

# Urban Agriculture, Household Organisation and Female Autonomy: a case study in southern Mexico City

San Luis Tlaxiataltemalco is a town of the Xochimilco Delegation in the southern zone of Mexico City, which has a population of 12,553. Agricultural micro-enterprises have developed around production in greenhouses. This study (1) found that the establishment of such enterprises has proved to be a valid strategy for the farming families to generate income, but it also serves to improve the decision-making power and freedom of movement of women.



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**A**griculture plays a significant role in the lives of people in San Luis. Since the end of the 1970s agricultural production has taken place mainly under greenhouses, which make use of the old agricultural and landholding practices. Greenhouse production of decorative plants and flowers still largely has a household character, although day-labourers are hired while family members are engaged in non-agricultural salaried and non-salaried activities.

## DIVISION OF LABOUR

On average 67% of the households involved in this activity employ an average of three family members. The gender division of labour is such that the men concern themselves with the productive activities, especially the physical labour. The women dominate the commercial arena. A few activities are performed together with the men. Besides these tasks, for which the women do not receive remuneration, women are in charge of all tasks related to household maintenance, thereby doubling their responsibilities. The production under greenhouses is a profitable activity for families as a source of income and for subsistence.

## SOURCES OF INCOME AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Of the 185 households interviewed, 45% see the greenhouse production as their primary source of income, followed by paid work (35%) and non-paid activities (20%) outside agriculture. Despite higher income and education levels among those households that earn an income outside agriculture, the greenhouse farms occupy a significant proportion of the active population

of the town, in part because of the employment of family labour.

The production of greenhouse plants (as with other small businesses and informal commerce) depends on the participation of women household members. Both the families involved in greenhouse production and those working in the informal sector could be characterised as predominantly extended, while the nuclear family is predominant among the households employed in the formal non-agricultural sector. The extended family arrangement favours the formation of agricultural and non-agricultural micro-enterprises and the participation of women family members, particularly those who are older and have less schooling. The productive units and points of sale are close to the home, which makes it easier for the women to combine these activities with their household chores. But since the women working in greenhouses do not receive an income, the greenhouse business facilitates female participation but does not necessarily improve income-generating possibilities for women.

## ECONOMIC AND DOMESTIC ACTIVITY

While more women can be found in agricultural and other informal activities, men dominate the paid jobs. The greatest income disparities are found among the husbands and wives of the greenhouse growers; nearly none of the women receive any income while a third of the men earn six or more times a minimum salary, and nearly half of the men earn from four to six times a minimum salary. The greenhouse production is

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therefore profitable for the family, yet these enterprises do not allow women access to their income. What little they earn is invested completely in the household and not in themselves.

Independent of any economic or productive activities, nearly all women spend over 60 hours per week on various domestic chores. Women greenhouse growers and other women who do not

### Low payment goes along with high workload but also higher autonomy of these women

receive a salary. In the case of the male heads of household, in general they do not spend much time doing domestic work, although those involved in non-agricultural, non-salaried work are somewhat different, as a fourth of them dedicate 35 to 59 hours weekly to household endeavours.

In the households of San Luis, there is a heavy work burden regardless of the kind of activity one is engaged in. Women have double and triple workdays. Nearly half of the women of the town are engaged in an economic activity, yet this does not exclude them from long hours of domestic work and in the case of those who work in greenhouses, generally this does not mean that they will earn any income. The agricultural micro-enterprises are a viable economic option for the family but they do not contribute to gender equity, as they increase the women's workload but not their personal economic status.

#### FEMALE AUTONOMY

Two dimensions of female autonomy were studied in San Luis: decision making and freedom of movement of female family members (especially the wives). While it is true that the women

involved in greenhouse production work more but receive less income than wage-earning women, what is interesting is that they enjoy greater decision making ability and freedom of movement compared to these women and especially compared to those who are non-economically active. This is true despite the fact that their level of education is slightly lower than those earning an income outside the household. In this sense, agricultural micro-enterprises have the capacity to employ older women and those with less schooling, which has a positive effect on the women's autonomy, although their workload increases and their incomes do not. This positive effect that economic activity has on the women's autonomy is in stark contrast to the lower access to income that greenhouse household women have compared to wage-earning women. Furthermore, it shows that a higher level of education is not necessarily a determinant for improved decision-making capacity and freedom of movement for women.

In the context of urban agriculture, notably greenhouse production, participation in economic activity and older age are variables that are positively correlated with the potential for women to make decisions and move about freely. Among those who work outside the home, these indicators of autonomy are slightly higher among non-salaried, non-agricultural workers and greenhouse growers. Women members of households who work in greenhouses and non-agricultural, non-salaried women are, on average, older than salaried women, and with age generally comes more decision-making capacity and mobility.

Older age is a factor, which carries much weight in terms of female autonomy in the town of San Luis, while educational level does not seem to have an effect in this sense.

One important element that may contribute more to the greater mobility of women who work in greenhouses and those who work in non-salaried employment outside of agriculture than age and schooling is the extended character of the family. Given the fact that in these types of homes there are other women who can care for the children, there are more possibilities for

the wives to leave the house and less need for them to negotiate or ask permission for this privilege. The greater mobility of these two groups could also have to do with the type of commercial activities that they undertake. Even when they do not receive income, they handle money, leave the house, buy and sell and are in constant contact with people outside of their homes. Nevertheless, it still may be that this situation does not afford them the autonomy that they would like, insofar as in some cases the extended family system may diminish their decision-making abilities due to the presence of older women or other male family members.

Other determining factors that seem to affect female autonomy in this town are the socio-cultural dimension, given the economic predominance of men over women in agricultural and other activities, and the structure and forms of family organisation. In this sense, the social norms and values that emphasise subordination seem to make it difficult for women engaged in family agro-businesses to economically support themselves through the resources that they generate, which tends to counteract the effects of their access to decision-making power.

#### FINAL COMMENTS

The present study sought to approach the issue of how agricultural micro-enterprises can generate alternatives to salaried work and can impact women's economic participation and autonomy in these household productive units, from within the context of urban agriculture. In some ways, the agricultural micro-enterprise represents a survival alternative given the scarcity of well-paid urban employment and facilitates for female economic activity, however the women who work in greenhouses do so without pay. In spite of this lack of autonomous income, these low-educated and older women seem to enjoy greater autonomy than salaried women and above all housewives, possibly due to their engagement in commercial tasks.

#### NOTE

This article is a synthesis of a doctoral thesis written in pursuit of the title of Doctor of Population Studies from the Colegio de Mexico.