

## ECOTOURISM AND DAILY LIFE IN SONTECOMAPAN (VERACRUZ, MEXICO)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender division of labor has considered women as main responsible of domestic labor, at the same time it has been related to private space. On the contrary, men are considered to perform productive work that takes place in public spheres. However, daily life imposes women with different uses of time/space in order to perform domestic labor and productive work, but always limited –the second– by the traditional imposition of the first one. This paper identifies and analyzes strategies used by women that work in ecotourism in Sontecomapan (Veracruz, Mexico) in order to fit together domestic labor (mainly housework and childcare) and productive work. The strategies are generated as a consequence of time/space limitations imposed by housework and childcare. Domestic labor is determinant to women interested in work either in ecotourism or in any other kind of productive work.

### 2. TIME/SPACE FOR QUOTIDIANITY

Feminist geography turns to rural space by the end of the 80's. The first papers are interested in making visible productive work of women in, mainly, primary sectors; Henshall-Momsen (1989) emphasized the participation of women as farm workers in England, a kind of job usually described as masculine-type. In the following decade, Feminist geography turned attention to other kind of productive jobs in rural space (Sabaté&Díaz, 2003) and extended also to other societies to explore topics related to the control of natural resources in developing countries (Rocheleau, 2007; McCusker&Oberhauser, 2006).

In order to make visible the effects of gender division of labor, Feminist geography has developed new objectives that explores multiple relations of time/space to promote more equalitarian gender relations (Gregory et al., 2009:245-247; García-Ramón, 1989:33-35; WGSG, 1998). For Feminist geography the study of quotidian life is one of the most important topics in order to explore the way gender relations are projected to public time/space uses, particularly to those related to productive work (Whatmore, 1991:73-74).

Lindon (2006:356-357) considers that daily life generates, through interpretation-construction processes, time/space uses that support social interactions; in the analysis of quotidian life, Feminist geography searches the appraisal of inclusion-exclusion of time/space uses, since it determines who belong to where and who doesn't, as well as the place where the action is done (McDowell, 2000:15).

Women's spatiality is characterized by a full range of dynamic time/space uses –either private or public- to do either domestic labor or productive work; an exhausted analysis of women's spatiality is complete only when social value of activities is considered. To do that there must also be a consideration of gender roles (Vázquez et al., 2000:80).

### 3. ECOTOURISM AND GENDER IN RURAL SPACE

Feminist geography has also been interested in the study of rural tourism. One of the first academic works explored the condition and use of time/space in the English countryside at the XIX century (Bouquet, 1987). In this work, women appear to be having a diverse time/space uses as a consequence of domestic role and the use of «home» for productive activities. Gasson&Winter (1992) also explored the role of gender relations in women that offered B&B accommodation in the English countryside, their work showed that women are considered as the main responsible of domestic labor but also have to contribute to productive work in a context of economy diversification in the countryside.

Little (2002:151-154) has also been interested in analyzing the countryside, this geographer has been working in making visible the interactions between macro and micro scales; since to make compatible domestic labor and productive work are not only influenced by micro processes, it also can be affected –positive or negative- by global dynamics (Baylina&Salamaña, 2006:103-105; Sabaté&Díaz, 2003:144-146).

Ecotourism is one activity that takes place in rural space, it has also been considered as an important strategy of conservation and development during the last three or two decades. Ecotourism started to be developed in Mexico during the 80's and by the beginning of this century the government incorporated it to official policies as conservation and poverty fight strategies (López&Palomino, 2008:40-42).

Regarding its conceptual framework, ecotourism has been considered as one strategy for sustainable development and due to socio-cultural element, and also as a strategy to change gender roles and to improve empowerment of women.

Academics have also been interested in the analysis of ecotourism (officially named as rural tourism in some European countries) with gender mainstream. The researches have found some positive and negative effects as a consequence of enrollment of women in ecotourism. The most important positive effects are: visibilization of women' productive work, specially in community-ecotourism projects in Global south (Hernández et al., 2005:621-622; Aguilar et al., 2008; Zapata& Suárez, 2007; Maldonado et al., 2006). Among negative effects are the maintenance (or little change) in gender relations and the presence of women in jobs considered as «women works» related with cleaning or cooking (Soares et al., 2005:89; Lara-Aldave y Vizcarra-Bordi, 2008:503; Focaut, 2002:520).

Traditionally gender role appears as still important in many of the research done. Women as the main, or principal responsible, of organization and/or performance of

domestic labor is a constant even if they are engaged in productive work (Hernández et al., op.cit.:619; Soares et al., op.cit.:83), the productive jobs of the women are subordinating to the household maintenance and the care of children/elderly. As a consequence, the use of time/space is limited by domestic activities. Lindon (op.cit.) remind us that women do not need to be «anchored» to the house since domestic labor can also take place in public spaces; the use of public spaces to practice some domestic activities is a strategy that has been developed by women as a consequence of maximization of time/space uses to fulfill both kind of jobs (Rodríguez&Quintana, 2002:0; Zapata&Suárez, op. cit.:603).

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The research is mainly a qualitative one, since this kind of methodology is considered as the most adequate to grasp the dynamism of gender relations in regard to quotidian time/space uses (Ruiz, 1996:55; Mendizábal, 2006:70-73). The tools used were in-depth interview and non-participant observation. The total of research participation was 23, they were obtained by non-probability sampling (snowball sampling).

#### **5 SONTECOMAPAN AND ECOTOURISM**

Sontecomapan (Head river in nahuatl) belongs to the municipality of Catemaco (State of Veracruz) up to 16 kms. northwest of the head city. Its population was about 2,400 inhabitants by 2010 and the main economic activities are the primary and tertiary ones (Censo, INEGI, 2010).

Sontecomapan is part of the buffer zone of the Reserva de la Biosfera de Los Tuxtlas (RBT), a federal protected area declared in 1998 to protect the remaining areas of tropical rainforest and cloud forest which can be found in the coastal of the Gulf of Mexico (CONANP, 2006). Historically, the region has reached different types of protection during the last 8 decades, efforts that has been intensified specially during the last 30 years and that culminated with the declaration of the Biosphere Reserve. According to the Management Plan for the RBT ecotourism was one of the activities approved since it was considered to be congruent to conservation; this resolution has been an important element to promote this kind of initiatives, community-based or private, especially in Sontecomapan.

Ecotourism started to develop once the RBT was declared in Sontecomapan; the first initiative was community-based and started with the direct support of the RBT office, during the last 8 years some personal initiatives have been created (most of them conform the secondary services offered to the ecotourists).

#### **6. DOMESTIC LABOR**

Domestic labor (household, socialization activities –especially of children– and care work) consumes an important time in Sontecomapan, women that actually work in ecotourism have been performing domestic work since they were children. The highest rate of domestic labor is reached after marriage and born of children. Female children are socialized to become care givers through the care of youngest sisters and brothers: «I was

about 6 years-old when I started to take care of my little sister and brother, it was like a children's game... instead of dolls I had them» (Ana). As female children grow up the amount of domestic labor also increases, by the time women are adolescents they are able to manage a house and can almost take completely care of others –baby, children or elders.

These kind of domestic activities are not only a burden or monotonous and repetitive, they also either «anchor» female to home or limited the mobility of women: «Let's imagine your children is a sickly one...who will take care of his if you have to get out of the community?» (Vicenta).

Men also perform some domestic activities, mainly when they are children (they help the mother) and when they are old men (they help the wife). Even when some activities are performed in the adulthood, those activities are the less urgent so they do not anchor them neither to the home nor the community. Since domestic labor is still considered as a main responsibility of women, domestic activities performed by men are always socially defined as a help to the wife. The participation of women in productive activities (traditionally considered as a masculine responsibility) is subordinated to the performance of domestic labor and the permission of the husband or older men in the family, women get the husbands permission to participate in ecotourism if they keep the promise of keeping family and house care as their first responsibility.

To keep the status quo of gender division of labor the community has well-established social norms. Among the most important are: the questioning of masculinity and the reputation of women. Both social norms are used against women, rumor and disqualification can be applied by other community members and by the family as well (especially husband). Gossip affects women and to get over the rumor they must work very hard to become emotionally stronger («hacerse fuertes» as they said), a work that must be extended to children, parents and husband. The participation of women in ecotourism activities far of the custody of the husband can be a source of jealousy so strong that women prefer to abandon their participation in ecotourism even if they enjoyed the work or needed the income.

## 7. IS ECOTOURISM AS EXTENSION OF DOMESTIC LABOR?

An important component of ecotourism activities performed by women in Sontecomapan is close related to domestic labor: to clean, to cook, to take care of ecotourists, to be kind and helpful are either attitudes or activities traditionally identified as feminine. However, by the time being to perform these activities for ecotourists are well-valued, even if they are identified as work of women. This is probably related to the fact that ecotourism is defined as a cosmopolitan activity and a source of proud to socialize with the ecotourist.

While attending ecotourists men can also perform some activities traditionally considered as feminine (e.g., some activities related to cook) but this negotiation is not extended to the domestic group since those activities are defined as a mean to get money and are performed by men just because of it. To cook for tourists is accepted by men, but to cook for the family is still considered as a women responsibility.

One of the most valued activities related to ecotourism is guiding. In the community-based initiative all women and men partners were trained to do it; however,

guiding was defined as a masculine activity since to perform it requires mobility, the knowledge of the «campo», as well some physical activity. As a result just male partners are guides, women cannot be because they were excellent cooks even if trails designed are not far for the community. Plus by being at the ecotourism installations women can also perform some domestic labor (take care of their own children and feed them or the husband).

## **8. OTHER PRODUCTIVE LABOR OF WOMEN IN SONTECOMAPAN.**

Ecotourism is a secondary economic activity in all cases. Women and men that work in ecotourism have other source of income in Sontecomapan. Men use to have a principal source of income and perform other secondary activities, while women use to get money through performing several secondary activities but have no principal one. This is especially evident during reproductive life cycle when childcare consumes an important amount of their time and efforts. While women are single and have no child, they can even get out of the community for a job; when they get married, productive labor is preferred if it can be performed at home.

Strategies to get income are domestic group based. Main strategies are informal employment, entrepreneurship, income from other domestic groups in country or abroad, benefits from government programs and paid employment. Those strategies are recurred either by female or male; however in the case of men their productive strategies might present higher mobility.

There is a diversity of strategies used by women to get income in Sontecomapan. Women that work at the ecotourism community-based initiatives or are employed by other initiatives get enrolled in other productive activities that are paid. Some of the activities are punctual (due to the agricultural cycle, like coffee harvest) but others are performed all year long. The possibility of performing several remunerated activities depends on timing of the activity: «... I sell poultry in the corridor of the house, then, I can take care of children and manage my time to be at the «comedor» (Marcela, cooker). The participation of other members of the family is also important in order to allow women to get involved in several productive activities.

## **9. DAILY LIFE STRATEGIES**

In rural Mexico domestic activities are still considered as a main responsibility of women. To accomplish both types of work, women have developed several strategies. Strategies have been classified in two principal types: those related to productive work and those related to domestic labor.

### **9.1. Strategies related to productive work**

Some of the strategies are well consolidated and have been practiced by women during many years, some come before their engagement with ecotourism. Main strategy is the realization of productive work at home. To force coincidence of domestic and productive

spaces is one of the most popular strategies. But sometimes ecotourism generates new arrangements, especially when the activities have to be done out of the community.

Some productive activities can be seasonal or half-time and it is also applied to men's work; however, while male participation in those seasonal activities is more related to the nature of the activity, female participation is also restricted by domestic labor.

The participation of women in ecotourism has been the way of achieving visibilization or acknowledgement inside and outside the community. The use of public space through their participation in ecotourism has allowed women to access new and different scenarios. Some women have had an active role in public spaces before they enrolled ecotourism, but in other cases access to public spaces were motivated as a result of their involvement in ecotourism.

A positive result of the engagement of women in ecotourism is to make visible their participation in a new activity that is well-valued by the community; but there is no question about the arrangements that have to be made by women in order to solve domestic labor and productive work.

## **9.2. Strategies related to domestic labor**

To have time for productive work women have to manage different time/space strategies to accomplish domestic labor. The most common is to ask other females of the extended family for help (e.g. the mother, the mother-in-law, sisters, sister-in-law or elderly daughters).

According to the economic level some female will pay for domestic labor, this is not very frequent because women have an extended family in the community and the limited income.

Rearrangement of domestic labor is also an important time/space strategy, this strategy is used for not urgent activities. It is common that ecotourists (mainly those traveling by their own) arrive without reservation, as a consequence there is an important need of availability that generates the need of rearrangement domestic labor.

The last time/space strategy is reassignment of domestic labor among all members of the domestic group (men included), this is the less strategy used. Women considers the need of participation of men in domestic labor, especially if women are also earning their own income, but they are not empowered enough to discuss this matter with the husband.

To avoid conflicts, women ask the sons for their participation in domestic labor and hope this will eventually change the gender distribution of work. Guilty is another reason women avoid reassignment of domestic labor, when women work out home they have a feeling of neglect childcare.

Strategies are inclusive, even though one is more frequent than the others. In fact there is a blend of strategies that changes with the cycle of life. For example, women with children depend on the family network and try to do ecotourism work in the installations (to be available at any time). But as children grow up they can rely on family network and in the few public childcare services in the community.

Some arrangements have been used for many years, but others have to be build according the necessity. Effectiveness of strategies is related to the characteristic of family and

the vicinity of home. As a consequence women will usually find another woman of the extended family to take care of their children or house while going to work in ecotourism. To have a sister, a mother, a mother-in-law or a cousin to take care of children and the house give some relief to the women, especially if they have to be absent of the community some days.

Men appear as secondary actors in the distribution and realization of domestic labor in Sontecomapan. Even though they do some activities, these activities are punctual and temporary until some other women could take care of the domestic labor.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Women have to use different time/space strategies to accomplish domestic labor and productive work. Domestic labor is still considered as the main responsibility of women in Sontecomapan. Neither the companies, nor the government, nor the community consider themselves as agents with authorization to promote strategies for a better distribution of domestic labor.

As a consequence time/space are dynamics because women have to maximize them, so there is not a well established line for the public or the private.

Participation of women in ecotourism has allowed them to build or be introduced into few spaces and through this participation make them visible and recognition of domestic labor. But in few cases this opportunity has promoted more equalitarian gender relations.

Distinction between productive spaces and domestic spaces are not well established as a consequence of the performance of domestic labor in productive spaces or vice versa. The dynamism of quotidian time/space is a result of being the principal responsible of domestic labor and the participation in productive work.

The participation of female in ecotourism is supported by strategies that allow them to perform domestic labor and ecotourism or other productive job. The main objective of these strategies is the maximization of time and spaces in quotidian life. Most of the strategies are supported by the women and other women of the extended family, the participation of men in the domestic labor is minimum. However, step by step the questioning of the gender division of work is starting to arise.

