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**RESIDENTIAL LEVEL STRUGGLE AND CONSCIOUSNESS:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF POOR WOMEN IN GUAYAQUIL,  
ECUADOR**

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## I. Introduction

In Latin American cities low-income women work, not only in their homes and in the factories, but also in their neighbourhood communities. Along with men and children they are involved in residential level mobilisation and struggle over issues of collective consumption. The inadequate provision by the state of housing and local services over the past decades has resulted increasingly in open confrontation as ordinary people organise themselves to acquire land through invasion, or put direct pressure on the state to allocate resources for the basic infrastructure required for survival. This paper describes the critical role that women play in the formation, organisation and success of local-level protest groups, and considers the implications of their roles, both for the women themselves and for the nature of struggle and consciousness at the point of residence.

A case study of the participation of poor women in self-help barrio level committees in the mangrove swamp periphery of the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador, provides the opportunity to examine a number of critical issues concerning the importance of women in residential level protest. Firstly, to what extent does the form of struggle amongst poor families reflect the division of labour within the family and consequently the gender divisions within society? While men are primarily concerned with the formal world of work and carry on their struggles at the point of production, women are primarily concerned with reproduction (in the sense of raising and maintaining the family) and carry on their struggles around issues of consumption at the point of residence:

By virtue of their place within the sexual division of labour as those primarily responsible for their domestic daily welfare women have a special interest in domestic provision and public welfare. (Molyneux 1979, p. 6)

The extent to which it is seen as 'natural' that women should assume such importance in residential level struggle should be reflected both in the nature of their mobilisation and the manner in which it is interpreted. If women's mobilisation is perceived of as an extension of their realm of interest and power in the domestic arena, then it is most likely that it is in their gender ascriptive roles as wives and mothers, rather than as persons, that it is legitimised both by the women themselves and by their men.

Secondly, what are the implications of the fact that women play such an important role in local-level mobilisation, both for the women themselves and residential level struggle? What are the consequences for the women themselves if they move beyond the perimeters of the 'domestic realm' into political action, thereby breaking the 'tacit agreement' between the sexes? What is the significance for those involved in residential level struggle if it is identified primarily as women's struggle? Does this mean that in the same way that women's domestic labour is undervalued, so residential level struggle is invisibilised and viewed as an inherently weaker basis for wider urban class struggle than men's struggle at the point of production? Examination of these issues in the following case study is intended to contribute to the debate concerning the extent to which the analytical separation between the two forms of struggle, identified as an economic division between production and consumption, is in fact a gender division between men and women reflecting the division of labour within the family.

The paper is divided into four parts. Part one, by way of background, describes very briefly the developing crisis of collective consumption in Guayaquil and the self-help response to this on the part of low-income families. Part two examines the origins of popular participation focusing on the different reasons that men and women become involved in forming barrio-level committees. Part three is concerned with the role of women in the different ferret functions of barrio - level committees. It describes the manner in which women mobilise and the achievements of their residential level protest. Finally, part four focuses on the implications of the experience of residential level struggle for the development of women's consciousness. In this highly complex and somewhat speculative area issues are

explored at two levels: firstly, the consequences of the participatory experience for rank and file barrio women in terms of the extent to which this opens alternatives for transforming the nature of their gender subordinated relationships within the family; secondly, the implications for leaders, both personally and politically, of the process whereby local level barrio committees are co-opted by national political parties.

## II. The Development of Guayaquil and the Crisis of Collective Consumption

This case study is concerned with the experiences of poor women in the Indio Guayas barrio-level committee, situated in a low-income area of Guayaquil. Clearly the development and functions of one of the many hundreds of self-help committees cannot be viewed in isolation nor its formation and evolution understood except in terms of a wide diversity of external economic and political factors. However, in a paper this length only a very brief reference to the wider context is possible<sup>1</sup>.

Guayaquil, founded by the Spanish in 1537, is Ecuador's largest city, chief port and major centre of trade and industry. It is situated on low land 160 kilometres upstream from the Pacific Ocean. Historically its growth has been closely linked with Ecuador's primary export-oriented economy, critically dependent on shifts in the world market structure (MacIntosh 1972) with expansion during the 1920 cacao slump, the 1960s banana slump, as well as during the post-1950 import-substitution industrialisation policy. The highly skewed income distribution in Ecuador and the low level of per capita income has limited the possibilities for industrial development (JUNAPALA 1973) with Guayaquil remaining an industrial enclave whose growth reflects the agricultural sector's declining capacity to retain its population as much as the city's potential to create industrial employment (Cueva 1972; Hurtado 1969; Moore 1978). Guayaquil has a population of over one million, with thirty per cent of its annual growth rate resulting from in-migration, mainly mestizos from the surrounding littoral departments.

In Guayaquil commercial activity is focused around the 40 gridiron blocks of the original Spanish colonial city which are encircled by the inner-city tugurios (rental tenements). To the north separated on higher hilly ground are the predominantly middle- and upper-income areas, while to the west and south are tidal swamplands which provide the predominant area for low-income expansion. Settlement in this peripheral-zone, known as the suburbios, involves both the creation of solid land as well as the construction of incrementally built bamboo and timber houses linked by a complex system of catwalks. With most of the low-income population effectively excluded from the conventional housing market (public and private) 'invasion' of the municipal owned suburbios was, between 1940 and 1980, the predominant means by which access to both land and a form of shelter was obtained<sup>2</sup>.

Indio Guayas is the name given by the local residents to an area of swampland, about ten blocks in size, located on the far edge of Cisne Dos. The settlement has no clear physical limits but has some three thousand residents, the majority of whom belong to the Indio Guayas barrio committee. The population, which has been settling in the area since the early 1970s, is young. Data from a household survey undertaken in 1978 show a mean age for both men and women of 30 years. Free unions (compromisos) are the predominant form of relationship, with most households male-headed and having a mean household size of 5.8.<sup>3</sup> This is a low-income community, representative of the lower end of unskilled

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<sup>1</sup>See Moser (1981, 1982) for more detailed contextual information relating to this case study.

<sup>2</sup>See Moser (1982) for a detailed account of the history of suburbio land ownership. Three different types of invasion can be identified, each linked to changing patterns of land ownership. Firstly, politically motivated organised invasions; secondly, those manipulated by real estate interests; and, thirdly, the invasion of 'professional squatters' who resettle every few years, selling off their previous homes. The first two types of invasions predominated prior to 1967 legislation which reaffirmed the ownership of suburbio land by Guayaquil's Municipality, while requiring it to sell to existing occupiers. While the 1976 legislation was seen as a vote-catching gesture on the part of the CFP Party of Assad Bucaram to give homes to the majority of the city's population, it was de facto a recognition of the State's responsibility to provide land on which the low-income population might build their own homes.

<sup>3</sup>Fieldwork for this case study was undertaken from September 1977 to March 1978, and based on participant observation through living in the area, and a 244 household survey of three different block groups

non-unionised labour surviving in highly competitive small-scale enterprises, which are characterised by underpaid and irregular 'casual' work in a variety of marginal service sector activities - the men mechanics, construction workers, tailoring outworkers, unskilled factory workers and labourers, the women domestic servants, washerwomen, cooks, sellers and dressmakers<sup>4</sup>.

The motivation to 'invade' this municipal floodland and acquire a ten by 30 metre plot is primarily to own a home and thereby avoid prohibitive rents. This is reflected in the fact that virtually all the lots surveyed were occupied by the owner. The decision to acquire a plot is predominantly a family one. Potential inhabitants hear about vacant plots almost entirely through their families (37 per cent) or friends (40 per cent). More than half had relatives living in the area. Distinct processes can be identified in which extended families settled in the area over time. In one an elder son establishes a house for himself and nuclear family. After a few months or even a year or two, he will acquire a second plot nearby and bring his mother and siblings to the older plot which he transfers to their name although he effectively pays for the two plots himself. In a second pattern, more common with women, a resident keeps constant surveillance on plots falling vacant to ensure that her family has first access to them. Both men and women visit the area looking for plots, with Indio Guayas being settled through incremental plot by plot squatting<sup>5</sup>. Both individuals and groups are involved in the initial process of cutting back the mangrove swamp and marking out the area, the majority either 'professional squatters' acting for personal profit or plot owners working for themselves. But in all cases this is men's work, physically arduous and at times dangerous. Women, therefore, tend not to be involved at this stage and it is only when the family occupies their plot that women become involved in the process of consolidating their home.

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selected to show changes in the settlement and consolidation process. Further fieldwork to provide longitudinal data was undertaken in January 1979 and August 1982.

<sup>4</sup>See Moser (1981) for detailed statistical breakdown on occupations and sources of income.

<sup>5</sup>The inhabitants of Indio Guayas identify eight different categories of plot acquisition, and make a clear distinction between paid and unpaid. (See Moser (1982) for detailed breakdown.)

### III. The Origins of Popular Participation

Community level mobilisation in the suburbios is neither automatic nor immediate. The development of self-help organisation which occurs, as areas of swampland are incrementally occupied by a heterogeneous population, is the consequence of two interdependent experiences: the common experience within the community of struggling to survive in highly adverse conditions, and varying previous experience concerning the 'institutionalised' procedure of petitioning political parties for services in return for votes. These two sets of experiences will be examined separately in detail:

**Internal factors.** Plots are not always occupied immediately when acquired but are held as a future investment to be occupied when infrastructure has reached the area. The distance from the city centre, lack of electricity, running water, sewerage and above all roads deter families from living on their plots. Women are most reluctant to move because of the dangers to children of the perilous system of catwalks, the considerable additional burden of domestic labour under such primitive conditions and the very real fear of loneliness. It is the men, generally less concerned with issues such as these, who persuade the family to move. But it is the women who bear the brunt, and the distress experienced by many in the early months and years should not be underestimated. Initially, walking on catwalks is so frightening that many crawl on hands and feet, venturing out as infrequently as possible. The logistics of acquiring water from the tankers, or food from shops up to a mile away, are costly, time consuming and physically gruelling, with women recounting hazardous stories of wading miles through mud to acquire necessary provisions. As Maria, one of the earliest women to the area, described:

The life on the catwalks was terrible. To live on the catwalks without light, without water, without anything, was excessively terrible. To live in the hope that friends from outside would help to get water was terribly difficult. Often there would not even be a drop of water to drink. Because if one wanted to eat one would have to bring the tank of water from over there, and they charged 30 sucres for bringing it here in canoe. When my husband had time he sometimes carried it. I did not carry any because I was afraid, because those catwalks were very high and they would often collapse. Women would fall off and they would injure themselves, they would get sticks stuck in themselves and get, what do you call it, gangrene. Two women died of that. They got one of those mangrove sticks stuck into themselves and they died.

For many women it is the first time they have left their parents' home and because the move frequently forces them to give up work, such as laundering or domestic service, it also involves greater economic dependence on their men<sup>6</sup>. While families acknowledge the longer term positive aspects of home ownership, particularly in releasing resources previously spent on rent for housebuilding, children's education or the acquisition of consumer goods, the women in particular are forced to recognise the important implications it has for their lives. In accepting the additional domestic burden they become aware of their need for new and different forms of solidarity and support. Prior to moving to the barrio, hardships were most often shared with family or close kin.

Once in the barrio, however, they are forced very suddenly to rely on previously unknown neighbours and then quickly develop complex interdependent mutual-aid linkages with each other, formalising them through comadrasco (god parenthood) relationships at the birth of suburbio born children. The unreliable nature of the labour market which causes financial insecurity and the high desertion rate experienced in compromiso relationships (i.e. the fact that men frequently abandon women) are both factors which constantly reinforce support networks between women. Above all, however, it is the

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<sup>6</sup>The lack of a reliable water supply is a critical problem for the numerous women involved in laundering work.



struggle for survival in a situation where even water is a scarce and valuable commodity, which forces women to develop and retain friendships with their neighbours, and gradually results in an increasing awareness among women of the need to try and improve the situation. Women living in the same street are constantly thrown together; when the water tanker fails to arrive they stand in groups discussing how to share what they have; when a child is killed falling off the catwalks women gather to console a grieving neighbour. In situations such as these women complain and commiserate together, and through interaction of this kind they become aware that the problem is not simply an individual one but common to all women.

As Susana, later to become president of the barrio committee, remarked:

In this area where we are now two little children died. A man also died by being electrocuted. He was making the light connection when the tide was in, there was lots of water, he got caught and died. There were some terrible cases that happened here. And seeing that it was extremely difficult to be able to live under these conditions, that's when we decided to get organised in a committee.

In the early stages of settlement growth, socio-economic differences between neighbours are not visibly marked. All live in rudimentary bamboo houses, have young children; differences in previous experience, or their men's occupations, are largely irrelevant when surviving in the same hazardous conditions. Although women become aware of their common suffering, this experience itself does not always provide sufficient motivation for common action. Socialised in a Latin society which places great emphasis on the submissive, dependent and mothering role of women (*hembrismo*) as against the dominant, aggressive and fearless role of men (*machismo*), poor *suburbio* women do not question the fact that their responsibility for the domestic arena, which they see as natural, makes them the primary sufferers. Much of their conversation comprises woeful stories of endless misery with consolation gained from the recognition that this is the fate of all women. The suffering role of women is universally reinforced by the highly popular television soap operas and photo novels (imported mainly from Mexico, Brazil and Spain). Even when attempts are made to reassess roles within the family it is difficult to change long-standing attitudes. Thus Maria, discussing her attempt to 'better' herself recalled:

I listen to the radio because they give advice about the home, about how to behave with the husband, how the husband should behave with the wife, that he mustn't be bad, mustn't keep her alone at home. It's nice to hear that. When he's here on Saturdays he listens in and he laughs.

**External factors.** The existence of a widely known procedure of petitioning for services in return for votes by self-help committees proves an important external catalyst for instigating popular participation among newly settled communities. Inhabitants arrive in the area with a varying range of prior knowledge, if not previous experience, about the functions of local level organisation. The long history of barrio level committees in Guayaquil beginning in the 1940s was associated with a political system in which populist parties bought votes by providing infrastructure<sup>7</sup>. Until the late 1960s committees were short-lived, formed prior to elections and disbanded soon afterwards. It was only in the late 1960s with the

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<sup>7</sup>Ecuadorian politics have been described as 'a pattern of constitutional rule in which power is passed often peacefully and legally from one upper-class clique to another' (see MacIntosh 1982). The consequence of an overcentralised hierarchical system of government means that local municipalities without annual budgets have to manipulate the system by petitioning central government for local project funds. Decision making is personalistic, based on short-term political motives and a concern for buying votes rather than the long-term effects of their actions.

post-Guevara tremors which shook liberal Latin America that they took on a more 'institutionalised' form. Along with the church, student, and middle-class women's organisations, which flooded the suburbios with dispensaries and clinics, came President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress programme. As a condition of a large US AID grant for squatter upgrading, the Guayaquil Municipality was forced to create a Department of Community Development whose purpose was to assist poor communities to 'fight for infrastructure' (luchar para conseguir obras). The 1972 Plan 240 to infill the mangrove swamps was organised around local barrio committees who formed by the hundred to ensure the arrival of infill. Although by 1976, when the project ceased for lack of funds, most committees had disbanded or existed only in name, nevertheless the experience of local organisation gained during this period was an important one for the suburbio inhabitants.

### **The Role of Women in the Formation of Barrio Committees**

Barrio level committees in the suburbios of Guayaquil contain both women and men members<sup>8</sup>. It is the differences in motivation and commitment between the sexes which it is important to identify. Since individual barrio committees have limited power on their own to petition for infrastructure, it is necessary to examine leadership roles in terms of the history of a group of spatially overlapping committees, in which one tends to predominate in each area. This reflects a complex process of fusion, especially pre-election, and fission, usually post-election following the unequal allocation of resources. The barrio committee Indio Guayas was formed in 1975 as a splinter group of another committee because of discontent with the incumbent leadership. As Susana who invented the name Indio Guayas explained:

The first committee here was terrible. All the president did was to steal the money. He was simply engaged in swindling the people. Many presidents of committees live off their members. They don't care if anyone dies or drowns. But to be a leader I think one must be truly human. And also to live here. Because otherwise how does one know what the needs are? I was experiencing that reality in the flesh living here. I made the people understand that we would not achieve anything if we stayed in that committee and that we should organise ourselves, whoever might be the President. But provided he really fought for the interests of this area. So one evening we met in my house, some thirty of us from this area, and we organised the committee that I am directing. At that time I was not president, my brother-in-law Julio was. But as he is lax, he does not like to fight if he meets any problem, he gives up saying, 'I don't want to know anything about it'. I would say to him, 'Julio, you will not have anything'. I was vice president, so

I became acting president and I went out into the streets to go after things. I would go with 10, 15 women to see what we could get. So I became president.

Although it is the women who urge their neighbours to form a committee they do not automatically see themselves as leaders. Susana, now president of Indio Guayas, started as a deputy in the first committee she joined. When she persuaded her neighbours to form a splinter group it was her brother-in-law, Julio, a white-collar worker in a brewery and her highest status male relative who was considered most appropriate to become president. It was only one year later in 1976, by which time Julio had shown himself thoroughly inept, that Susana had sufficient confidence to become president herself, a position

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<sup>8</sup>This contrasts with the majority of studies of women's residential level mobilisation which have described the history and functions of women-only committees. See for instance Kaplan (1982), Chinchilla (1977) and Schmink (1982).

she still holds today<sup>9</sup>. Rosa, woman president of a nearby committee, had a similar experience when, 'out of curiosity', she first participated in a mobilisation to petition the mayor for infrastructure:

In those days I cooked and washed. I had no idea about the business of struggle. I was so fed up with the bad organisation of that committee that I persuaded my two neighbours to come to my house. They elected me president and we formed a committee. I had no idea what to do. But it is the obligation of women to struggle. It is our duty to ensure that things improve. Women are more dedicated than men. Women are stronger, they make decisions while men vacillate. So that's how we started.

Examples such as these indicate that women participate in protest initially out of desperation at their appalling living conditions and then out of a sense of duty, move into leadership positions over frustration at the corrupt management of the incumbent men presidents. It is important to note, nevertheless, that the majority of committees still have men as presidents, although those headed by women have increased.

In the area of Cisne Dos, where Indio Guayas is located, four out of twenty committees were female-headed in 1976; by 1982 the number had increased to eight<sup>10</sup>. Women have always formed the overwhelming majority of rank and file members, although when a committee is first formed status distinctions are not marked. The committee sees itself as a group of predominantly women neighbours working together out of a common preoccupation with their living conditions. Over time distinctions emerge between those few prepared to take on the difficult responsibility of presidentship, and the majority who, for a variety of reasons, prefer to remain working at the rank and file level.

Men and women become presidents for different reasons. Although the majority would emphatically stress their commitment to 'help the community', which at one level is certainly the case, this response also reflects the official line of the Community Development Department that for community work not to be corrupt it must be unpaid and voluntary. This conflicts with the reality which clearly shows community 'work' to be both arduous and costly in terms of time, an unaffordable luxury in a low-income community. Obviously there are economic interests involved in the work. Men, however, are able to be far more blunt and open about their personal motivations than can women. 'Professional squatters' for instance use their position as barrio presidents to legitimise their operations 'advising' overnight invasions of unoccupied land for remunerative tips<sup>11</sup>. Local shopkeepers and artisans use committee work to establish their reputation and thereby increase clientele in the neighbourhood. In the community itself a somewhat ambiguous attitude exists concerning the unofficial payments made. When the president is a man it is a recognised, if criticised, part of 'work'. Certainly women presidents see men's involvement in financial terms. As one woman explained:

The great majority of the men leaders sell themselves, sell their conscience. Most of these leaders are not disinterested. They do it for an ulterior motive. Even if they see Ecuador is sinking they do it for the money.

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<sup>9</sup>Once elected, presidents tend to remain permanently in office until they either resign or lose power through internal schism within the committee,

<sup>10</sup>By the 1980s the extensive reputation of women presidents such as Rosa and Susana in the area around Indio Guayas resulted in younger women founding their own committees, many under the direct guidance of Susana.

<sup>11</sup>See Moser (1982) for a detailed account of the operations of 'professional squatters'.

How far this is a question of skill or conscience is debatable. As a woman president, when asked if she had illegally sold plots, remarked:

I wasn't taught to be shrewd; I came in as a novice. If I had known as much as I do now, I might have done it too. But I didn't know anything. All I wanted was to have a home and to go around the Centre getting the works (i.e. to mobilise for infrastructure).

Women, unlike men, have to be seen as selfless and 'pure', with their participation justified in terms of working to improve living conditions for their families. It is legitimised in terms of their gender ascriptive roles as wives and mothers and not perceived of as 'work'. For this reason women's motives for becoming president are far more complex, often not recognised by the women themselves, and also can change over time. While many men leaders had previously belonged to trade unions and had prior experience of local level organisation this was not the case with women<sup>12</sup>. Equally the evidence does not suggest that prior politicisation by parent or spouse was a determining influence in a decision to accept the responsibility of leadership<sup>13</sup>. While women presidents constantly justify their decision in terms of their commitment to improve conditions for their children as the duty and obligation of a mother, the life histories of suburbio women show that those who experienced traumatic suffering in childhood or early adulthood are more likely to involve themselves in residential struggle, out of a determination that their own children, particularly their daughters, should not suffer in a similar manner.

Two examples provide illustration of this. Susana, president of Indio Guayas, is the eldest daughter of a woman who had six children by five different men, most of them casual lovers. One was murdered in a fight, others simply walked out and the children were brought up in abject poverty. Susana, as the eldest, took the main responsibility for her brothers and sisters while her mother worked. She herself began working at twelve and when she married at fifteen it was to a much older man, with sufficient resources to allow her to train as a dressmaker. She still retains responsibility for her siblings while limiting her own family to two through birth control. Margarita, Susana's right-hand woman in barrio work, experienced a very traumatic first marriage. For fifteen years she lived with a taxi driver who locked her up whenever he went out. She escaped only at the cost of losing her seven children, becoming an itinerant market seller before settling in the suburbios in a second compromiso. Histories such as these are very common. Obviously for all women experiences such as these do not have similar repercussions. Nevertheless the evidence indicates that the experience of internal personal pain and suffering, resulting from severe poverty, are as important as external struggle (such as in the case of factory workers) in developing an awareness and recognition of the nature of oppression and a determination to confront it. As important as 'class consciousness', then, is the gradual development of a consciousness of gender oppression and the subordinated position of women. As Susana, addressing an audience of both men and women in the

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<sup>12</sup>For instance, the president of the barrio committee next door to Indio Guayas was an important official in the local fire service union, while an important male member of the Indio Guayas committee, now a local shopkeeper, had previously been involved in union work in a banana packing company in Guayaquil docks.

<sup>13</sup>Comparative work indicates the importance of identifying both class and political orientation of party. Chaney (1979) in her work on Latin American middle-class women leaders shows the important influence that parents have on the political activities of their daughters in Peru and Chile. Randall (1981) in her Testimonies on Nicaraguan Women in Struggle shows the important influence of radical rural campesino leaders on their daughters, and of radical urban middle-class sons and daughters on their mothers. In Guayaquil radical university student sons of working-class women were responsible for persuading their mothers to organise mass invasions prior to elections. However, the reverse is not necessarily true' often the daughters of women leaders from the suburbios are vehemently non-political in their attitudes.

weekly local-level meeting, said:

We must fight. Above all I want the women, the housewives, to help us, to come with us wherever we go to get the services we need. Why? Because you are at the heart of your homes. You are the ones who suffer the actions of your husbands. The woman is a slave in the home. The woman has to make the ends meet.

## IV. The Barrio Committee and the Role of Women

### The Structure of the Committee

Local level committees comprise up to fifteen elected officials, consisting of the president, four named officials and up to nine representatives. Although officials are regularly elected, in reality a core group of three or four take the major responsibility of making important decisions and day-to-day organisation, both because of the time constraints of different members and the frequent necessity in committee work for rapid action. In a society with a strict norm concerning the extent to which women can work alongside men to whom they are not related without causing malicious gossip or marital friction, women prefer to work with other women. Consequently the composition of the committee tends to be influenced by the sex of the president. Thus, when Indio Guayas was formed with Julio as president it consisted of eight men and four women. A year later when Susana took over there were eight men and seven women, but by 1982 there were nine women and five men. Despite this favourable balance of numbers the women remain in an exposed position because the work involves considerable contact with men officials and political party representatives. In order to minimise conflict they always try to ensure that either their spouse or another woman accompanies them, especially when they are required to journey outside the barrio. The close friendships which develop between women leaders are an acceptable way of showing that each woman is minding the other women's behaviour. Over time predominantly female-headed committees function alongside male-headed ones. However, because of a recognised sexual division of labour in the work of barrio committees, they never become single-sexed.

### The Functions of the Committee

The barrio committee performs a number of important functions, particularly in the early stages of settlement consolidation, and regardless of the composition of elected officials, it is the women members who take responsibility for much of the day-to-day work. The lack of police stations in peripheral areas such as Indio Guayas means that the most important function of the committee within the community is to try and maintain social order. The president is frequently forced into a leadership position arbitrating 'invasion' disputes and negotiating compensation (most often for the clandestine overnight 'invasions' of unoccupied but owned plots)<sup>14</sup>. One of the main causes of splits in committees is animosity resulting from the financial payoffs and bribes paid to presidents. The evidence suggests that men presidents, especially those involved in 'professional squatting', are more likely to gain from this activity. A second important internal function of the committee is to provide a support system to its members at moments of sudden personal life crises such as an unexpected death, or imprisonment. The financial support given comes from voluntary monetary collections, responsibility for which is undertaken by women committee members<sup>15</sup>.

The most important 'external' function of the barrio committee is to petition for infrastructure. This is a highly complex operation which can be mentioned only briefly here in terms of the particular role played by women. In common with low-income communities in cities throughout Latin America, the barrio

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<sup>14</sup>Although presidents 'negotiate' compensation, the actual invasion is often undertaken with the president's tacit support in order to increase the barrios population, and hence bargaining power in the fight for the allocation of infrastructure.

<sup>15</sup>In contrast, when a man abandons his woman, or beats her up when drunk, both are considered domestic family concerns and not the responsibility of the barrio committee.

committee mobilises so as to influence the manner in which resources are allocated<sup>16</sup>. Forms of mobilisation are determined by the way in which the Municipality of Guayaquil allocates its limited resources on the basis of patron-client relationships. This requires local committees to allow themselves to be co-opted by political parties which exchange services in return for votes and political support (see Sepulveda 1977). It also means, however, that the extent to which barrio level mobilisation is successful is in large part determined by national political factors beyond their control.

The different stages of mobilisation involve considerable time consuming 'voluntary' work. During the co-option process there are a succession of lengthy meetings (in addition to the regular Saturday neighbourhood meetings) within the barrio, as well as with party representatives and local government officials. The preparation and presentation of complex petition documentation is undertaken as well as the very rapid organisation of 'spontaneous' large scale mobilisations to protest at the Mayor's office in City Hall at propitious moments. Since the provision of infrastructure is ultimately in direct exchange for votes, the barrio committee has particular responsibilities to the political parties at election time. These include attendance at party headquarters briefings, organisation of busloads of supporters for political gatherings and extensive barrio level canvassing. Finally, when infrastructure is provided, the committee must ensure that the community's plan of work is implemented and that neighbouring committees do not manage to divert the infrastructure through bribes to implementing agency officials. In local level committees it is the women, both presidents and rank and file members, who bear the primary responsibility for this work, as the following detailed examination of Indio Guayas committee shows.

### **The History of Indio Guayas Committee**

Indio Guayas committee was founded in 1975 during the 1972-1977 period of military rule in Ecuador when few resources were allocated to low income communities such as the suburbios. Until 1977 and the return to democratic government, Indio Guayas' committee was effective primarily in its internal functions within the barrio. Political activity in the run-up to the 1978 national elections provided the opportunity for mobilisation. The fact that Indio Guayas and the surrounding area had been settled since the previous elections, with barrio committees unco-opted, resulted in intense activity with the range of political parties (from extreme right to left) offering vote-catching promises. In a highly complicated process Indio Guayas together with twenty other local committees were formed into a Front (Frente) and co-opted by a newly formed centre-left political party, Izquierda Democratica. At the barrio level the critical decision concerning the choice of party to support was based less on its political line than on the perception of its capacity to deliver the promised infrastructure in return for election votes. In the 1978-82 period Indio Guayas, with the other members of the Front, retained its long-term commitment to the same political party as it mobilised, bitterly fought and finally acquired infill, electricity and water. Its success has been determined by events at both the national and the local level, where, throughout, constant conflicts of committee fractionalisation have occurred as infrastructure provision has continued to be allocated in a non-rational manner.

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<sup>16</sup>See for instance Cornelius (1975), Eckstein (1977), Nelson (1979) and Collier (1975).

## V. The Implications of Women's Participation in Struggles

### The Rank and File Members

All the women support the committee. In general when people are asked to help on something serious they will come. When we go to the City Hall, when we have a demonstration the women come and that's the base of the committee. (Susana)

Since infrastructure is exchanged for votes the size and commitment of rank and file members is critical to the success and long-term survival of the barrio committee. Although in most families both the man and woman join as members of the committee, it is the women who regularly participate in the Saturday afternoon local meetings, the daytime 'spontaneous' mass protests to the Mayor's office and the evening mass lobbies at political party meetings held in different locations in the city. While older children are left at school or locked up at home, younger children almost always accompany their mothers since even at night their men are generally reluctant to be involved in childminding activities. Where men do attend mobilisations, their participation is neither regular nor reliable and is often undertaken after considerable pressure has been put on them both by the committee and their women.

Political party leaders, administrative officials and working class barrio men themselves all see it as natural that most of the participatory work should be undertaken by women, 'because women have free time, while men are out at work'. Although this may be true in some cases, particularly in relation to daytime mobilisation, it is also a convenient myth that ignores reality. The majority of women, throughout their adult lives, are involved not only in domestic and childrearing work but also in a diversity of income earning activities, even though these are more likely to be undertaken from home (see Moser 1981). Time spent in mobilisation, therefore, is detrimental both to domestic and to productive work, and women make considerable sacrifices, often risking their jobs as well as neglecting children, in order to make themselves available for mobilisations. The predominant attitude that community level politics, other than in leadership positions, is essentially women's work is reinforced not only by men at all levels but also by the barrio women themselves. Just as it is natural for them to take full responsibility for domestic work in the home, women see it as their responsibility to improve the living conditions of their family through participation in barrio level mobilisation, as Maria mentioned: 'It is the duty of a good mother and wife to improve the neighbourhood for her children.'

In this way women justify their responsibilities in terms of their gender ascriptive roles. Equally they perceive themselves as benefiting most from, for instance, piped water, since the work of water collection and haulage is undertaken primarily by them. Thus, the lack of reliable participation of men is lightly and often jokingly dismissed, as laziness, selfishness and irresponsibility, the predominant characteristics of male behaviour in the domestic arena. For their part, most men are willing to allow their women to participate, provided they can see the direct benefits to the family and ensure their own domestic comforts are not disturbed. Although mobilisations involve women travelling outside the barrio, and at night, the fact that it is a group activity means that it is considered 'safe'.

In Indio Guayas the women have been involved in community level mobilisations for more than eight years. Over time the experiences and achievements of struggle have had important consequences for their personal lives. From the outset participation in protest meetings provides women with an opportunity to get out of their homes and meet their neighbours. For many it is their first experience of a group activity with non-kin. In the tedium and monotony of daily

domestic work it provides excitement, if at times exposing them to hostility and violence, as the following mobilisation account indicates:



Susana said we must make a big demonstration, we must get all the people out. And Euclides (a man president) said ' If they make any trouble for you, knock Pendola' s (the Mayor' s) door down with your feet and you will see that they will give you something.' And so it was. We came along the catwalks, Jose (a man president from the next door committee) along one side and Susana on the other side, going all around calling all the people to come to the City Hall. We went in seven buses packed with women and children; people full of mud, without shoes, because they had to go around like that, just like that the women went. We went around 10 in the morning. And we made a real big problem for Pendola. The Mayor was real mad, he said that the police must evict us from there. And we didn't budge. 'We want infill' everyone was shouting. We were happy because like that we could achieve something.

Popular mobilisation involves endless waiting, in queues with petitions, in buses to reach destinations and at political meetings for the relevant politician to appear. This provides women with frequent small-group situations and the opportunity to discuss common problems and share intimate experiences: typical conflicts in their relationships with men, problems concerning their own sexuality and marital disputes over the use of birth control. As a group, women make consensual judgements about women who allow themselves to be sexually abused, and increase each other's confidence to return home and confront their men over issues such as sex or money. Group struggle provides catalytic situations for shared confidences which gives the women the opportunity to examine and question their own lives. In their personal lives most women moved very rapidly from the parental control of childhood, to the compromiso control of their children's father and, therefore, have had limited previous experience of independence or recognition of their own power, even if in a limited arena. Group experience of shared problems and common successes produces an awareness of personal consciousness. The extent to which it gives women the confidence to question the subordinate nature of their personal relationships cannot tangibly be measured. Nevertheless, individual examples provide evidence of the manner in which the experience of group protest over time has assisted local barrio women in their decision to take greater responsibility for their lives. Both Anna and Josefina live in compromiso relationships with local artisans, a carpenter and a tailor. In their early years of living in Indio Guayas both brought up young children and provided unremunerated assistance to their men's work through the diversity of tasks (see Moser 1981). Neither had any economic independence and both endured the physical abuse of husbands who were heavy drinkers. Anna's situation was exacerbated by the fact that her husband openly, and with his mother's support, lived between two households in a polygamous arrangement (see Moser 1981). Four years later both had taken conscious steps to make themselves economically independent. Josefina returned to night school to complete her primary education, while intermittently selling cloth, travelling on her own, with her husband' s reluctant consent, to retail it to rural family contacts. Anna was attending dressmaking classes and working as a laundry woman. With her own income she had gained sufficient confidence to retaliate when attacked by her husband, and to prevent him access to the house for three months until he stopped both excessive drinking and beating her up. Both women clearly identified the community mobilisation experience as critical in assisting them to recognise not only their need but also the possibility to get out of their homes and obtain some degree of economic independence.

The experience of protest exposes low-income women to the nature of the Ecuadorian political system, to the structure of local government and the function of political parties in the allocation of resources. In concrete terms, they see corruption in the way decisions are made, and exploitation in the manner in which the poor are constantly manipulated for political ends, resulting in increased cynicism about the political system. Despite the fact that literate women have had the vote in Ecuador since 1928, politics is still considered essentially a male world with women traditionally accustomed to vote in accordance with their father's or husband's view. In Guayaquil the low-income vote has predominantly supported populist leaders such as Velasco and then Bucaram. Popular participation often provides women with their first direct contact with a range of political views, which in the case of Indio Guayas from 1978 onwards

included the non-traditional new centre left party, Izquierda Democratica. Obviously not all women are equally affected by this experience but as many begin to make their own decisions about political support they are no longer prepared to conform to family attitudes, resulting in many cases in splits between spouses in voting behaviour.

Although the experience of struggle affects the personal lives of the women involved it is important not to exaggerate the consequences, especially for rank and file members. Each mobilisation by its very nature is a relatively short-term activity with the women returning home to continue their domestic and work responsibilities until the next occasion. Even during the protest period itself there are often strong pressures which prevent women from participating, and which make them frustrated and bitter. Women clearly identify the principal problem not as their domestic commitments but the hostility of their men. As Margarita, a long-term activist expressed:

Many of the women got tired of going on because there was always trouble with the husbands, they are jealous, they don't want to let them, and one needs time for the business of politics, get up at dawn, leave the house early and come back late at night. You only survive if you can overcome that problem. But for a lot of them it's too much. You know how men can bully and then they get frightened. What will the children live on?

However, the history of mobilisation in Indio Guayas throughout the 1978-82 period indicates that once women have participated the experience of struggle is not forgotten. Not only is it a bond which unites women, a frequent topic of discussion, recalled in retrospect as 'a good time', but the same women can be called on, time and time again, whenever their support is required.

### **Women Leaders<sup>17</sup>**

For a very small number of women the experience of popular participation has fundamental consequences not only personally but also at the economic and political level. In the struggle for infrastructure women leaders emerge, presidents as well as prominent committee members, who in the process of co-optation look towards political leadership roles. However, those women who try to move beyond the women's domestic arena into the men's world of politics do so at enormous personal cost and little reward. It is in the criticisms encountered and the conflicts confronted by women leaders that the powerful societal mechanisms which control women and confine them to their domestic roles are most blatantly manifested.

In their work within the community women leaders are viewed ambiguously, alternatively admired and criticised, subject to both verbal and physical abuse. Susana's description of an early conflict over the selective provision of infill indicates this:

Because we got the works the people on H Street were furious. There were blows, sticks, stones. The people knocked down a catwalk because they thought the infill was coming. And a woman fell down and broke her skull, and so they put the blame on me. 'That whore's daughter, she order the catwalk to be knocked down.' So they blamed me for the woman cracking her skull. They were going to beat me up but I didn't let them. I came out with

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<sup>17</sup>During the 1978-82 period, when Indio Guayas formed part of a political front with twenty other local committees, much of the work particularly prior to elections involved close collaboration between committees. Consequently the fieldwork was broadened to include the experiences not only of Susana, president of Indio Guayas, but also the other seven women presidents in office by 1982.

a milk bottle, I was going to buy milk for the coffee. It was 7.30. It was nothing but mud. All the people shouted at me. I was absolutely livid. I said to her, 'So you say I ordered the bridge to be knock down!' 'Yes, you said it.' So I threw the bottle and threw it at her head; but as it was wrapped in a paper bag it didn't break and didn't do her any harm, and I grabbed at her and tore at her clothes; as she wasn't wearing a bra, all her tits were sticking out. Somebody rushed up with a blanket to cover her. Then she went and filed a complaint with the police. So I also filed a complaint against her. It was an awful problem.

As women leaders become more powerful they are increasingly distanced from their women neighbours and friends. The fact that they have 'got out', and that political leaders and officials rush in and out of the area visiting their homes, is viewed with hostility and jealousy by women who feel 'trapped' at home. Critical gossip of their roles as wives and mothers is the most powerful mechanism utilised by women to destroy their reputation and thereby control their behaviour<sup>18</sup>. The following accusation, made about a woman leader by her close neighbour, is typical:

She neglects her children. The girls know how to cook but they just don't want to. The trouble is that there is no one to make them do it. The children are badly brought up, they just run around the street.

The importance of conforming to the expected role of a woman as wife and mother fulfilling the required domestic obligations is also used by women to justify non-participation. One of Susana's close neighbours, who suffers from chronic exhaustion and severe depression, complained:

I can't just let everything go. Nobody will do it for me, you see, like Senora Susana. She goes off and doesn't cook, because her sister does the cooking for her. Whereas when I come back I have to cook and wash and everything so often I don't go for that reason, and then she sometimes gets annoyed when I don't go. But she has fewer kids than I do, and her husband stays at home, whereas mine gets home tired, wants his meal and to get to bed. If I were in her shoes I would go.

This gossip is an interesting distortion of reality. Although Susana's husband, who works as a sub-contracted tailor, 'stays at home', he certainly never expects to cook, while the assistance provided by Susana's sisters, although important, does not solve the fundamental problem of her domestic commitments.

In fact the most difficult personal problem faced by all women leaders is that of marital conflict. While their men are content, even proud, at the outset, a number of factors rapidly result in a deterioration in the marital relationship. Firstly, the time-consuming nature of the work, particularly at a time of national political activity; secondly, the rampant gossip that assumes that because women are working with men they must be prostituting themselves; and, thirdly, that as women become public figures they achieve greater importance than their spouse, both inside and outside the barrio. Susana describes some of her feelings on the problem, and how, over the years, she has tried to cope:

I have had problems for years, since I first went on the committee. Ever since then there has been lots of trouble. But I don't go around telling everyone about it, I just keep quiet. They come for me, I say fine and I get dressed and go. He says it's all right if I am fighting for our street only, but not for all those others. I tell him that's selfish. If I am a

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<sup>18</sup>See Wikan (1980) for an analysis of the role of gossip among women as a mechanism of social control.

leader and people have trust in me, I cannot let them down, I must go on until I get the works for them.

It may be that he doesn't like it because I have to see a lot of men, because most of my work is with men. But if I don't want to do anything, nothing will happen to me, because that depends on oneself. I have been with him for twelve years and in all those years I have never failed him. It gets worse and worse. One week we are all right and the following week nothing but fights. But I don't care. I don't pay much attention to him. I don't suffer. I eat. If I stopped to think I would be miserable. I am not going to let him dominate me too much. He would like me to do nothing and let him do whatever he likes. Once he sees that I don't obey him, he'll have to decide whether he wants to go on or go to the devil. What does marriage do for us? I have always worked since I was a young girl. So I'll just have to work a little harder if he goes, to support myself and the children. Is that such a problem?

Susana, discussing the problem in 1978, when she stoically resigned herself to being locked into her home when her man decided she had done sufficient 'running around with men', still saw the problem as a private affair. By 1982, however, the conflict had become public, and degenerated to such an extent that in a Front meeting Susana's husband, Juan, publicly, in front of twenty presidents and the regional party representative forbade her to accept the presidency of the Front, moments after she had been elected in an open ballot. In the ensuing confrontation the women presidents attacked Juan as 'macho', but added:

The system is the critical problem. Even if we all vote for her, even if twenty of us democratically vote for her, in the end you, Juan, have the only vote that matters. It is you who has the final vote. It's the husband who decides everything.

When the male presidents interceded they explicitly praised Susana, explaining why the party could not survive without her, but without attacking Juan personally. The problem was finally resolved by a compromise so solution, in which Juan agreed that his wife would remain president, but only until the imminent elections were over.

Women leaders try in a number of ways to cope with marital criticism and local abuse. The most common response is for them to observe traditional female images and roles to an exaggerated extent to compensate for the contradictions created by political work. As women working in a 'man's world' they are scrupulously 'respectable' in their behaviour, always ensuring that they are accompanied by kin or a woman friend when travelling outside the suburbios and attending political meetings, dressing unprovocatively and consciously avoiding compromising situations. Publicly they constantly justify their active participation in terms of a common concern for the needs of their children rather than their personal ambition: 'I work for my children. In the future they will be able to say, "Her mother was loyal to us, let us help her." ' (Margarita)

Despite their efforts, women leaders are faced with conflict on all sides and become painfully isolated. Their involvement in the world outside their community distances them from local women. They are used, but not accepted as equal by male leaders, and forced to rely on the friendships with other women leaders with whom they are often in conflict due to the competitive allocation of resources inherent in political patron-client relationships. A middle-class woman political leader summarised the problem in the following way:

Women have a very difficult time. The patriarchal culture means that they are not helped at all, just used. If I was married I wouldn't be running all over the place. I would have to stay

at home. Because of the problem of machismo, women are not allowed out. But the competition between women is enormous. Women have to struggle against other women as well as against men.

Of all the low-income women involved in struggle, it is the leaders who, through bitter experience, try to challenge conventional attitudes concerning the position of women. Thus, Susana, while blatantly justifying her work to her husband in terms of her role as a mother caring for her children's needs, quite explicitly recognises her own personal needs:

I wasn't born to slave away at the sewing machine. I do believe that a woman has to do the cooking and cleaning, but not to be stuck at home all the time and nothing else. We must see something better, get some profession, do something for the community and also work. They probably think that I order my husband around, that I am very overbearing. But I am not overbearing, it's merely that the woman has the same rights as the man. Because if he wants to go out, so do I, although of course not to get drunk, but to have a good time.

The attempts by women leaders to change the nature of their marital relationships invariably, however, culminates in the breakdown of the compromiso. While Susana is in her early thirties, the life histories of older working-class women presidents in Guayaquil show a common pattern in which conflict over the woman's political work results in the couple separating. Although the woman frequently forms a second compromiso, this is generally with a younger, often less aggressive man, on whom the woman is not financially dependent, indeed she may well support him. It is important to emphasise that although economic independence solves the immediate problem for the woman concerned, it does not result in any fundamental restructuring of the nature of interpersonal relationships between women and men.

### **The Co-option of Women Leaders by Political Parties**

Not only do low-income women leaders enter barrio committees for different reasons from men, the way in which they are co-opted by political parties also differs in a number of respects. Ecuadorian political parties have become increasingly aware that women leaders, while fewer in number than male leaders, have a particular importance. Since the majority of rank and file members of barrio committees are women, women leaders often have far greater capacity to organise them; given that women take on much of the day-to-day organisation, this includes responsibilities for male-headed committees within the Frente.

Finally, women are by reputation more reliable, committed, loyal and not as fickle as men in changing allegiance from one party to another. Evaluating the participation of women leaders in the Frente de la Izquierda Democrática, a local political party representative commented:

The women from the suburbios are fabulous. They are critical to the Party. The women are the real leaders. They commit themselves with real passion to the work, while the men play around. In the Frente Susana is the epicentre. They all work round her. If she changes they all follow. But she has to learn to think with her head as well as with her heart.

Opinions such as this reflect the prevalent attitude in the elitist male dominant political party which manipulatively co-opts working-class women leaders, because of their local level power, while failing to take them seriously as people. A national level leader expressed his own ambiguity concerning the role that women leaders play in national politics, when he said:

The openings are there. Women simply don't take advantage of them, and don't want to go into politics. From birth they are taught to respect men, to respect their brothers and not to be independent. So they are not prepared to fight. That is why there are no women in the National Congress, and only a few at other levels. But when a woman is in politics, when you get one, 'esta muy fuerte', more than men. When a woman has power the men say that she is very dangerous and they don't like her.

On the one hand the national leader criticised women leaders for a lack of professionalism; on the other hand he criticised women who, in the 'men's' world of politics, behave like men.

In campaign speeches and political party slogans the virtues of working-class women were extolled with particular emphasis on their roles as mothers and wives, while their activities within the party are limited to women's affairs and they are prevented from gaining any real power. In Izquierda Democratica this policy reached a crisis in 1982 when the party tried to organise suburbio women leaders into a Women's Front (Frente Feminino) under the leadership of the upper-class wives of national political leaders. The blanket refusal of leaders such as Susana, Margarita and Rosa to join the Women's Front highlighted the impossible position of working-class women leaders caught in a conflict not only of gender but also of class. The assumption that as women they a priori have interests in common with other women, including the patronising wives of upper-class politicians, fails to take account of the fact that both as political leaders and as members of the working class they feel they have more in common with other working-class leaders, male or female.

Although barrio women leaders are co-opted to obtain votes for political parties it is far more difficult for them than for men to achieve elected positions in Ecuadorian politics. Five different stages of political involvement can be identified: barrio-level leader, activist in political party, elected municipal councillor, and, finally, elected national congress representative. Working-class men leaders quite frequently reach the fourth stage of elected municipal councillor. However, lack of sufficient financial resources makes them unable to participate adequately in the complex system of political pay-offs and they rarely survive more than one term in office. Women leaders, in contrast, rarely reach beyond the third stage, but are themselves far more ambivalent about their political ambitions. Some, like Rosa, see the problem primarily in terms of personal inadequacy, as the following comment indicates:

The Party thinks that at the base it doesn't matter if it's a woman or a man, but at the political level it must be a man. I will overcome this problem. Men use women, but then get jealous, because when women get educated they try and take over. All the men fear that Susana and I will become councillors. The Party will not give us an opportunity. I want to study, why should I just wash dishes? If I am given the opportunity to stand again I will. When I stood as councillor in 1977 I did not understand politics. I did not understand the Municipal Law. I had no confidence. Now I am prepared. I know how to read documents. The Party did not teach me. I kept on asking Ledesma (National Congress Representative) to give us seminars on administration. If we don't prepare ourselves when will we achieve anything?

However, most women leaders show great reluctance about moving beyond the level of barrio-level leader. As Susana, speaking in 1982,

I don't know if I want to stand as a councillor. Politics just causes problems, problems in my home and problems with everyone here. Men like playing around, but I know what I can do well. I can get works (obra). Look how many people have got water around here. I got the water not only in Indio Guayas but all over. I am a leader not because I am that

capable, but because the people have confidence in me, because they see I will fight for what I believe in. That's why I know this is where my power is, here in the suburbios.

Susana's preference to stay at the level of community mobilisation is the consequence of her situation. As a woman leader she has far greater commitment to the community than is the case with men who more frequently assume leadership responsibility in order to gain economic rewards or political advancement. However, the constant criticism she encounters in her work increases her personal guilt about neglecting her children and husband and reduces her self-confidence. Community level ambiguity about women leaders, combined with the fact that the political arena is effectively closed to women, ensures that leaders such as Susan limit their personal ambition, restricting it to short-term community gains rather than longer term political goals.

## VI. Conclusion

This case study from, the suburbios of Guayaquil illustrates the way in which, within one Latin American urban context, women and men's spheres of work are clearly separated, and the implications of this in terms of community level popular mobilisation. While the men's world lies outside the community in the productive work of factories and market places, and the power politics of City Hall and local government, the world within the community, identified as the arena of domestic responsibility and welfare provision, is primarily organised by women. Thus popular participation over issues of collective consumption and community level politics is fundamentally seen as women's work, with men's involvement most frequently legitimised in clearly defined leadership positions.

However, the fact that women, supported by their men, mobilise in what is considered a natural extension of the domestic arena imposes limitations on such action. In the same way that women's domestic work, undertaken in their roles as mothers and wives, is not valued, so women's popular mobilisation, undertaken in the same role, is not considered real work. This attitude is reflected leached throughout society; for it is not only men, but also the women themselves who consider it their duty to participate in mobilisation as part of their domestic responsibilities.

While women recognise that community level work is their most effective arena for action, the vast majority nevertheless fail to realise that in reality their only power lies in their gender ascriptive roles and that as people they have no power. Consequently after their success in achieving a change in the provision of items of collective consumption they are content to return to their homes without demanding any fundamental change at the ideological level concerning their role in society.

Those few women in leadership positions who do demand real power, by trying to move beyond the women's world of community level consumption provision into the men's world of power politics, become a threat to the prevailing gender divisions within society. Although they perceive of their struggle in class terms, and not in terms of gender struggle (which remains at the personalised level within the family), nevertheless, in their attempts to achieve political power they are also, if unintentionally, challenging the gender subordinated role for women in Ecuadorian society. As a result they are caught between two struggles, of both class and gender, and alienated on all sides. They are viewed with hostility and jealousy by women of their own class and mistrusted by their spouses. At the same time they are used but not accepted by men political leaders of all classes while instinctively rejecting alliances with women of other classes. In their struggle to survive without space for gender issues to be expressed their only recourse is either to consciously ensure that in their personal behaviour they conform to the traditional female role, or to avoid the worst marital hostility through economic independence. In neither case do the solutions openly confront the essential issue of gender struggle, thus demonstrating the lack of possibility under the prevailing conditions within Ecuadorian society for gender issues to move beyond the personal level and become formalised as a political issue.

In much of the recent literature on urban social movements the important role played by women is only mentioned descriptively in passing. Present in their gender ascriptive roles they have been effectively invisibilised to the extent that the dominant analytical issue concerns the nature of class struggle at the point of residence<sup>19</sup>. Where the role of women in struggle is mentioned at the conceptual level it is in terms of the emergence of the women's liberation movement which 'aims at overcoming the structural domination of one gender by the other' (Castells 1983, 309). The evidence from this case study indicates the inappropriateness of evaluating the struggles of low-income women in a Third World city entirely in terms of their feminist consciousness, and consequently the limitations of assuming the universal

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<sup>19</sup>See for instance Castells (1977, 1980), Downs (1980), and Singer (1980).



commonality, both trans-class and trans-culturally, of women's interests. At the same time it would suggest that any analysis concerned with establishing why residential level mobilisation fails to create the same level of class consciousness as does mobilisation at the point of production needs to take account of the issue of gender subordination within 'more realistic parameters for comprehending the underlying and persistent causes of gender inequality' (Molyneux 1983, 2). To date far too little recognition has been given to the fact that this is one of the most divisive mechanisms of social control, reinforced not only by the state but also, if unconsciously, by men of all classes. For this reason it is critical to identify the extent to which gender struggle and overcoming gender subordination may in the last analysis be one of the most important preconditions for popular movements (in which women play such a significant role) to be effectively transformed into political movements. Only then will low-income urban movements not only combine both production and consumption but also involve both women and men equally.

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