Embroidery as Participation?
Women in the Calakmul Model Forest, Campeche, Mexico

JULIA E. MURPHY

La forêt modèle Calakmul est une initiative conjointe des gouvernements canadien, mexicain et de l'état de Campeche. Mexico avait l'intention de créer un modèle de développement durable pour ses forêts tropicales. En l'absence d'une politique qui tenait compte de l'égalité des sexes, les femmes se sont impliquées d'une façon très spéciale : quelques unes ont reproduit les politiques régionales mexicaines de développement alors que d'autres les ont défiées.

The challenges of doing this kind of cross-cultural feminist research include considering the transformative potential of activities such as embroidery and concepts such as participation.

This article is drawn from my ethnographic study of a Canadian sustainable development project in Mexico, the Calakmul Model Forest. I have given it the title, "Embroidery as Participation?" because I discuss how women were drawn into the Model Forest project in Calakmul under the rubric of "participation" and through the organization of handicraft production groups. The challenges of doing this kind of cross-cultural feminist research include considering the transformative potential of activities such as embroidery and concepts such as participation.

The Calakmul Model Forest was a joint initiative of Environment Canada and the Mexican Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources intended to create "a model of sustainable development... [and] set an example for other tropical areas" (Ministry of Supply and Services 1994). The Model Forest concept was developed in Canada in the early 1990s as part of Environment Canada's *Green Plan*, a response to public concern about the environment and to the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. In preparation for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, ten Model Forests were established in Canada, each comprising,

> both a geographic area and a specific partnership-based approach to sustainable forest management... A model forest is also a voluntary partnership whose members fully represent environmental, social and economic forces at play within the land base. The partnership works to define a shared, locally relevant vision of sustainable forest management, and then works to translate that vision into concrete terms for the benefit of all stakeholders (www.idrc.ca).

Since 1993 Model Forests have been created in eleven countries around the world, coordinated through the International Model Forest Network Secretariat in Ottawa. In September 2002, in his address to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, Prime Minister Jean Chretien announced continued funding for the International Model Forest Network as an important Canadian contribution to global environmental efforts.

The Model Forest program is thus an interesting example of a Canadian conceptualization of sustainable development, one that has been implemented in divergent cultural and political contexts, such as the Calakmul region of Mexico. The Calakmul Model Forest brought together Mexican rural development professionals and biologists (its staff), and the directors and members of the Regional Agro-silvo-pecuario and Service Council of X-Pujil (*Consejo Regional Agrosilvopecuario y de Servicios de X-Pujil*, a council of local communities *(ejidos)*. This relationship, however, was fraught with difficulties and eventually mistrust as multi-stakeholder planning proved difficult to implement where relations between rural development workers and *campesino/as* had long been characterized by hierarchical relations.

I understand sustainable development as the subfield of "development" that attempts to reconcile the apparently contradictory goals of development and environmental protection. It developed from the encounter of western environmentalists and development institutions that began in the mid-1980s (Adams). Since the publication of *Our Common Future* (WCED), the concept and its associated discourses have been a dominant mode through which concerns about global ecology and Third World environments are expressed while a proliferation of writings has debated the definition and merits of the concept

of sustainable development. In interpreting the concept, my research follows the lead of anthropologists Arturo Escobar (1995) and James Ferguson (1994) who have examined "development," not as a universal project in human advancement, but as the exercise of particular forms of power in specific historical and cultural contexts. They have called for explorations of the ways in which the discourses, practices, and institutions of development shape the relationship between so-called First and Third Worlds and the lives of people who are its supposed beneficiaries. They have also noted the value of ethnographic studies in this approach to development, which some have called the anthropology *of* development, to distinguish it from more conventional development anthropology.

An ethnographic study usually involves a relatively long period of time spent among its subjects and has as a primary goal understanding *local* meanings and perspectives. Sustainable development, however, is a complex cultural phenomenon involving interlinked levels of meaning and cultural processes unfolding in multiple spaces. The impetus to involve women in the Calakmul Model Forest, for example, was the result of *global* agendas developed in western capitals to which *local* development workers and women responded in particular ways shaped by factors such as previous work experiences, culturally-informed notions of work, and gender and family roles. When it focuses on a particular locale, ethnographic research can examine how global and local factors interact in the daily practice of, in this case, sustainable development.

I conducted my research in Calakmul between April 1996 and January 1998. It included attendance at the monthly assemblies of the Regional Council of X-Pujil, the *campesino* organization linked to the Model Forest; interviews with women leaders and development workers in the region; and, in one village (*ejido*), called 20 de Noviembre, participant-observation, attendance at women's meetings, and interviews.

Women, Gender, and Sustainable Development

It was pointed out decades ago that men and women almost always have very different relationships to "development." Since then, tremendous energy has been devoted to debates, and to policy and project initiatives around gender. Bina Agarwal has noted, however, that despite all the accumulated evidence that gender is such a significant dimension of development, "gender continues to be viewed as an issue of 'special interest,' whose incorporation into development analysis and program interventions has been piecemeal at best" (1373).

One of the contributions that ethnographic approaches in the anthropology *of* development can make is to "identify struggles and spaces in which important changes can be and are made" (Watts 286). In keeping with this ethnographic goal, this article offers an examination of the relationship of sustainable development, as the Calakmul Model Forest undertook it, to women's activism. In other words, its purpose is to explore the ways in which involvement in sustainable development projects and activities created opportunities for women to promote their interests and/or challenge dominant local gender ideologies, as well as the ways in which this involvement reproduced unequal gender relations. To do this, I worked with three groups of women, each differently positioned with respect to the institutions of development: women development workers; women participating in sustainable development projects in their *ejidos*; and women political leaders. Although the groups' memberships were overlapping and shifting, examining them together shows the connections between actions in these realms, as well as those between struggles in these public domains and those in the domestic realm. Furthermore, over the course of my fieldwork, relations between men and women in the Regional Council became a critical factor in the regional political dynamic. This illustrates how gender analysis should be of interest not only to those concerned with the conditions of women's lives; in this case it was essential to understanding regional political change.

Development workers told me sexist jokes and warned me that if I was a *feminista primer-mundista* (First World feminist) that the local women wouldn't be interested in my imperialist and judgemental ideas.

Because I was concerned about the possible imposition of ethnocentric western feminist views, my approach included a reflexive examination of the power relations involved in the research process. In other words, I asked how the fact that I was a "First World" woman researcher working with "third-world" women in the male-dominated context of rural Mexico influenced my research project.

I knew that both men and women in Calakmul were curious to find out whether or not this educated Canadian *gringa* was a feminist and how that might influence my work with women, my interactions with men, and my views on gender relations. Development workers told me sexist jokes and warned me that if I was a *feminista primer-mundista* (First World feminist) that the local women wouldn't be interested in my imperialist and judgemental ideas. Thus I understood I was entering a field where gender relations were already contentious and where notions of femininity, masculinity, and women's and

men's respective roles were understood to be sites of gendered, inter-ethnic, and inter-national contest.

When I first arrived in Calakmul several people approached me to tell me about all the wonderful things that were being done by and for women there. I listened eagerly, but was troubled to learn that the most talked-about events had involved handicrafts, food preparation, and a Mother's Day celebration. Why, I asked myself, was there such celebration of women's family roles and domestic activities in the name of their "participation" in sustainable development? Was anybody talking about challenging dominant gender ideologies? Where were these ideas for women's projects coming from? Didn't international donors have more progressive gender policies than this? Although I had some intellectual preparation for dealing with the apparent contradiction between poor Mexican women's activism and forms of western feminist action I was more familiar with, on a personal level, I was somewhat at a loss as to how to locate myself, as a woman, a researcher, and a feminist, in relation to these kinds of initiatives.

The Model Forest's original neglect of gender concerns, did not mean that women remained excluded, that the implications of their involvement could be predicted, or that its effects were entirely negative or positive.

Participación, Organización, Proyectos, *and* La Política: *Three Realms of Women's Involvement in Sustainable Development in Calakmul*

Campesino organizations, development projects, and regional politics are important and interconnected realms in which women work, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, to change the conditions of their lives. I will begin with a discussion of some important factors that shaped how women participated in sustainable development, then describe the actual series of events through which women were drawn into the activities of the Regional Council and the Model Forest. Following that I will describe an example of women's experiences with sustainable development projects implemented at the level of the *ejido*. Finally, I will present some of the experiences of the women who were most involved in the Regional Council, including two who served as elected directors.

As a result of decades of women's activism in both donor and recipient countries, most western development assistance agencies now require attention to gender from the very first steps of project design. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has had policy guidelines on women in development since 1976 and currently has well-developed guidelines to promote gender equality in its program. Similar policies influenced the way most internationally funded, and some Mexican, projects were implemented in Calakmul, but because funding for the Canadian Model Forest program originally came from Environment Canada, not CIDA, the Calakmul Model Forest was not required to follow CIDA policies. The proposal document for the Calakmul Model Forest (Ministry of Supply and Services Canada) does not mention a mandate to involve women in any of its projects, or a gender analysis of forest use and management, or express concern about how the project might affect men and women differently.

The Model Forest's original neglect of gender concerns, however, did not mean that women remained excluded, that the implications of their involvement could be predicted, or that its effects were entirely negative or positive. Several people working with the Regional Council recognized an important opportunity to involve women in the Council's work and thereby attract greater interest from international donors. The Model Forest was, however, working in a country in which there is a long history of women's marginalization from formal political structures, particularly in rural areas.

As a result of programs of *ejidal* colonization beginning in the 1960s, land tenure in Calakmul is dominated by *ejidos*. Thus the communities that were the object of sustainable development programs in Calakmul are *ejidos*, self-governing agrarian communities that have received land in accordance with the agrarian laws established after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). The members of an *ejido*, the *ejidatarios*, together form an *ejidal* assembly, from among whose members *ejido* authorities are elected.

Until 1971 holders of *ejidal* rights (*ejidatarios*) could only be male heads-of-households, their sons of marriageable age, or the widow of an *ejidatario*. After 1971 a woman raising children on her own for any reason could also become an *ejidataria*, but in Calakmul few such women have claimed *ejidataria* status. Agrarian laws enshrined post-revolutionary patriarchal family structures and values, and the presumption that male heads-of-households can and do democratically represent the interests of all members of their families persists (Stephen). This fact has been critical in shaping the ways women in rural areas dominated by *ejidal* land tenure, such as Calakmul, have organized politically and participated in sustainable development projects.

The 1971 changes to the Agrarian Law also enabled the creation within *ejidos* of women's groups called *Unidades Agro-Industriales de la Mujer* (Agro-Industrial Women's Units), best known in Mexico by the acronym UAIM

(plural UAIMes). Lynn Stephen suggests the principal motivation for the creation of this institution was to draw women into so-called productive activities and thereby increase agricultural productivity in the *ejidal* sector, overlooking the important fact that across the regions of Mexico rural women historically contributed their labour to a wide variety of productive activities (Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan). Furthermore, UAIMes across Mexico have been involved in projects such as tortilla-making and chicken-raising, activities that already were the responsibility of women, and their creation did not address the exclusion of women from *ejidal* assemblies.

The practice of development organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, such as the Calakmul Model Forest, to work with women through UAIMes and the few women's SSSes (Societies of Social Solidarity—*Sociedades de Solidaridad Social*)[1] that had been established therefore reproduced the historical relationships between women, *ejidos*, and state rural development agencies.

Organizing Women for *La Biósfera*

One of the very first initiatives for women in the Calakmul region was a credit project to support small-scale cattle raising, part of a program called *Fondos Estatales de Solidaridad para Mujeres Campesinas* (FESOMUC) (State Solidarity Funds for *Campesina* Women). In order to be eligible to receive this credit, women had to legally constitute and join UIAMes in their *ejidos*. The results of the cattle-raising were mixed, but in my interview with Maria (a pseudonym), the Model Forest staff member who became most involved with its women's activities, she commented that the FESOMUC's cattle credit program helped women to organize.

> *I think the greatest value of that program, although it was a significant investment for cattle that was not taken advantage of, was that it was the spearhead that enabled the women in the region to begin to organize themselves.*[2]

When the Regional Council was formed in 1991, each *ejido* with Council members sent two male delegates (*delegados)* from among these members to the monthly assemblies of the Regional Council in Zoh-Laguna. It was not until 1993 that three or four women began to attend the assemblies. In Maria's words,

> *There were around four women with ... a lot of passion for participation.... It was they who began to ... invite other women.... They saw them in ... meetings that were taking place in the* ejidos *about the formation of the [Regional] Council. They were the women who were doing the proselytizing in the* ejidos.

They encouraged other women to be assigned as *delegadas* (female delegates) of their UAIM or SSS.

The *delegadas* had been encouraged to begin participating in the activities of the Council at the insistence of its most important advisor, then director of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. Deocundo Acopa had decades of experience with rural development programs in southeastern Mexico and, as I was told, a gift for communicating persuasively with people of all "social levels," from the poorest *campesino* to representatives of international funding agencies. With his guidance, the Regional Council became the first regional *campesino* organization in Calakmul to involve women. People gave me various explanations for Acopa's invitation to the *delegadas*, some related to his upbringing in rural Tabasco, his understanding of rural women's work and contribution to production, and his stated belief that the Mexican family structure is "essentially matriarchal." Regardless, involving women in the Council was a strategic move for an organization seeking international funding.

Women took advantage of the "political spaces" that were opening for them and by 1995 more than half of the member *ejidos* of the Regional Council had women delegates attending the assembly and one of the six directors of the Council was a woman. One of the Regional Council's auto mechanics, a keen observer of the Zoh-Laguna scene, was reported to comment that,

> *Before... of women, there was almost nothing. There were no women and they didn't participate, nor did anyone talk about them in the bosom of the Council. Nor were women seen visiting the Council.... Now women are invading us. Every day there are UAIMes [here] and every day the women's group comes.*

Maria became one of the key figures promoting women's participation and organization in Calakmul. She was the Director of the Communication, Training and Environmental Education sub-program of the Model Forest, and for several months in early 1997 Coordinator of the Model Forest. During a long interview after she had left Calakmul, Maria reflected on her work and the challenges faced by women in the region.

Maria had been involved with environmental education programs in northern Mexico before being invited to do similar work in Calakmul. Several months after arriving she, "realized that the women and children were the great absence from all the programs that had been and which were about to be" in Calakmul. She then convinced Acopa that she should focus her work on these groups.

The first events she organized in the *ejidos* were showings of children's videos, including Disney's The *Lion King*, with the aim of

> *attract[ing] their interest.... And to begin to see who we could establish a dialogue with ... [and] what was going to be the best script to begin incorporating them, to begin to interest them. Because no one was interested, no one*

knew anything.... Now at least ... they know that a program exists.

When the women arrived with their little children, and gathered together to watch the videos, Maria could chat with them.

Maria collaborated with another NGO to organize a one-day event for the women of two *ejidos*. Its purpose was to allow the exchange of information about uses of local plants for food, medicine and other purposes, and about the activities of their UAIMes. The event was repeated on a much larger scale as a *muestreo gastronómica* (gastronomic fair) involving women from all the member *ejidos* of the Regional Council. According to Maria, this generated a lot of interest among the women and drew attention to women's work in food preparation, handicrafts, and production of candy and jams from local products. When I asked her about the rather conventional women's activities the event focused on, she said that the event was primarily an opportunity for cultural exchange between women of different cultural backgrounds, a way of bringing women together, of overcoming the challenges to communication resulting from the cultural diversity of the region, since interest in food and cooking was something all the women had in common and would enjoy sharing. As she put it,

Every time that you get together with a woman ... it is always food that sparks their interest. Food and medicines are the topic of conversation, and what has happened with their children; this is typical among women.

The overarching goal of the event, however, remained, "to search for the mechanisms for women to be bold enough to participate more actively in the general activities [of the Council]."

This event was followed by a series of others, including Children's, Mothers', and Earth Day fiestas in Zoh-Laguna. The first two of these events were criticized for not fitting into the work of the Model Forest or the Regional Council, and being frivolous and expensive parties. Maria, however, explained the importance of the events in the following terms:

A group could never be organized if the people didn't know each other beforehand, if they had not been in touch before, if there were no bonds there to be grasped. Never, ever would they reach this degree of organization.

Clearly, in its initial work with women, the Model Forest did not develop projects that challenged their association with domestic and family labour. The assignment of women's projects to the Communication, Training, and Environmental Education subprogram meant the Model Forest—unlike some of the other organizations working in the region—never addressed the question of women's actual or possible roles in productive activities, or challenged the established pattern of separate and different kinds of projects for men and women.

The Regional Council, however, coordinated projects funded by a variety of sources, and in the tangled relationship between the Model Forest and the Council, the Model Forest staff were involved in administering programs funded by other agencies. Such was the case of the women's handicrafts training project in the *ejido* 20 de Noviembre. The way these projects came into being demonstrates how participation in the Regional Council was connected to funding for projects for women at the level of the *ejido*.

Embroidery as Participation

Not long after Maria had begun her work with women and children, she learned that the state governor was planning to visit Calakmul, accompanied by his wife, and that they would meet with the Regional Council. Maria encouraged women in several *ejidos* to take advantage of the opportunity to present a *solicitud*, or formal request for support for their activities, to the important visitors. In Mexico, the wife of a municipal president, state governor, or national president usually becomes the honorary director of the corresponding level of the government agency known as the *Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (DIF) (National System for Integrated Family Development). The DIF administers a variety of social programs, including supporting handicraft production. Hence it was decided to take advantage of the visit of Campeche's first lady to showcase the work of local women, in the hope of obtaining some DIF funding.

Maria also felt that there had been a lack of attention to ceremony and protocol in previous visits of dignitaries to the region, and that this was an area in which the women could make a contribution. She approached the UAIM of the *ejido* 20 de Noviembre and asked if it members would put their well-known talents in embroidery to work making gifts (*obsequios*) for the visitors? The women agreed and, also at Maria's suggestion, embroidered bags with motifs representing the flora and fauna of the region—"ecological designs." These were artfully rendered using techniques used to adorn the white dresses many women in Yucatan wear with colourful floral and geometric patterns. They also embroidered a large white tablecloth with the same motifs for Council's head table.

The plan succeeded. Shortly afterwards it was announced that the DIF would provide funds for training in handicrafts for the UIAMes of three *ejidos* in Calakmul, including 20 de Noviembre. This *ejido* was particularly fortunate because there would be training in two kinds of handicrafts: embroidery and woodworking. This was the first project for women to arrive in this *ejido* since the cattle-raising program, and the first to involve them in sustainable development, through the Model Forest.

Proyectos: Projects for Women in *20 de Noviembre*

Despite the success of Maria's plan, it had created a conflict that the workshops intensified. Although the women recounted these events to me more than a year after they had occurred, they did so in great detail and with visible emotion. The problems began when the embroiderers, who had made the *obsequios* on the understanding that they would be paid for the time spent, realized that they would not be.[3] When the two groups whose members would participate in the embroidery and woodworking training were formed, the group of disaffected embroiders opted for woodworking. None of the women in the *ejido* had any previous experience with this craft. Not surprisingly, the embroidery group's work reflected the women's skill and sold well, generating small amounts of income for the members. The wooden boxes and spoons the woodworker's group learned how to make were "laughable." One member of this group told me, "visitors only buy our handicrafts out of pity!"

When some of the woodworkers decided they would like to switch groups, Maria told them that they could not because they had been given the training in woodworking and in return must continue making handicrafts from wood. She strongly discouraged them from making the "ecological embroidery" and selling it on their own. The woodworkers were understandably resentful, especially since several of them were excellent embroiderers. Never before, the woodworkers complained to me, had any woman in the *ejido* been told what she could or couldn't embroider, nor had there ever been a need for someone from outside the *ejido* to organize women to embroider and sell their work.

The projects nevertheless generated momentum to build a handicraft centre (*casa de artesanías*) to serve as a work and meeting space for women. But when the embroidery group was given six brand-new sewing machines, insult was added to injury for the woodworkers who felt their efforts should be supported in similar ways. Tensions peaked when women from the two groups built a wall permanently dividing the *casa de artesanías* in two.

The woodworkers' concerns were legitimate. The women knew how to organize themselves to generate income without the supervision of a development worker and understood that the investment required to make woodworking even nominally profitable was unavailable. Furthermore, they felt the conflict the handicrafts projects had generated between women was unnecessary and undermined the good relations they had generally enjoyed among themselves in their *ejido*. The continued existence of the woodworking group, however, reflected Maria's desire to be able to report that there were two organized women's groups in the *ejido*, and that they had made good use of funds for training provided by the DIF.

Apparently, evidence of women's "participation" in sustainable development, through handicrafts production, including embroidery, was sufficient to demonstrate to donors that the Calakmul Model Forest was taking gender equity concerns into account.

A number of women in Calakmul, however, had more ambitious visions. The next section describes what some of the most determined and outspoken women in Calakmul were doing to challenge established practices of development, to make use of the political spaces offered them, and to improve their families' lives, as well as the challenges they faced in working toward these goals. Their visions clearly went beyond "embroidery as participation."

Women in *La Política*

People's responses to politics and economics also affect history and culture as their identities change through time. Thus it is necessary both to understand what the political, economic, and cultural restraints on women's political mobilization are, and yet be equally committed to unravelling how women see themselves, how they experience and give meaning to structural context, how they interpret what happens to them on a daily basis, and how they come together through the process of political activity to form movements that push back on structural conditions of inequality. (Stephen 7)

Here I will discuss the third realm of women's involvement in sustainable development: the work and experiences of women leaders in Calakmul, based on interviews I conducted with Edelmira Jiménez, Dorcas de la Cruz, and Carmen Salgado.[4] As the following excerpts show, these women often used the terms of sustainable development discourse to describe their needs, and they justified their needs in terms of their family roles as mothers.

Doña Edelmira Jiménez, originally from the state of Tabasco, was one of the first women to participate in the Regional Council as a *delegada* and the first woman to become a director of the Regional Council. After leaving that position she continued to be outspoken in the Council's assemblies. During our interview, I asked Doña Edelmira what women had achieved through their participation in the Regional Council. She described the obstacles the women had faced, including the opposition of their husbands, sometimes expressed through physical abuse, but said that there had been benefits: some women had been able to improve their economic situations; they had a bit more money to improve their children's diet and health and to provide them with clothing and the other things that they needed to continue attending school.

When I asked if women's perceptions of themselves had changed, if they had more self-confidence, or if they had different ideas about what kinds of work they could and could not do, "Oh yes, definitely," she replied, "some women now have eight or nine cows." Women in San Antonio Soda had not owned cattle before and any women who owns a herd of cattle, however small, would

likely be more self-confident, as well as wealthier.

Edelmira told me that despite the difficult conditions in which they live it is possible for women to improve their situation. She described with great enthusiasm the difficulties she had faced in getting to meetings with women in other *ejidos*. "It didn't matter to us if it rained. If the trucks got stuck in the mud, we walked into the villages, through the forest and through the rain, and didn't care one bit, even if we didn't get home until the middle of the night."

The biggest obstacle to women trying to meet their needs, Edelmira said, was their lack of liberty *(libertad)*. Not all women had the same degree of freedom that she had, although achieving it had come at a cost.

> *What motivates us are our needs. I've seen that when I have a little bit of work and make a few cents, I can buy things for my children—crackers, bread in the evening; and the next day they don't have to eat just beans and rice, they can have egg or something else with it. This is why we need work, to be able to defend ourselves a little bit. This is why we need to be supported with training in handicrafts.*

I was surprised by her complaint about women's lack of liberty and her call for the kinds of projects the women had already been offered, as the handicrafts projects did not challenge the cultural restrictions on women's movements and had generated relatively little income for them.

In a similar vein, Doña Carmen Salgado, originally from the state of Veracruz, explained to me that when women organize themselves into groups they are able to obtain more *cosas* (things), *apoyos* (financial and material support) and *proyectos* (projects). Both these women leaders articulated women's interests using the terms of development discourse, drawing attention to their needs for the kinds of opportunities they had previously been offered by development institutions.

Why, I asked Edelmira, are men so opposed to the women doing these kinds of things?

> *They are not opposed to the women working, but it has to be here in the village. [Otherwise] the children get left alone in the house [and] our belongings are unwatched. The husband too is left on his own. So that's why they don't want their wives to be gone all the blessed day, two days, three days. [But] they've seen that when we have been working here in the village, well, even they benefit.... [When] other husbands saw that we had obtained results ... they gave permission for their wives to participate with us, and now we've gone on to conquer the* compañeras *in the other* ejidos, *who were living in peace before.* [Laughs].

Edelmira and other women leaders told me about the difficulties they also faced in their work as directors of the Regional Council, difficulties posed by the necessity of working together with their male counterparts, and created by these men, their own husbands, and other women. It is a very delicate task for a woman to manage her personal reputation while involved in political work.

Doña Carmen explains:

> *If a woman goes out, if a woman is going around with the* compañeros *(men),* hijole, *all the world is criticizing you. They don't believe that you are going around working. They gossip. A woman has to have a good dialogue, good communication with her husband to be able to travel where we have to travel, and we have all been through big conflicts because of this.*

Edelmira, Carmen, and other women leaders are engaged in local politics with clear goals and the desire to fight for them. Our conversations showed how they engage with the Regional Council, the Model Forest, and other institutions in terms of claiming rights as women and mothers to supports, projects, and training, while managing their reputations.

In August 1997 the Regional Council held an election to select a set of new directors. A woman, Doña Dorcas de la Cruz, received the highest number of votes, making her President-elect. But no sooner was it realized that she had won the election, than the voting process previously agreed up on by the assembly was declared invalid. The vote was repeated according to a new process in which Dorcas could not be elected president. The angry *delegadas,* once they had protested vigorously, walked out of the assembly as a group and reassembled in the women's regional handicraft centre then under construction. There they held a long and difficult discussion about forming their own separate Regional Women's Council, rather than continue to participate in the Regional Council, or whether they should do both.

When I asked men of the Regional Council why they had been opposed to Doña Dorcas's presidency, they said that it would have been impossible for them to work with a woman president. One of the reasons given was that they couldn't go drinking with her, and how could people who couldn't go drinking together possibly work well together? The functioning of the organization would be jeopardized. What they didn't say to me, but which I had heard said on other occasions, was "no man likes to be ordered around by a woman."

By early 1998 the *delegadas* had decided to go ahead with organizing a separate Women's Regional Council, having concluded that in this way they would be more effective in obtaining projects and *apoyos* for women. The *delegados,* however, did not want the women to leave the Regional Council, fearing this would contribute to their organization's decline. By this point the organization was in such financial difficulty that it did not have funds to bring the *delegado/as* from the *ejidos* to hold an assembly

every month. This gave the women added leverage in the Council.

When I visited Calakmul again in mid-1998, the Model Forest was in the process of developing a work plan for its second three-year phase of funding. To my surprise, the new work plan would see the greatest part of its budget go to projects for women. Thus, somewhat ironically, the Model Forest had turned 180 degrees, from having no particular concern with women, to preferentially supporting their projects. As Stephen noted in her discussion of a similar Women's Council in Nayarit state (Mexico), sometimes the consequences of women's organizing are unintended, or even unimagined.

Conclusions

The involvement of women in the assemblies of the Regional Council of X-Pujil represented a significant departure from rural development practice that had previously excluded women from *campesino* organizations. Given the opportunity to participate in the assemblies and on the board of directors, several women were extremely vocal in advocating for women and occasionally criticized their male counterparts. In these ways and others women can be seen to have actively occupied, and sometimes tried to expand, the political spaces opened for them in the regional sustainable development project in Calakmul. Such efforts, however, were made in the face of a persistently male-dominated political culture and unequal gender relations within their own families and homes. The Model Forest's projects for women did not directly challenge dominant local gender ideologies, the gendered division of labour, or the marginalization of women in *ejido* level decision-making. The implementation of the women's projects, in at least some cases, followed the populist logic characteristic of rural development in Mexico. The combination, however, of women's involvement in the Regional Council and of projects for women in the *ejidos* reinforced women's agency and expanded possibilities for action.

Some of the consequences of women's involvement in sustainable development were unanticipated, in particular the move towards the formation of a woman's council independent of the Regional Council. The debate among the women over this possibility reflected the tension between the possibilities offered by gender integration and those offered by the creation of a separate, autonomous women's organization. Given the distinction made between women's and men's projects at the *ejido* level, and the subordination of women's projects and interests at the level of the Regional Council, the argument in favour of an autonomous women's organization was compelling.

In retrospect the warnings I was given about the cultural inappropriateness of "First World feminsm" in Calakmul seem best interpreted as defences of dominant local gender ideologies. Not that researchers and development workers should disregard such concerns—they have, of course, also been eloquently described by feminist academics—but the areas of common concern, in Calakmul, at least, are significant and an important basis for solidarity.

Like Michael Watts, I would argue that ethnographic approaches in the anthropology *of* development are useful in identifying "struggles and spaces in which important changes can be and are made" (286). While the Calakmul Model Forest both provided opportunities for women and reproduced unequal gender relations, in my interviews with them women leaders in Calakmul clearly articulated the challenges in working with sustainable development organizations, as well as some of their successes. Their struggles are important in their own right and important dimensions of sustainable development and regional political change.

Julia Murphy graduated from the doctoral program in the Department of Social Anthropology at York Univeristy. Since 1999 she has been Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calgary, with research and teaching interests in feminist anthropology, development discourses, ethnographic approaches to natural resource management, and Indigenous peoples in Latin America. She began working in rural Mexico in 1988, and is the single mother of a four-year old son.

[1]Unlike UAIMes, SSSes are not exclusively for women, nor are they necessarily associated with *ejidos*.

[2]Translations from Spanish by author.

[3]This was something I observed repeatedly during my research: women being paid poorly or not at all for labour contributed to development projects.

[4]Each of these women, when asked, requested that their actual names be used in my writing.

References

Adams, William M. "Green Development Theory?: Environmentalism and Sustainable Development." *Power of Development*. Ed. Jonathan Crush. New York: Routledge, 1995. 87-99.

Agarwal, Bina. "Editorial: Resounding the Alert—Gender, Resources and Community Action." *World Development* 25 (9) (1997): 1373-1380.

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). *CIDA's Policy on Gender Equality*. Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1999.

Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Ferguson, James. *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1990].

Fowler-Salamini, Heather and Mary Kay Vaughan. Eds. *Women of the Mexican Countryside, 1850-1990: Creating Spaces, Shaping Transitions.* Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1994.

International Development Research Corporation (IDRC). Online: www.idrc.ca.

Ministry of Supply and Services Canada. The Calakmul Model Forest: Productive Ecology—Proposal. 1994.

Murphy, Julia E. Ethnography and Sustainable Development in the Calakmul Model Forest, Campeche, Mexico. Unpublished Dissertation. Department of Social Anthropology, York University, Toronto, 2003.

Stephen, Lynn. *Women and Social Movements in Latin America: Power from Below.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1997.

Watts, Michael. "Development Ethnographies." *Ethnography* 2 (2) (2001): 283-300.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). *Our Common Future.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987.

ELISAVIETTA RITCHIE

NOTE TO YOUNGER SELF

Do not regret
every act,
only a few.

Regret words;
at sixteen, arguments
with a drunken mother,

at thirty-six, disputes
with sons unnaturally high.
With a daughter, learn silence.

Regret most "Yes, dears"
to an old spouse,
but with that new one

drum up bravado
to differ, or to keep still.
Every course is gamble.

Regret lapse of speech
when one word, if not yet
the perfect word,

might have rescued
a poem, healed a soul,
perhaps saved one.

Cherish words.
Live by them, *off* them
better than I.

Accept the curse
of curiosity. Risk more.
Bless energy spent

and reborn in loving
even the wrong
person or thing.

So, admire the vulture
ugly, ungainly at rest, yet
when on obsidian wings

He soars, scans the land,
Clears the dead,
What a useful, elegant bird.

Enjoy your lust for the sea,
mangoes and figs, further lusts
half understood.

Forgive most mistakes,
others' and your own.
Who is to judge?

For whatever you are,
I still am. But
do be more mindful than I

to fix dinner on time,
clear that avalanche on your desk;
not let the stewed apricots burn.

Elisavietta Ritchie lives in Washington, DC.