinated and carried out by CONPROGRESA, along with the state governments and the municipal authorities, in which 105 issues are investigated. The information is analyzed according to an econometric model, namely a point system "that tries to ensure comparative equality in the determination of families suffering from extreme poverty," a score is accorded and correlated with a pre-determined value (standard deviation), equivalent to a "line of extreme poverty" (very high marginality). The families included in the survey are selected if they have a lower score. All the families identified as suffering from extreme poverty are to be included in the "Participants."

### Register of PROGRESA.

- The participant families of PROGRESA will have an exclusive identification, which will be used for the control of resource allocation and to supervising the action of the officials.
- In each of the participant families, a person will be identified for receiving the benefits. This will be preferably the mother of the family or, in her default,



the person in charge of preparing food and taking care of children (PROGRESA, 1997: 3, 4).

At San Miguel de la Labor 387 families were chosen, along with the community of Guadalupe Cote and Nicolás Romero, 536 families were selected from more than 1300 in these communities. They are headed totally or partially by women, or, at least, a mother, grandmother or adult woman who is responsible for taking care of the children under 12 years of age who live in the household.

### **Changes in the Individual, Domestic and Collective Behaviours**

During my fieldwork in San Miguel la Labor, I had the opportunity to interview over 40 families: 35 of the program's chosen families and seven families that were not chosen. Individual and collective behaviours related to their situation were identified.

According to Pedro Juan (35-year-old peasant from the community of San Miguel de la Labor) observed:

In the last few months many surveys have been taken, and people are tired of responding to them, the people from INEGI (Institute of Statistics, Geography and Computer Science), PROCEDE people (Program of Certification of Ejido Rights and Titles of Urban Lots), the DIF people (Program of Integral Development of the Family), people from the PRI, etc. When the ENCASH was applied, the information they were looking for was what mostly women know; some people got confused.

The program provides families who were not accepted in the first selection the opportunity to reapply, but they will not be considered before the end of the first year. As for the families that were not surveyed, women will have to apply in writing for their case to be considered. As an immediate response, twenty women asked to be included in the register the same day that the participant families received their benefits and the list of selected families was published.

Social discontent was immediately felt, precisely from those families that were not selected. Women attribute this to various reasons: they were away the day of the survey, or they did not know it would take place. But mainly they say that they did not know how to answer the survey. However, another reason for this resentment or feeling of injustice is that they perceive themselves as being poorer than the ones who were selected, or that some families were selected despite not having children of school age. Another resentment is based on the fact that the amount of scholarships and

food assistance given is calculated according to the school level that children attend and the number of children in the family between 6 and 12 years old. The more children in that age group, the bigger the benefits. Conversely, the more children below that age group, the smaller the proportion of benefits. Such resentment is not customary, as, in Juan's words, "whenever money or food are given away, women forget about injustice and irregularities. Nothing can be claimed then."

The method for selecting and identifying the community and the target population may not be so efficient in that they generate resentment, but once the participants receive their first installment, they become tied to the determination of public action, as: "It's better than nothing; welcome" (Dominga, participant mother).

Participant families will have access to benefits for a maximum of three years after which they may reapply. The renewal of their benefits is then contingent upon the extent to which they have complied with the tasks they were assigned during the initial period.

On September 15, 1998, the first benefits were awarded to the women who signed their PROGRESA identification cards in San Miguel de la Labor. Benefits consisted of a check for a basic value of 210 pesos. This amount was to be used to buy food. Although it would allow women to purchase 70 kilograms of corn, they would first need to deduct the cost of transportation from these isolated communities to a bank. Calculating a daily consumption of two kilograms of corn for a family of five, benefits would cover 35 days. (In theory the cheques were meant to be received every two months, but in fact they consistently reached their recipients three months later.

Evidently, this kind of benefits are not introducing social changes regarding the nutrition of children, pregnant or breastfeeding women. They must be accompanied by other social development programs, against the neo-liberal tendencies of social polarization, otherwise their impact on extreme poverty will be negligible. Given the permanent nature of the problem, it is expected that more and more families will continue applying for benefits. However, it will be difficult for them to comply with the "voluntary" requirements of participation in PROGRESA.

It is the women must comply with the commitments, because it is they who sign and agree to receive the benefits in exchange for registering their children at school, taking their families to medical consultations and attending 25 workshops on disease, pregnancy, birth control and nutrition, as well as using the benefits for improving their families nutrition and for preventing

their children's school absenteeism. As in the case of all public policies, the goals of PROGRESA are not only achieved through the distribution of benefits or the transfer of income, in the hope that indicators will eventually change. Some regulatory and monitoring mechanisms for the desired social changes are needed. In this regard, CONPROGRESA stipulates the means of control and surveillance and penalizes women with suspension from the program for the following reasons:

Women will be temporarily suspended if their:

- children fail to attend school
- or if the women fail to attend periodic health service workshops.

Repeated non-compliance can lead to definitive suspension.

Definitive suspension can also occur if women:

- provide false information about the socioeconomic conditions of the family, or about the attendance at school and health workshops
- do not comply with the assigned tasks
- misuse the identification card of the benefit holder
- permanently migrate from the community.

Families may reapply for benefits in communities where PROGRESA operates. As could be expected, not many women complied with their responsibilities. Sometimes they did not attend workshops; they sent their daughters instead so they could claim attendance. However, these attitudes are not due to disobedience, but for many private and social reasons women were not available to attend the workshops at the health center for the whole 20 weeks. Despite their absenteeism, most women made an effort to organize their schedules to attend Wednesday talks and medical consultation. (Just imagine 536 women with their children lasting through the long days of outdoor medical consultation and talks). Hortensia, who tries to attend all the time, says:

I haven't been able to attend for three Wednesdays in a row. I have to stay at the shop and tend to the mill. My children can not help me, as three of them are going to school and the other two are little ones; next Wednesday I'm definitely going, otherwise I will get suspended from PROGRESA.

Against PROGRESA's goals of improving women's conditions, this new responsibility stresses them out, as they worry constantly about unattendance, have to get up earlier to make tortillas or otherwise stop cooking on Wednesdays. It should be added that most of the women did not use the benefits to purchase food; it was used instead to pay debts, particularly food and doctor's bills, school uniforms and materials. Some of them used their

money to buy "urgent things" (as, for example, construction materials for adding a room to their houses) and for things that are not so urgent but which are still important (beer, which is a part of social and religious festivities). Despite the fact that it is difficult to monitor where economic support is going, an indicator of improved nutrition is to keep records of height and weight among children who are under five years old. But, in any event, two kilograms of tortillas for a family of five during 35 days is not likely to have a great impact on nutrition.

CONPROGRESA was not as severe in this case, as it would have suspended temporarily most of the participants. They were penalized economically instead. This means that they had to wait until April of 1999 for their second check, for school materials and scholarships taking into consideration school attendance, women's attendance to the first 18 talks, and women's and children's individual vaccination record. Checks were issued for different amounts according to each case. This caused resentment, confusion and a sense of injustice. The health center officials, however, who monitor attendance and compliance to a large extent, explained the reasons for the penalties and generated a feeling of guilt among the population. Their explanation had the effect of encouraging compliance as well as conferring a sense of authority to the doctors and nurses in charge of the health center. The monitoring and penalizing procedures acquired social acceptance as well.

## Conclusion

When social demands generated by poverty are formulated by external agents in an atmosphere of emergency and reduced alternatives, the target population resigns itself to the imposed restrictions and conditions, hoping to get at least some "benefit" from the same state that they hold responsible for their situation in the 1990s. It is the state's responsibility to eradicate extreme poverty; however, its strategy is conceived within the framework of world concern and fundamental universal values promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This framework emphasizes, above all, values such as "equality of opportunities" and "freedom." Following the international bodies' guidelines, the Mexican state has oriented its social policies toward: a) distributing cash handouts; b) forcing the target populations to attend school; and c) fostering the use of health centres. Such assistance policies should, in theory, eliminate the obstacles that prevent the poor who are below the threshold of moderate poverty from entering the "game" that would improve their conditions. In practical terms,

however, this deliberately eschews the possibility of challenging poverty through economic policy measures, such as a policy of recuperation of real salaries, on the one hand, and a strong reactivation program for the peasant economy, on the other (Boltvink, 2000).

The role of the state, now reduced to implementing assistance policies through compensatory programs such as PROGRESA, is, in general terms, in agreement with two large-scale strategies of neo-liberal capitalism which are key features of its globalization phase. The first strategy aims at encouraging people who are experiencing extreme poverty to participate in the market, as the low wages they are willing to work for become a magnet for both local and foreign capital. The second strategy is intended to create basic conditions that guarantee access to a minimum stock of productive human capital (education, food and reproductive health), so that only the required labor force migrates towards the national and international production centers. The rest of their families are supposed to stay in their communities, thus complying with the directives of the social assistance programs such as school attendance for their children and use of health services.

Aside from the fact that the state presents itself as a co-participant which encourages the active participation of the population, the implementation of "top-down" policies reduces the range of agents of social change. We can only perceive two extremes (policies and the family), losing sight of intermediate agents that can influence social change (widely considered) and domestic change (in a private space). Current methods of analysis of welfare and social change policies are generally divorced from a changing reality. On the one hand we have the analysis of the official discourse and the role of the state in the field of social assistance policy, on the other, I stress the effects of policies on families or households; however, the gap between them can be bridged through the analysis of the regulation process of social policies (actions) and the responses from the subjects of such policies (reactions).

In this regard, this paper elucidates how the study of the mechanisms of execution should not limit itself to the role of analytical link, but that it become instead a wider study of strategies of power and social control. It could be hypothesized then, that Mexican social policies of the 1990s, in the case of PROGRESA, are the consequence of other public neo-liberal policies that exert control on the subject's behaviour and on their environment, actions that don't produce social change towards the families' well being. In our case, Mazahua women and mothers, because of their condition of "extreme

poverty" and because they are classified as "marginal" along with their families, are subject to power relations exerted by PROGRESA's administrators. Hence, these women are not only provided with money but entrusted with spending it wisely; if they don't, they are seen as undermining their families' well-being for not taking advantage of the "human development opportunities" PROGRESA claims to offer.

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## Notes

- 1 Cited by Nahmad, Carrasco and Sarmiento (1998: 72).
- 2 This was the case of the National Solidarity Program (PRONASOL), implemented on the eve of the 1994 elections.
- 3 In this regard, Foucault conceptualizes discourse as "a set of enunciations insofar as they stem from the same discursive formation; not forming a rhetorical or formal unity indefinitely repeatable and which use in history could be pointed out (and to be eventually explained); it is constituted by a limited amount of enunciations for which a given set of conditions of existence can be defined" (Foucault, 1996: 198).
- 4 The amount of population living under the threshold of moderate poverty are estimated to represent 24% of the world's population, most of it concentrated in rural regions of the "underdeveloped" countries (World Bank, 1999).
- 5 It should be mentioned that PROCAMPO, the Federal program of Support to the Countryside, started in 1992, keeps offering credit to the peasants, particularly allowing them purchase corn fertilizer. In San Miguel de la Labor, PROCAMPO affiliates received \$650 per Ha. in 1998. There is another program, Programa de Crédito a la Palabra, co-ordinated by the Ministry of Social Development, which operates through credit for agricultural investment. This credit is reimbursed without interest the following year; lack of payment is penalized with suspension from the program.
- 6 CONASUPO was the nationwide government agency which had the role of intermediary of basic foodstuffs distribution, mostly corn, milk and beans. Its policies, involving subsidized supply of basic foodstuffs such as corn and milk for the poor, practically disappeared towards the end of 1999.
- 7 The Ejido form of the land tenure was established as a result of the Mexican revolution (1910-20) in which landless peasants demanded "land and liberty" "from the state. The Ejido is a social land tenure.
- 8 See Raygoza and de la Torre (2000), who analyze the average amounts allocated to poor families between 1988 and 1994. These authors stress the differences of spending

among different regions: the poorest and most densely populated ones receive less social expense.

9 Roemer (1998) and Sen (1982) deal adequately with this debate.

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