



“Summary of article by Martha Roldan: Renegotiating the Marital Contract: Intrahousehold Patterns of Money Allocation and Women’s Subordination Among Domestic Outworkers in Mexico City” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 190-193

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## **“Summary of article by Martha Roldan: Renegotiating the Marital Contract: Intrahousehold Patterns of Money Allocation and Women’s Subordination Among Domestic Outworkers in Mexico City”**

Economic theory treats the household as a unit, subsuming the interests of its members into one decision process in which the household head allocates resources altruistically for the benefit of all. In contrast, feminist theory treats the household as a site of differing, often conflicting, interests with an imbalance of power between men and women.

For the research summarized here fifty-three married women, a subsample of a study of women who do industrial piecework in their homes in Mexico City, were interviewed in detail about their roles as earners and as wives and mothers. Where women were able to contribute a significant share of the household’s income, their ability to renegotiate their position in the family improved.

### **Domestic Outwork**

The working class family faces contradictory pressures. The earning and allocation of money takes place within the context of other processes: production of goods and services for the family’s own consumption, emotional and sexual relationships, in some cases violence or other forms of coercion. Domestic outworkers are invariably women, working at home, caring for children at the same time, and fitting the job around household duties. Many outworkers in this study also worked part time as maids or took in sewing, laundry or ironing for additional income.

Outwork is monotonous, insecure labor, requiring few skills and offering poor pay, usually on a piecework basis. “[T]he work is industrial, not artisan, and results from the division of labor associated with the very fragmented labor process that typifies modern production.... tools, raw materials, and components are provided by ‘jobbers’ or subcontractors.” Local jobbers are often linked through subcontracting chains to supplier networks for multinational firms.

### **Patterns of Intrahousehold Allocation**

Although the earnings of the women interviewed were low, their husbands often held low-waged jobs as well. A woman’s income often made a critical difference in meeting her family’s needs. Where the husband’s income was higher, the wife’s earnings allowed the family to enjoy some comforts. These circumstances governed two broad patterns of allocation, the pool pattern and the housekeeping allowance, among the families in this sample.

Under both allocation patterns, men controlled their own incomes, often withholding information from their wives about weekly earnings, overtime, bonuses or tips. Men controlled their spending money, on average holding back nearly a fourth of their income for transportation, meals at work, clothing, drinking and other social activities. Wives accepted their husbands' right to money for personal expenditures; however, they often contested the amount. In a few cases, the amount was decided jointly or set by the wives.

*Pooled Income Pattern.* In the 33 families that used the pool pattern, or common fund, the husband's income was low (minimum wage or less) or his contribution to the household inadequate. Husbands and wives pooled their earnings to cover basic household expenses: rent, food, gas, light, water, children's schooling, and clothes. In some cases, the men put in enough each week to cover their share. In most cases, the men put in part of their share initially and doled out the rest as needed.

Most women preferred to receive the men's share all at once. This reduced begging or quarreling over each expense, and ensured that household money would not be spent on drinking, gambling or other women. However, it also meant that women bore the brunt of making ends meet out of the common pool. "This requires a great deal of ingenuity and is itself a major cause of psychological stress." [234] By the end of the month families often reduced food consumption or borrowed money to meet rent payments.

The women contributed 100% of their earnings to the household pool, keeping none for personal expenses. They did this voluntarily, but the "ideology of maternal altruism" exerted a strong pressure for them to consider family needs before their own. Although women managed the household budget, they had little discretion because the pooled income barely covered necessities. Husbands made decisions about occasional large-scale purchases like land, furniture, or appliances.

*Housekeeping Allowance Pattern.* The 20 families with the housekeeping allowance pattern were better off than families which pooled income. Most men in this group earned two to three times the minimum wage. The husband was the breadwinner, providing for basic needs while the wife's earnings went for extras - to improve the standard of living or obtain special treats. However, men and women often had different ideas about what constituted a necessity, or its appropriate quality or urgency. Men's opinions usually prevailed, so that women often paid for clothing, linens, utensils and other things that men did not consider necessary.

### **Renegotiating Marital Contracts and Income Allocation**

Along with factors like age and experience, the contribution made by husband or wife to the family's economic well-being plays an important role in the "process of continuous renegotiation of the terms of interaction and exchange." [238] Most women approached marriage with the expectation that husbands would provide for the family's basic needs while granting a husband's right to keep money for personal spending. Women felt that men should help with household chores (but with little expectation that they would). Only a few newly married women hoped for affection and companionship, but most women wanted respect, sensitivity and recognition from their husbands. In return, women expected "that they should provide unpaid domestic service,

child care, and sexual faithfulness.... Men expect and usually get obedience and deference. But they usually do not feel obligated to attend to their wives' similar demands for respect whether by recognizing and appreciating their contributions as housewives and mothers or through companionship and affection." [239]

Women did outwork to alleviate financial need; most women in the pool group also wanted a measure of autonomy to offset their husbands' dominance. Some husbands objected to their wives working, fearing they might lose face as breadwinners, or that the women would take less care of home and children, or would stop respecting them. Domestic outwork was less of a threat to these men because it is less visible, earnings are low, and the women remain close to their duties at home. Even when low, independent income did enable women to renegotiate some aspects of their marriages, especially if their earnings constituted a large share of the household's income. Three patterns emerged for the pool group and a fourth for the housekeeping allowance families.

When women contributed less than 40 percent to the household pool (19 cases), they gained little leverage over the allocation of income or over their husbands' personal spending and disbursement habits. As a rule, husbands also controlled whether their wives could work outside the home, or visit friends or relatives; and decided when to have sex. Husbands generally made decisions about disciplining children, although other issues concerning children - contraception, how many children to have, and how long they stayed in school - were made jointly. Although they might quarrel over specific expenditures, wives respected their husbands as reliable providers, and behaved deferentially to encourage continued support for themselves and their children.

A second group of women contributed more than 40 percent to the pool (11 cases) and their husbands also met their obligations. These women played a significant economic role within the family which increased their influence over some kinds of decisions, particularly those involving children and whether to work or socialize outside the home. Husbands still decided when to have sex in most cases, controlled their own earnings, and decided how much to contribute to the household pool and how to deliver it. Women respected their husbands, but behaved less submissively and openly expressed opinions. Quarrels over women's assertiveness were common.

Three families established a third pattern. Women earned more than 40 percent of family income, but the men made little or no contribution to the pool. These women lost respect for their husbands and took control over the family budget and other decisions concerning themselves and their children. They quit cooking and doing laundry for their husbands and responded in kind to abuse or violent behavior.

In the higher- income housekeeping allowance group, women had to struggle for permission to work and to retain some control over their earnings. Men felt their breadwinner role was threatened and demanded that their wives uphold their duties in the home if allowed to work. Because wives' earnings went for extras, not necessities, gender asymmetries remained. However women could make some discretionary purchases without begging their husbands for money.

## **Conclusion**

The trend toward an increase in domestic outwork means an increase in poorly paid, isolated, insecure employment for many women. On the other hand, even though outwork increases their total hours of work, women can remain at home and care for children, reducing conflict over their responsibilities. Men often resist women's struggle for economic autonomy; and quarreling and abuse are frequent. "But no matter what allocational category a woman belongs to, her small yet independent income constitutes a lever to secure a measure of autonomous control and ameliorates the damage to her self-esteem done by economic dependence" [247]