

A Gender-bound Domain in Teotitlán del Valle: The Evolving Roles of Zapotec Women

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Only fifteen miles east of Oaxaca City, Mexico, Teotitlán del Valle is a small village that is home to a community of Zapotec weavers whose ancestors have lived in the region for more than three thousand years. In her book *Oaxaca Celebration: Family, Food, and Fiestas in Teotitlán*, Mary Jane Gagnier de Mendoza writes, “With a population of more than eight thousand and practically every person over age fifteen participating in the weaving process, Teotitlán may very well be the largest hand-weaving community in the world” (18). As a result of the growing international interest in Zapotec weavings, it is “a place caught between a rapidly advancing future in export production and a long-entrenched past of ethnic uniqueness anchored in ongoing institutions” (Stephen 5). The international popularity of Zapotec woven products has created a tension between their new awareness of the world beyond their little village and their traditional, religious, simple Zapotec way of life. Although some Zapotec women have taken steps toward gender equality in the past thirty years, women continue to be oppressed in this Zapotec community by the normalization of institutionalized patriarchal ideology, which permeates the local government, the religious doctrine, and the culturally ascribed gender roles. Apart from a few pioneers, Zapotec women still largely live within an “enclosed garden” in which their labor is socially valued, but their voices, or any other expressions of autonomy, are not.

In her book *The Enclosed Garden*, Jean Friedman defines the term “enclosed garden” as the social boundaries placed on women by their patriarchal communities, revolving around church and kinship (xiii). Although her research was meant to illuminate the cultural restrictions on Southern women of the nineteenth century, Friedman’s metaphor of the enclosed garden also applies to Zapotec women in Teotitlán. According to Friedman, “[T]he social demands of integrated kinship networks, church discipline, and farm labor compressed southern women’s experience into the confines of a rural, kin-dominated, church-related community” (39-40). Throughout history, Zapotec women have lived within similar confines in the rural, pre-industrialized, predominantly Catholic Teotitlán del Valle, restricting their opportunity for independent growth and personal autonomy. For her book *Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca*, Lynn Stephen, an anthropologist who spent the 1980s and early 2000s studying

Zapotec culture and its gendered inequalities, interviewed multiple women—Isabel, Julia, Angela, and Alicia—whose stories reveal the difficulties of navigating their enclosed gardens in this small Mexican community. These women learn to cope with the inequalities, attempt to rectify them, or escape the societal boundaries inflicted by these inequalities, and their narratives inform this paper (Stephen 63-91).

Consistent with Friedman’s concept of how the “enclosed garden” takes shape, a church must ground the kinship-based community. In Teotitlán, the Catholic Church is influential in enforcing the boundaries that inhibit women’s behavior, both in private and in public. The village’s colonial-era church is positioned in the center of town, and passersby often stop at its gates to make the sign of the cross or kiss their rosaries before pursuing their errands. According to Gagnier de Mendoza, a woman from Canada who married a Zapotec man and moved to Teotitlán, “[T]hese people had a direct line with the gods. Faith was not something plugged into for an hour at Mass on Sundays. Religion was a part of daily life” (6-7). Catholic doctrine continues to shape Zapotec societal norms and church rituals, and fiestas “create a sense of belonging within the extended family, the church, and the community” (Gagnier de Mendoza 21). Compliance with the status quo assures one’s place within polite society.



The Roman Catholic Church in Teotitlán del Valle, March 2016. Photograph by author.

However, the Zapotec do not simply practice the same Catholicism often seen in the United States. Their age-old indigenous beliefs have long been integrated into their Christian practices. Gagnier de Mendoza writes, “The Catholic Church walks a fragile tightrope between enforcing official doctrine and tolerating indigenous idolatry. It is essential to understand that for much of the native population there is no difference between Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, or their statues. Kissing the carved wooden feet of a statue of Christ is to kiss God himself” (95-6). So when a family agrees to host the fiestas for the celebration of a saint’s day, family members are preparing grand community affairs with the belief that they are personally hosting the saint within their homes. Julia, a Zapotec woman born in 1929, “believes that sponsorship of rituals for the local saints is extremely important” (Stephen 65). Julia states, “In 1957 we were

mayordomos [hosts] for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Like many things then, my husband didn't tell me he had made a vow to be a mayordomo. Now [a widow] I decide these things. But I wasn't afraid then because...I had six years to get ready. ... There were three fiestas for this mayordomía and we were ready for them" (67). One's level of participation in these fiestas and religious rituals affects one's respectability in the community. Stephen writes, "While all members of the community are accorded respect by virtue of being born into and participating in the community, the amount of respect accorded to someone depends on certain criteria. Thus, while it implies equality because everyone is due it, it is not given in equal amounts to all people in the community" (47). Women were not allocated much respect; instead their place was, and to some degree still is, considered subordinate to the men.



The walled compound of Casa de Elenas, March 2016. Photograph by author.

In *The Enclosed Garden*, Friedman states, "In nineteenth-century culture, maternity, domesticity, [and] self-sacrifice...were expected of women," and these expectations that hindered the personal growth and mobility of the nineteenth-century women in the U.S. can be seen to hinder the Zapotec women of Teotitlán (40). According to Gagnier de Mendoza,

Firmly established moral codes inherent in rural Oaxacan communities clearly demarcate socially acceptable behavior especially for women. Whereas it is normal for young men, even those who are married, to hang out with primos [cousins] and amigos [friends] on street corners, a proper *senorita* would be severely criticized for doing the same. The public space outside the security of the walled family compound is seen as "uncertain"—fertile soil for gossip and speculation. (27)

The walled family compound was literally a young woman’s enclosed garden. Although not consistently practiced now, the traditional dress for Zapotec women always included an apron, which signified their status as a domestic in private and in public. In her interview, Julia states, “When I was first married I never left the house. Never. My husband would go alone to Oaxaca. He sold the blankets and kept the money. At first I didn’t even leave the house to buy food. I was too scared. I had never been out alone. ...A lot of women who were my age didn’t go on the street” (Stephen 66). Since she speaks of her experiences as a young woman, Julia refers to Teotitlán in the late 1940s. However, Angela discusses the village’s gender inequalities in the 1980s, stating, “You know men here can talk to any girl they want and women aren’t allowed to say anything. If women spoke to other men they’d get in trouble. Men are very jealous” (74). Julia and Angela both describe a patriarchal community in which men are empowered and entitled to control women’s behavior. Furthermore, Isabel, interviewed in 2004, attests to the fact



Street art in Teotitlán, March 2016. The inscription in red urges, “Join in ending violence against women.” Photograph by author.

that the social inequalities that mandated Julia’s and Angela’s behavior are still publicly reinforced in the 2000s. Isabel, born in 1982, fifty years after Julia, was raised by a single mother and has worked to improve the gender dynamics in the village, advocating for women’s equal rights. In her 2004 interview, Isabel states,

[W]hen we used to participate in the parades [to raise awareness for women’s rights], everyone said a lot of things to us in the streets...the men made fun of us. ...[T]hey would say...“How is it that your family lets you walk around in the street, going from one place to another? Don’t you have work to do at home? Why don’t you stay home and clean, make dinner, take care of the kids?” [T]hey would say to us

“Women shouldn’t be out on the street marching.”...I didn’t feel good when they said that to me. (Stephen 87-8)

The fact that Zapotec men were trying to shame women for being seen in public, suggesting that these women were only valued as passive domestic laborers, indicates that the men felt threatened by these women advocating for societal change. Many Zapotec men wanted to maintain the status quo as the dominant gender. As of twelve years ago, women like Isabel were deviating from the gender role expectations of their village, despite the male backlash they encountered. With perseverance and determination, Isabel, along with other women, worked to construct a new norm of culturally accepted female autonomy, thereby eliminating the boundaries of the socially constructed “enclosed gardens” of domesticity and subordination for women.

Up until the 1990s, most women were not permitted an education (Stephen 90). This fact hindered Zapotec women’s ability to take care of themselves and function in society without the constant support of the men in their lives. In her 1985 interview with Stephen, Julia said,

I don’t know how to read or write... You know last year I went to the school for adults that they had for one day. When I got home my husband said, “Why do you want to learn? You’re too old.” I do want to learn, and I need to know for my family. My daughter doesn’t know how to read; she didn’t go to school either. ... My husband doesn’t care about my granddaughter going to school. ... I think a lot of men are jealous when women learn to read and write and that’s why they don’t like it when their wives are educated. ... I need to learn [so I can get] to Oaxaca [City] and Tlacolula. I can’t read the street signs. (Stephen 68-9)

Julia knew that her lack of education not only hindered her ability to function as an individual but also restricted her movement, keeping her confined within the physical “enclosed garden” of her husband’s aunt’s walled courtyard. All the women whom Stephen interviewed discuss their lack of education—the highest level attained was sixth grade—and how that affected them in their lives (90). Born in 1953, Alicia describes how her father did not want her to go to school, despite her grandmother’s buying her a notebook and pencil so Alicia could attend classes (77). She states, “He came to the school to get me... I tried to go again, but neither my father [n]or my mother wanted me to go to school. They told me I didn’t need to go to school because I’m a woman. They said men go to school because they are men. I took care of the babies. Every year my mother had a baby. ... I was fourteen years old when I got married” (77). As an illiterate woman who understood the power to be gained with knowledge, Alicia’s grandmother was trying to help her granddaughter, but her lack of power to make her voice heard led to the continued practice of denying her family’s women their education and relegating them to a subordinate life with limited opportunities. According to Stephen, “migration has been a longstanding survival strategy” for Alicia (79). She moved to the United States in 1989, and “her very clear memories of being told that she did not need to go to school because she was a girl have stayed with [her] as she becomes aware of how important it is to read and write, particularly in a new environment” (79-80).

Nevertheless, not many Zapotec women could leave their village, let alone their country. Canadian transplant Gagnier de Mendoza states,

When I came to the village, women didn't drive, something I had done since my teens. But shortly afterward, my sister-in-law Marcelina became one of the village's first women with a license. I happily report that these days [2000s], long braids interwoven with thick satin ribbons are a common sight behind the steering wheel. Women here do not ride horses, but I regularly ride ours. (14)

Once Gagnier de Mendoza's sister-in-law saw that this Canadian woman who married her brother drove well and observed the freedom that the ability to drive afforded her, Marcelina, not surprisingly, wanted such freedom for herself. The introduction of new ideas to Teotitlán promotes an acceptance of the changes required to attain gender equality.

Until the 1980s, women were not permitted to get driver's licenses, a limitation that inhibited their exposure to the outside world. This meant they were reliant on men to drive them everywhere, and since many men felt women's "place" was within their walled courtyards, women rarely saw places beyond the village market and church. If a woman attempted even to escape temporarily from her "enclosed garden," she was seen as deviant and usually punished. Angela describes an example of this oppressive behavior:

Once when my father was in the hospital in Oaxaca, I went to visit him with my sister. We got a ride there in someone's truck. When I got home [my husband and my sister-in-law] slammed the door in my face. [My] father's dying, I'm very sad, and they shut the door in my face and call me all kinds of names for going to the city—whore, prostitute—just because I left and got a ride in someone's truck. (Stephen 74)

Such treatment is meant to shame Angela back into her "proper" place—her "enclosed garden"—and to enforce the status quo and the patriarchal power dynamic that subordinates women.

Although the anticipated domesticity and self-sacrifice of Zapotec women have been discussed in relation to their "enclosed gardens," their maternity is also expected. With the exception of Isabel, all of the women Stephen interviewed had at least two children. Several describe either their mothers or themselves as having a baby every year. The Catholic Church bans the use of birth control, and the resulting continuous pregnancies also hinder these women, burdening them with the task of constant childcare while their husbands are working away from the home. In keeping with the Zapotec male-dominated culture, baby girls are undervalued at birth. Angela explains,

When I was pregnant for the first time I went [to a wishing cave] and asked to have a son. ...I wanted to have a son because I thought that if I had a little girl, my mother-in-law would kick me out. When you have a baby people ask you, "*tengjum?Éñí(ŋ)*" [Is it a little man?], with a smile on their face[s]. ...If it's a little girl they say, "*tezapε?ε(neŋ)*" [Hmmm,

it's a girl.] If it's a little boy they say, “*ʔkalbao tengjunεʔéñĩ(ŋ)*” [Lucky you, it's a little man]. (Stephen 72-3)

As is customary, Angela lived with her husband's family, so her fear of being kicked out for being pregnant with a baby girl is alarming. Women were raised believing they are worth less than their male counterparts from the time they are born, renewing the cycle of patriarchal ideology when they themselves become mothers. In order to raise young women who are not denied their self-esteem and education, the cycle must break and a new, more egalitarian attitude must become the social norm. Luckily, young women like Isabel offer proof that this change has been occurring over the past thirty years.



Cooking dinner on the comal, Teotitlán del Valle, March 2016. Photograph by author.



Flan at Las Granadas, Teotitlán del Valle, March 2016. Photograph by author.

The rituals that take place when a daughter leaves the home are interesting in that they reflect how girls are undervalued. According to Zapotec tradition, young women are “stolen”—the literal translation of the Spanish *robar*—by male suitors. A man takes a young woman to his parents' house to live as his wife-to-be (Gagnier de Mendoza 55). The language is significant because it implies that women are passive victims, thereby empowering men. In most cases, however, the woman voluntarily leaves with her boyfriend—actively participating—in what is basically an elopement. According to Gagnier de Mendoza, “Being ‘stolen’ has become over the last fifty years standard custom, and very likely the girl's own mother did the same thing. Nevertheless, the ensuing ritual, *Chisiak Lazá*, translated literally from Zapotec as ‘to content,’ can be best understood as a means of appeasing or contenting the girl's parents” (55). Mediators from the husband-to-be's family bring gold candles adorned with ribbon and wax flowers, and bowls of fruit and chocolate to the parents of the young woman, promising that their daughter will be taken care of in her new home. In essence, this dowry system allows for Zapotec daughters to be traded for candles, fruit, and chocolate; women

measure their “worth” by how many candles their parents received for them (Gagnier de Mendoza 66; Stephen 70). This tradition is still practiced today: Parents are contented by the glow of lit candles and the scent of the beeswax, and by the Wednesday and Sunday labor of their future sons-in-law, who sweep the porches of their father-in-laws-to-be as “replacements” for the work their daughters had performed (Gagnier de Mendoza 66).

Zapotec women’s domestic labor is expected and valued, but not compared to the value placed on men’s work. Since women started weaving, some of that division of labor has shifted a bit, but not to the extent that men are expected to help with domestic chores. Zapotec women’s voices are muted—seen as unequal to men in both private domains and public. However, the most recent generation of Zapotec women is trying to change this imbalance by becoming more active in the male-dominant politics of the village.¹ Isabel states, “Here women don’t really have a voice and a vote, only men, according to the custom. ...I don’t think that’s right. I think women should have the same rights as men” (Stephen 87). As a result of the feminist attitudes of young women like Isabel, Zapotec women’s “enclosed gardens” are opening up with new possibilities. According to Stephen, dissatisfied Zapotec women want more for their daughters and emphasize the importance of their education, not willing to allow their daughters to suffer as they have (90). With increased tourism and day trips to Oaxaca City, Zapotec women currently are exposed to more women of different cultures. Additionally, many Zapotec women have obtained driver’s licenses, and some now play in bands—an activity denied them until the 1990s. Furthermore, most women weave, allowing them some financial independence, and some are participating in local politics.

Like Friedman’s southern women of the nineteenth century in the United States, with all the same cultural limitations of a patriarchal society, many Zapotec women lived and died within their “enclosed gardens” of opportunity. Despite the slow social acceptance of education for girls and other egalitarian changes that have occurred in recent years—like women getting their driver’s licenses—many Zapotec women endure, still living within culturally ascribed boundaries that prevent them from experiencing autonomy and independence. Slowly, women’s rights are being recognized in Teotitlán del Valle, and the “enclosed gardens” of the local Zapotec women are expanding and allowing opportunities for personal growth and autonomy with fewer expectations for self-sacrifice.

Works Cited

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¹ Isabel and other Zapotec women have participated in local marches held to advocate for women’s suffrage. During Isabel’s interview with Stephen, she also discusses her regular attendance at the village’s political meetings, which are held to elect the town officials. Isabel reports that women have been allowed to attend these meetings for a while, but that female attendance is low. (Stephen 87-8)