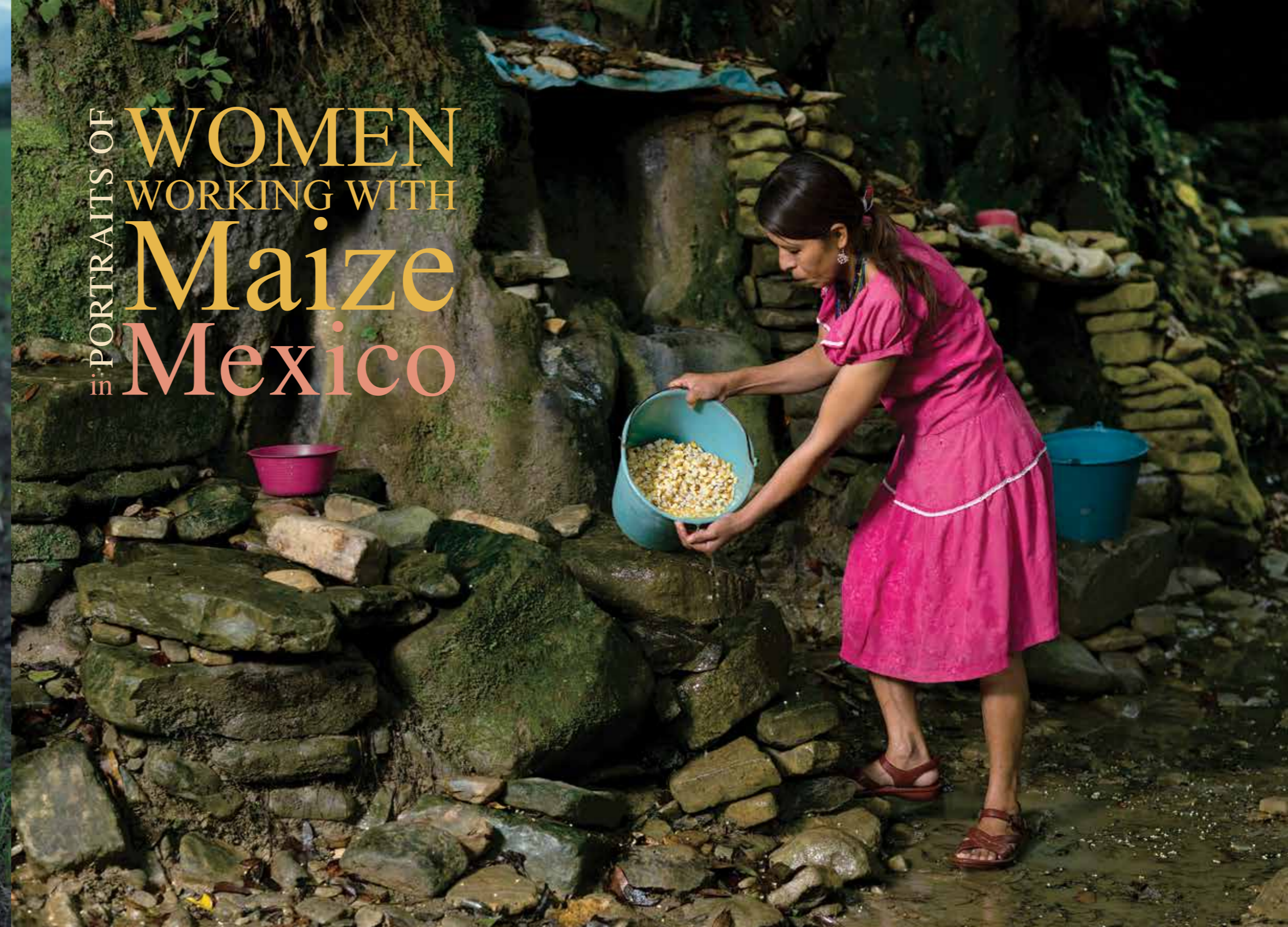




PORTRAITS OF
WOMEN
WORKING WITH
Maize
Mexico





is PORTRAITS OF

WOMEN
WORKING WITH

Maize Mexico

"I stay here caring for the land, so the earth doesn't tremble."



Oztocingo, Guerrero

“Many women have tougher working days than I do, cultivating maize and doing other agricultural activities, but sometimes the work of these women doesn’t come to light.

For example, many women are obliged to work in the field as a result of the huge migration of men to the United States. Many fields are left empty and it is the women who have to take the place of the brothers, fathers and husbands who go off to chase the American dream. The responsibility falls on their shoulders and they say, ‘Well, we have no choice but to work these fields they left us, since they’re gone.’

I also know women who have driven tractors for many years to help their husbands. Of course, it’s the husband who shows his face, but she drives the tractor for three or four hours a day, as much as he does, to get the crop sown, since she enjoys it!

Maybe you work because you love the land and have been successful, or to help your husband, or because you were left land you can’t sell. Maybe you work out of necessity, because you have no choice and you have to eat?

I’m asked a lot about gender issues because it’s not every day you see a woman who drives a pick-up back and forth and runs a ranch, I’ve always been asked why? To tell the truth, I do it by vocation and I think vocation has no gender. Each person has to decide for themselves what they want to do.”

CONSUELO GONZÁLEZ PASTRANA
KIKAPU RANCH, CHIAPAS

A documentary initiative for the CGIAR Research Program on MAIZE

“Before we start plowing, we make an offering. I make the sign of the cross then I pour a soft drink on the soil just behind the oxen where the plowing starts, so the maize grows and there’s a good harvest,” says

**MARÍA DOMINGA AYALA REYES
ATAYIKI, OAXACA**



Obviously if we're in this line of work we're not doing it just for love, are we? We also have to think about the financial side. You put your heart into it and love what you are doing but it also has to pay so you make a decent living, says

HILDA FLÉRIDA CASTRO MONTOYA NAVOLATO, SINALOA

We usually sow about 100 hectares. Last year we planted sorghum, maize and beans. But this year we're only planting maize because it's the safest crop; there's less risk and better returns. The costs are very high but we still say, "Let's go for maize."

My grandparents came here to Panamá from the Angostura area fifty years ago because there was drought. The Sanalona Dam was just built and the whole valley was watered with canals.

Then there was a maize boom with good yields so it was a good time for sowing. I lived here in those years and had the best childhood imaginable. When I was twelve we went to live in Culiacán for the schools, but we never stopped coming back. My father used to come every day like we do now.

I studied Interior Design at college. When I graduated, I sold blinds and carpets and made curtains for homes and businesses. I never imagined I'd work in the country.

At first I only helped my father with the administration. He just wanted to be out in the field. Anything to do with paperwork and banking, he'd say, "You do it." So I helped him with what he didn't want to do while continuing to work on my own business.

Then I started going with him and making decisions about buying seed and fertilizer, fixing the tractor, going to the workshop, buying spare parts, picking them up and trying them out and doing everything else that needed doing here on the ranch.

That's how I started learning on the job. Until my father died. Since then, I've worked here full time, doing the paperwork and managing the work in the fields.

Sometimes it's difficult as a woman to run a farm. Not many do. Lots of people say, "What are you doing here?" I say to them, "If I didn't like it, I wouldn't be here."

I like working here because it's what I've known all my life. My family has always worked the land, though I studied something completely different. Sometimes life takes you places you never imagined, don't you think?"

The truth is I love what I'm doing. It's satisfying to do something for other people. You're part of providing food for people. Also, maize is the root of my country's culture. That should never be lost and it won't be as far as I'm concerned.

I also like working on the farm because no two days are the same, even though you have your worries, like, **what if it rains or freezes?** So many things can happen, that's for sure. But it's not the same as being in an office or having a fixed schedule. There's no schedule here, and we don't have weekdays either.

In this region, we use precision seed drills; everything is automated. Irrigation is through canals that follow contour lines where the land isn't flat. If we're going to irrigate and the water's allocated to us in different lots at the same time, we hire a couple of people to help.

At harvest, we wait until there's exactly the right amount of moisture needed to thresh with the harvesting machines. Then we load up the trucks and take the harvest to the granary where we draw up a sales contract with the buyers, unload and wait for the payment.

The **future of maize is very uncertain** because international prices are fixed by the Chicago Stock Exchange. The futures market is very low, so prospects aren't good for continuing in this line of work.

I hope the prices go up. I think there are difficult years ahead but there has to come a time when the curve goes up rather than down, like a cycle. So we hope things improve, just as life does, right?"



I hold flowers and a candle in my hands and pray to Mother Earth, asking her to bless our work.

HILARIA GONZÁLEZ JIMÉNEZ SANTA ROSA, OAXACA

The maize in the bowl is an offering to the images of the saints. We always keep it on the table. If not, we sometimes offer an ear of corn, so we are never without maize in our house.

My mother also had her customs: when the maize was about this size and about to mature, we'd kill chickens for Mother Earth, so the wind wouldn't harm the crop and nothing would happen to the maize field.

At harvest we did the same thing: after the maize was harvested and piled up, ready for storage, we'd kill a chicken, offer some tamales and make the same offering with a candle and flowers. That's our tradition.

My grandparents grew maize and beans. They carried the whole harvest on foot from the plot to the house, about 10 kilometers, on their backs or on donkeys.

When I start telling you about my childhood, **what if I start to cry?** My father died when I was five months old. My mother had to bring up four children, so she had a hard life.

She knew how to make shawls, huipiles and clay pots and work the land. As soon as the sun came up, she started to weave or make bean tortillas to sell in the square.

My father really wanted his children to go to school. But after he died my mother said to me, "Your brother's at school, so I can't afford to

send you off to study. You already know how to work the land. You can make clay pots and you can weave. **What more do you want?** You've learned everything!"

I learned to grind on the *metate* (mealing stone) when I was six years old. We had to do the weeding, fetched firewood, and carry clay for making pots. But I always insisted, "I'm going to learn something else!" And when I was nine years old, I went to school.

I was 15 years old when I finished primary school and went to high school, almost begging my mother to send me. "Who's going to help me?" she always said, "Who'll be with me if you go to school? How am I going to live on my own?"

When I finished high school, my mother was happy to come to my graduation. What I missed out on was a career because there were no openings. Instead, I had to get married, as I had no other option.

My husband is from Las Peñas but his family has never accepted me. At first he worked at a bakery and I had to work with my mother in the field. She and I worked together and divided the harvest. Then I started selling tamales made from the maize that I harvested, and coffee and sodas. That's how I started making money.

In those days, I got home from my taco stand at one in the morning. **I would sleep two or three hours** and then get up at four in the morning to prepare food for the workers who helped me in the fields.

My husband managed his money separately. What he made, which wasn't much, was for saving. What I made was for the family, to buy gas and other things. That's how we've always done things, more due to do my cleverness than to

custom. And that's why I say us women have the right to make our own decisions, to have our own work and our own ideas, because we're equal.

In the end, I left my taco stand because every time we set up somewhere, the authorities would say, "You can't set up a stand here!" I got fed up. "Fine," I said, "I'll go to my ranch!"

The seeds I plant are from my mother, but I like modern farming more than traditional farming because you make better use of the land and the maize cob is usually a bit bigger.

Now all the maize we grow is just for the family because it's not much. Sometimes we're bothered by wind, rain and the sun. But **a woman farmer never gives up.**

It doesn't matter if it rains or if there's thunder or lightening. You have to keep going because it's what you live off, what you eat. What can you do about nature? Whatever you do, you can't control her.



Since my mother was a widow and I was single, we didn't have money, only what grew in the fields. Our neighbors helped us sow following our tradition of *manovuelta*—that's like an exchange: I help you, you return the favor and so it goes.

MARÍA GUADALUPE GALINDO CRUZ SAN PEDRO HUEYTENTAN, PUEBLA

We also help each other spread soil and bend the maize on the stalks so the birds don't peck at the kernels. When we harvest, we select the maize cobs with the best seed for planting again. And so it goes round in circles.

I think things have changed a lot since then. When we were young, **we all spoke Náhuatl** and work was in the fields, grinding corn and making tortillas. Nowadays, girls have a career and their professional work routines. I don't know what they learn or what they know, none of that.

My father grew maize, barley, wheat, lentils and planted beans in the maize here in San Pedro Hueytenantan. My brothers grew up and left. But I stayed here with my parents because I was the youngest and had to help.

When I was six years old I looked after loads of turkeys. When I was 10, I went into the hills to look after my bulls. My father only let me go to school until I was seven. He thought a woman should learn to wash, make tortillas and look after her husband, brother or father. That's what he believed.

I'd take my woven basket and fill it with tacos, *gorditas*, *enchiladas* and my bottle of water. I'd tie it all up in my shawl and carry it up into the hills with my bulls and my little dog. I'd play

there with my rag dolls and make little houses with stones. I was really happy with my animals because I'd grown up with them since I was little, so I was very fond of them.

That's how I worked, until I turned 21 and got married in the church to the father of my children, an older man of 40. We were married for quite a while. But you never know what your luck will bring you: he turned out to be a drinker and he'd beat me. Then I got pregnant with my first child. My mother said, "If you want, you can come and live here." So I went back to her.

I lived alone with my mother and my son, as my father had died, and **we two women worked the fields**. We'd find a neighbor to help us sow and return the favor. And when we finished harvesting, we'd feed everybody.

First we'd choose some maize plants about this big. Then, holding a maize stalk with its cob, we'd dance as an offering to thank Our Father Jesus, because we'd harvested a lot of maize. Back home, we'd give everyone food and a few drinks and the harvest was over. This is what my father taught us and I did the same.

We don't follow these traditions nowadays; things have changed. My mother died when she was 84 years old. Then my children wanted to go to college. I had to get a job as a housekeeper but I never abandoned my land.

My work was washing, ironing and cleaning, all of that. I earned 12 pesos and saved up the 30 pesos I needed to pay my children's school fees.

Every day I'd leave my ranch at seven in the morning and walk two hours to the village. I got to work at nine and left at nine at night. That's how I helped my children get ahead with their studies.

In those days, I worked my land on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes I'd ask for a day off and when I'd harvested half the maize, I'd keep half of it for food. I'd shuck the other half and carry it to town in my wheelbarrow to sell in the plazas.

Now **my daughter is an agricultural engineer**. My son has a job as a bilingual teacher. My youngest also studied education at college and has her degree. So I have two teachers and an engineer.

We women we don't stand around with our hands on our hips. We know how to struggle, how to work. I suffered a lot, working hard to earn money to pay for my children's education. But I have no regrets because I know that with those sacrifices I managed to help my children get ahead.



Here a father divides his land among his sons because people say we daughters will marry and go to live with our husbands. So it's the men who inherit the land.

**PETRA ROSAS CRUZ
MAGDALENA PEÑASCO, OAXACA**

That's also what my father used to say. But he didn't do it like that with us. He recognized we were his daughters. So he gave me this bit of land here by the house, the avocado tree and the chickens. But most of the land went to my brothers.

I got married when I was 18 and worked with my husband on the land his father gave him, until I had a problem with him and we separated. Now we live apart and I stay here with my four children, working as a day laborer for the neighbors because I don't have anywhere to plant. **I work for people who have land** and they pay me. If they don't give me money, they give me maize. That's how I struggle on.

I like working with maize because they give us food and soft drinks and I don't have to eat at home. I don't go hungry and I don't suffer, although I get tired of all the bending down. It's tough.

When there's no work to do in the fields, I make tamales and *atole* (maize porridge) to sell in the square. I prepare the *nixtamal* (maize grains cooked with lime) the day before and take it to the mill at about seven at night, so it's ready to make tamales.

I finish making the tortilla dough at one in the morning. I rest for an hour then I get up again to

put wood on the fire and the tamales in the pot. That way at seven in the morning they're ready to take to the square.

Some days they sell fast. Otherwise, I have to wait until they're all gone. Then I go home and prepare food for the children and weave hats until ten or eleven at night.

When I've made 12 hats, they give me 48 pesos to buy a kilo of beans. This might seem like nothing, but it helps a lot. Sometimes my back aches and my eyes hurt but we always eat. This is why we say, "**You don't rest, but you do get tired!**"

It's said we'll live in abundance, but we won't! On the contrary, we'll keep on eating tortillas with salt. That's how life will continue to be, because there's not much work and the pay is low. That's how it is in our village.

The truth is, there's not a lot of money and I barely earn enough to buy groceries for the children. Sometimes there's not enough maize or beans, and sometimes I haven't got enough for a kilo of rice or sugar. Life's not easy here.

In the past, people drank a lot of alcohol. There was a lot of violence and that's why I ended up single. My husband used to get drunk and beat me from when we got together until five years ago.

I put up with it for ages, out of respect, not for any other reason. Then I made the decision to live apart so I wouldn't have this trouble with him.

He's still drinking. But **I'm not afraid like I was** before I came to live here in my own house. Now the children are happy too. My oldest son is working as a laborer on a construction site and for two years we've had this house where we can rest and shelter from the rain.

I'm still working in the maize fields. I can't go to an internet café and send a message because I don't know how computers work. I can only just write my name. I don't want my children to end up like me. I want them to keep studying so they can get a bit further ahead than I did.



Before there was nothing here but trees. It was all bush and as soon as we arrived we cleared the fields. We made a shelter and that's where we lived until we managed to build a small house.

MARÍA ELIDA CRUZ NUEVA REFORMA AGRARIA, CHIAPAS

As the founders, we were the first to settle here. Well, there were another 56 families, but they came just like we did, moving up little by little. **It was hard to get here!**

I carried a pot full of dishes for the kitchen on my head and a bag full of diapers for the babies on one hip. I had three children and carried my four-month-old girl on my back. My oldest, who was six years, old had to walk. My four-year-old walked some of the time and then I'd carry him for a bit. Sometimes we'd rest. That's how we got here, little by little.

My husband carried a box with the blankets and something to sleep on. He also carried a piglet that came with us so we would have some company at home.

The path was very narrow. Those who came on horses barely squeezed through the trees. We had to cross the stream many times and at that time it was deep. It came up to my waist but we crossed it anyway because we wanted to come and live here. I just said to myself, "I have my children and when they grow up they'll have land and a place to live."

My parents also came. They were about 15 days ahead of us. They already had a hut made of leaves set up and they gave us shelter there.

From there we started to build our own hut. It was covered by a roof made of branches and cloth and laminated sheets.

The men started to cut down the trees and clear the land. Since it was far away, I used to bring them their breakfast. Then we'd go help fertilize, cut and collect the maize. The children stayed at home with my mother, but when they were bigger, they'd go too.

At first the maize field didn't produce much. We had to buy maize to feed ourselves. We borrowed and—how should I put it—we bought on credit. The government's gave us a loan. That's how we started to grow our maize, bit by bit.

The men carried sacks of maize out on their backs as far as the ranch, where the road started. Even if just sold two or three sacks, we were really happy.

We women couldn't go down so often because the stream crossings were deep. When it was raining, it was even harder. Sometimes the men had to cross the mountain to bring food or medicine when they couldn't cross the stream.

Most of the fifty-six families who arrived, left. They couldn't stand the shortages, and worse still, there wasn't much harvest. Instead, we had to buy everything and that's why many couldn't manage.

Sometimes we thought about leaving because the children were so small. They could get sick and it was difficult to go down. But I decided we weren't leaving because we had the right to a small piece of land to build our home on. We used to say, "Since we've come we might as well put up with it as long as we can." We asked God to help us so the children wouldn't get sick. We have faith and that's how we got through.

Now cars drive right up to our house. We don't get lost in the bush any more and the maize field produces, though not much, because fertilizer and liquids and all that are very expensive. We have to bring the gasoline for transport from far away and the price has gone up so much. So it's better not to plant a lot, only enough to eat.

Anyway, I'm happy because my children have had a place to grow up and live. There were eight children, two boys and six girls. Now they're all married and gone their separate ways.

Since I'm 73 years old, I feel relaxed, even though a little distracted about being alone in the house. My youngest daughter just got married recently. So now my daughters are saying, "Mami, **come and live here with us,**" but I say to them, "You don't know how much we suffered to get here and have this place for ourselves. I don't want to leave before God decides." I'll stay here until then.



This place is called San Francisco Cabayua, which means “ice cave,” because there’s a cave up there near the peak of the black volcano. It freezes and there’s lots of rain but does that bother me? Not really, it’s normal. I always carry my plastic so I’m prepared for rain.

JOAQUINA MÉNDEZ LÓPEZ SAN FRANCISCO CABAYUA, OAXACA

People in the city go to work in cars with their music, quite relaxed, but we walk. I load up my donkey, get him on his feet, prepare everything and start to walk, sweating when the sun comes out.

When I was a girl I used to help my father thresh the wheat with the donkeys. Then we’d stay there among the wheat sheaves. At midnight, he’d get up and start threshing the wheat. Then the next day my mother would bring us *atole* and food. That’s how I grew up.

There wasn’t much money but we always had tortillas to eat. My mother cooked beans or corn with onion, nothing fancier because they didn’t know what oil was. Every now and again, they’d kill a chicken. And if there wasn’t any other meat, we’d kill birds with stones.

When I finished primary school, I wanted to go to the city. My father said, “If you want to go, I’ll let you.” But my mother didn’t want me to and she’d say, “Who’s going to look after the goats?” So I stayed to look after the goats.

One day I was with the goats behind the mountain. It started to rain and we got soaked in the strong downpour. My goats went into a cave by a ravine. The thunderstorm lasted two or three

hours and I took shelter in the cave with the goats. Suddenly I realized the cave next to ours along had collapsed and the rocks had carried away my uncle’s cousin’s house.

A woman was grinding maize in the house to make tortillas for her children because she’d just got back from the field. The good thing was that the rocks didn’t carry her away, although they destroyed the roof and only a few pieces of wood were left. The **landslide also took away some fields**. Not mine, but my neighbor’s.

After getting married, I went to live with my mother-in-law, so it was more of the same! I ground the nixtamal for the tortillas on the *metate* and washed the clothes. I went to the fields with my husband and herded the sheep. Then I had my children. We moved away from my mother-in-law and my husband went to work over there.

There’s no work here to make money. We take out loans but the money lenders charge interest and it keeps going up. My husband had to leave home to pay this debt and to support the family.

Now he’s working in the United States but earns very little. Sometimes there isn’t enough money. It’s hard for me. I also have to take all the responsibility for my children, as if I were both mother and father.

I go to sow with them. When the land is stony we can’t plant because it’s too hard. So I find a neighbor and pay him to dig with a shovel so we can plant maize. But when the earth is moist, my children and I just drop the seed and use our feet to cover it with soil. When the time comes to harvest, I also get help from my children. We always work together.

There are still **husbands who don’t let their wives go out into the fields**. Also, some women

don’t like going out and want to stay home. But I can’t stand television soap operas: they’re just a waste of time and don’t produce anything. I prefer herding my cattle and working in the fields.

When my husband was here, we used to discuss things. He would go off to cut wood in the hills or to look after the goats or the maize field or anywhere else, and sometimes he’d say, “Instead of me going shopping, you go and I’ll give the children their lunch.”

Now he’s far away. We’re sad because we are missing a member of our family, even though we coordinate everything together. He calls on weekends. He knows I go out to work in the fields every day. We’re used to living like this.

They used to say only men were worth something and we women were worthless. Now we know **we’re all worth the same**. I’m responsible for my home and my children. Whether we are men or women, we all have the same rights.



The name of our settlement is New Providence. We chose it because this place offers the hope of a better future for all of us, with land for us to work and bring up our children.

**MINERVA RUFINA MORALES
HERNÁNDEZ
NUEVA PROVIDENCIA, CHIAPAS**

A rancher used to own all this land. But he left about 20 years ago and 37 families moved in. We've lived here ever since.

My mother lost her sight when I was 14 and it was up to me to look after my father and my younger brothers and sisters. "I'll fight for you! I'll help you get ahead!" I told them. I think that's why I ended up here.

Later, when we were grown up, my brother got married. To avoid problems, I decided to come here on my own, even though I was only 18 years old, and fight for this land I now farm. Actually, we managed to get it by talking. None of us wanted to fight because **fighting doesn't solve anything**; dialogue is better. Talking is how we managed to settle here and that's how I ended up with my land.

It was difficult at the beginning because there wasn't anything here; it was just mountain. I went out to work as a maid and was able to build a wooden hut with my wages. Whenever there were meetings or work in the fields I'd ask my *patrón* (employer) for permission to come. So I went back and forth.

I made 500 pesos a month working as a maid. It's not much but with the little money I earned I started building my house. Then I left the town

and came to stay here and work the land. I was happy to leave my job as a maid because having a *patrón* isn't good. They send for you and give you orders, no matter what time of day it is. But here I'm the *patrón*. I'm in charge.

I love living on the land because it brightens up your life. You hear the birds singing and the field gives you maize, beans and vegetables. Since it all comes from your own harvest, you never go hungry. So it gives you security.

My parents tended their maize fields almost like we do; nothing has changed much, except they cut down the trees and burned them. Well, when we first arrived we burned them too, but later we realized when the fields are burned, the soil deteriorates. But when the soil is maintained, the harvest is better.

My father did the planting and my mother only helped with the harvest because the fields were very far away. Usually she stayed home with the children.

Now **we work together** in the fields. He does the sowing and we both weed. The mature maize has to be turned; then we harvest and pay for a pick-up truck to bring it all home because it's too heavy to carry.

Once the harvest is home, I use some to make tortillas and *atole* (porridge) and sell the rest by weight as grain and also as cobs.

Early in the morning, when it's still dark, we carry the maize to the road in the wheelbarrow, then get on the bus to go to town where I sell maize by the scoop in the market.

Those of us who sell there belong to an association from the Ocosingo region that includes many communities. That's why you see so many different regional costumes. There are more

women than men because selling is a job for the women. The men work in the fields.

I like being in the market because you can make a living and support your family. We also get along well with each other and enjoy the chance to chat. Me, I get along with everybody, they all know me and I know them and we're close friends.

My father used to sell his maize in one lot. Life's better now because all the maize and vegetables we grow can be sold in the market. There's almost nothing that isn't sold. I'm just finishing building a new house with the money we make selling our produce, though we still need doors and windows.

Everything you see that I have here is the result of my work. People who don't need anything or have everything don't know what work is. But we have needs, so **we have to do whatever it takes and keep trying**.

I think all our struggles and sacrifices have been worth it because we're here and we have work. If we hadn't chosen to struggle, we wouldn't have anything.



I check the Chicago Stock Exchange at least twice a week on my computer to keep track of the price and corn futures. So if somebody comes to buy my maize, they won't take me by surprise.

CONSUELO GONZÁLEZ PASTRANA OCOZOCOAUTLA, CHIAPAS

My father was an agricultural engineer. He came to Chiapas as an agricultural extension agent with seven other engineers. Over a two year period six of them got married and stayed. My mother's family had always been ranchers, so I have a family that is very close to the land.

What defines you as a person is your childhood experiences, or what your parents taught you. I was seven years old when my father put me in the pens with the calves and gave me a towel to fight them. I told him, "I'm going to be a bull-fighter!"

He'd say, "I might not buy you a dress for every fiesta because I **don't want a doll**, okay? I want someone who knows how to work and fend for herself."

When I was 14, an uncle showed me how to drive my father's pick-up. When he was away, I'd drive my mother to the ranch and we'd fetch the milk. So I was involved in the ranch from a young age until I went to study abroad.

I stayed abroad for 12 years, then came back for my sister's wedding. My father asked me if I could help run the ranch, at least for 10 days, because he was overloaded with work.

"All right," I said, "I'll help you for eight days, 15 days maximum because I have to get back to

school." My father knew I had always been passionate about the ranch and he just said, "Okay, 15 days is enough." Well, those 15 days passed and I'm still here; I never went back.

When my father died at 59 years of age, I took charge of the whole ranch, together with my mother. Many years have passed and I've had other jobs, but I always come back to the ranch.

I was the editor for two national livestock magazines. I also had an auction company and worked for six years at Anahuac University as the coordinator of postgraduate programs and diplomas in agricultural extension for the whole of the south of Mexico.

In 2006, I was still at the university when they said, "We're closing Chiapas but there's a place for you in Tabasco." That's when I said, "No, I'm not going. I'm going to stay on the ranch." They're the decisions you take in life.

The ranch has been mine for 26 years. I bought it from all my sisters because I'd invested a lot of work in it for many years, and also it's something I enjoy. When I had other jobs, coming back to the ranch was always like coming back to a more peaceful place than the city.

I have women friends who run much bigger ranches than the 120 hectares I have. We're good friends; we speak the same language when it comes to the land, and there are quite a few of us in the state: some bought their land, others inherited it, others are widows. Several **women lead big companies**.

I personally haven't tried to prove to anyone that even though it's men's work I can do it too. The important thing isn't what your neighbor says, but what you're doing and whether you like it. The only thing I can control, and sometimes

struggle with, is myself, and nothing else. The truth is that I don't care if a man thinks I can or can't do something. Sometimes they've said, "Hey, what do you do if you get a flat tire?" "Well, what do you do? You get someone to fix it, don't you?"

I'm asked a lot about gender issues because it's not every day you see a woman who drives a pick-up back and forth and runs a ranch. I've always been asked why? To tell the truth, I do it by vocation and I think **vocation has no gender**. Each person has to decide for themselves what they want to do.

I don't regret staying here. I like the land, the cattle, the maize; it's part of my life. I think anyone who works just for the money is lost because you can't take it with you in your coffin. Just ashes, at least that's what I think.



The donkey's a bit of a scoundrel. Sometimes he gets my heart pumping because he likes to race. But we still bring home the harvest in his cart because we don't need any gasoline for him, just a driver and that's always been my job.

**FLORENCIA JACOBA MARTÍNEZ
HERNÁNDEZ
LOS SÁNCHEZ, QUERÉTERO**

Sometimes my husband helps me cut the maize stalks. Otherwise I do it alone. I throw them onto the cart, tie them up with rope so they won't fall off and we're off.

I was born in Ezequiel Montes; my father walked five kilometers from there to here to work these fields. My mother used to get up early to make lunch and then bring it here at nine in the morning. She also used to sow maize with a pouch on each hip, while my father worked the oxen. That's how they used to sow.

Women's roles have changed a lot. These days girls don't work like we do; they go off to study. But not us, or maybe just at the beginning, then we worked in the home and in the fields.

When I was a girl, I used to help shuck the corn. When we got tired, we'd play with the soil, making little houses and animals, like donkeys, calves and sheep. Then they'd call us to come and help again or to rock the baby in his crib.

I was never sent to school because it was far away and they couldn't send me alone. My parents thought my brothers should study but not a girl like me. Instead, they put me to work grinding maize on the *metate* to make tortillas.

They'd leave me a container of maize to grind and I'd make the dough. Sometimes I'd start grinding at nine in the morning and I'd have to finish all of it by two in the afternoon. Then I'd wash the dishes and the clothes. I did this every day, so there was no rest for me.

I stayed with my parents for 19 years and then I got properly married to my husband. His parents came to chat to mine and I went to live with him and my in-laws. They worked for a *patrón* too, just like us.

My husband worked with the oxen and I had to do the same work my mother did. I'd walk to the maize field to bring lunch then work there. I suffered a lot with my children; I'd wrap them in my shawl and carry them like this while I sowed. Then the *patrón* sold the ranch and all the workers scattered.

About 30 tenant families were left without work. This was when I went back to my parents. By then they were old and my father couldn't work his land, so he gave me one hectare. When I worked on it, the entire harvest was for us. Since then, we haven't had a *patrón*.

I'm 58 now and we have six hectares of maize and beans. When we started here 30 years ago, the yield was small because we didn't know how to prepare the land. It only yielded when it rained; when it didn't, we only had **food for a few months, not the whole year**. My husband had to go to Ezequiel Montes or farther away to find work. It was hard because I had to take care of the children, the goats and all the housework. My children are grown up now and we all work together in the field. So we're doing well.

A while ago, an agricultural engineer came here with a young woman. I went to their meetings

and they told us we shouldn't turn the soil over. So I decided to plant two hectares without turning over the soil. That year we didn't plow the land and the result was good.

My husband saw it worked, but he kept plowing the rest until he realized the land yields more if you don't turn over the soil. This was a big change for us because **now we have maize to sell**.

Some people leave their land, but not us. My children are thinking of selling when I'm gone. But I tell them, "If you want to sell, sell a couple of hectares and keep the rest for my grandchildren."

When I go to fetch the maize harvest with the cart, my grandson comes with me. He loves going to the farm, which is why I say to my children, "Teach my grandchildren how to work the land since they like to follow me."



The mill is extremely noisy but I have to stay here at the foot of the cross, doing my work, even though the racket is almost unbearable.

**TERESA REYES CASTRO
SANTIAGO TUPATARO, MICHOACÁN**

Sometimes they get me up at five in the morning. It's dark, so you can't see anything. They call for me and I go and start the mill for them. First I have to rinse the machinery. Then I have to make sure the stone catches the maize, otherwise it thunders and I have to give it a few thumps. I turn the mill on and start to grind.

More customers arrive and line up their buckets on the plank: sometimes there are three or four buckets, sometimes ten or fifteen. They have to empty the bucket into the funnel of the mill. When it's time to put in more *nixtamal*, I say, "Okay, next!" so they don't get mixed up.

They give me five pesos for a six-liter bucket and ten for a ten-liter one. Sometimes we joke and chat, if they're not in a real hurry; otherwise they just grind and go.

The mill is a service. You need to know how to deal with people and wait on them well because **people are more important than machinery**. You have to treat them well.

There used to be another mill, but the miller didn't give good service. If you went early, he'd get annoyed because you got him up. If you went late, he'd get annoyed because you were late. He argued and fought with everybody. This is why the village encouraged my mother to buy a mill.

As a miller, you have to pay attention. Sometimes there are stones in the *nixtamal*, or nails, but-

tons, even marbles. It's not that people throw them in, but accidents happen. So I have to be alert; and when something happens, I have to stop the mill, take it apart and take out the stones. I have to take care of everything.

Once my hand almost got caught but I only hurt this finger. The mill didn't stop and it almost caught four fingers. Thank God it didn't grind them. My finger was really sore. But the next day I went back to work.

When I started as a miller, I was about 25 years old. My mother couldn't stand the noise and the men said, "This is women's work. We're not going to work with women. We're too embarrassed to grind for them."

I only need to be told once and I know what to do because I used to help my father a lot. I helped him with the plow from the age of seven; when I was older I'd grab hold of the oxen to help him in the fields.

In the old days, we used to grind on the *metate* or a small mill that we'd turn like this. It was really hard because you had to work it like this, with your hand. So we were happy to go to the village mill, but sometimes we didn't have money to pay and we'd have to grind by hand. I remember a period of about nine years when there was no trade. There wasn't a thing. We never saw a peso.

When I got married I was about 23; that was quite old. My husband didn't have any land or a house. He didn't have anything. He went to work over there and I used to help my father like before. Then **my mother bought the mill** and I started to work here.

Now we've got nothing more than the small piece of land that my father gave us and a piece

my husband bought, two small plots where we grow maize just for ourselves. My husband drives the tractor for my father.

Life's changing here. People don't want to work the land any more. So you say, "I'll sharehold or rent some land," and that's how you manage.

Me, I like working the land because you don't lack anything. Whether you want maize, zucchini or broad beans, whatever you sow in the field is there for harvesting if you want to work, and if you don't, it's not. That's why I like what I'm doing; if I didn't, I wouldn't come to work.



My daughter is six years old. She can't make tortillas yet but she likes to try. When I'm working in the barn she'll grab a handful of dough and start making her little balls.

ANELI ZÁRATE VÁSQUEZ
LA HUANA MILPERÍA, OAXACA

I've always liked farm life. But it's not what I want for her. It would be better for her to study than make tortillas, because the oven is hot and you have to keep putting your hands in and out.

Sometimes **you burn your face** and you burn your arms. You can't put your hand in the water, wash dishes or do the laundry and you have to take a bath before you put your hand in the oven, otherwise you're in trouble.

I tell all my children, "Farm work is hard; if you study, you'll have more, you'll have a different life." But if my children don't want to study, they won't have any other choice than farm work.

My mother also spent her time making tortillas. My brother and I used to finish school at midday and have lunch. I'd put my cap on and we'd go off to sell them.

I was eight years old the first time I went to sell tortillas with my brother. He was already 13 but he only used to come with me to make sure nothing happened to me. My mother said I was too small to go alone and he had to go with me because the village was far away.

He carried the tortillas. I was in charge of selling. I'd ask, "Do you want to buy tortillas?" and the lady would reply, "Yes!" Then I'd ask, "How many do you want?" and tell her how much they cost. If nobody wanted to buy, we'd keep on walking.

My brother didn't want to sell tortillas because he was male. Here it's us women who sell. Sometimes my husband drops me off at the entrance of the village in the pick-up. But **I do the selling**. He's in charge of everything to do with growing the maize. We women only have to pitch in if one the sowers don't show up.

The man harvests the maize and brings it to the barn. Once the maize is inside, the woman is in charge of preparing and selling it as tamales, tortillas or *totopos*, depending on the season.

On a normal day, I start shucking at three in the morning. Then I shell the maize and prepare the *nixtamal*. I go to the mill, come home, take a bath, have my breakfast and I'm ready to prepare my tamales with salt, sugar and butter. I put the pot with tamales on the oven then take them out to sell.

I make about 150 tamales, which is a bag full, and sometimes 300. Then I spend about three hours going from house to house to sell them. Then I visit my mother. If she hasn't eaten, I give her whatever she wants to eat plus her pills with some *atole*. When I get home, I give my little girl her milk. I go to bed around nine. The following day **I get up at three in the morning** again.

It's heavy work because you're sitting for a long time with the maize, taking the leaves off, shelling the corn, tossing tortillas on the stove and selling them. But I like what I do because I've watched my parents working to get ahead since I was a girl. We're used to working.



It used to be so poor here, there wasn't even any maize. Our grandparents had to walk for ten days to fetch it. I don't know where they found it but they were the ones who brought the maize here. The way we're planting it now is how they taught us to do. If they hadn't, I'd be hungry.

ISABEL PÉREZ VÁSQUEZ
SANTA ANA, OAXACA

We choose the best maize, then we shell it and plant it again, so we don't lose the seed. We both do the field work but **I select the seed**. We grow our maize in the same way they did before us, but there's less to harvest now as the land is being washed away.

My clothes are the same as the ones my mother wore. No one used to wear pants before. Our ancestors sewed their own clothes to their liking. My grandparents tell me they went to get cotton from Juchitán. They made their own thread and wove cloth on the *tejate*.

Young women these days don't want to wear clothes like these. They all wear pants because they say it's easier to run in them. I've never put on pants because **I've always worn my Mixe clothes**, out of custom and for lack of money.

The men used to go out looking for work to support the family. The women looked after the house. They didn't eat well because there was no money; there wasn't anything. Now there's lots of money. There are roads, there's electricity, radio, schools... who knows what else there is, but it wasn't like that before.

When I was a girl, there was no school. Our parents said girls shouldn't study because if they learned to read and write they'd leave home and wouldn't do the chores their mothers had always done, looking after the children and going to the square to sell. This is why I never learned to speak Spanish.

When I go to the market to sell, everyone speaks Mixe. You feel good because you understand everything they're saying, so I like being here more than going anywhere else.

I went to Oaxaca once, but I hardly go away from here because I get embarrassed when I don't understand anything. Who knows what they're saying in Spanish? I'd like to speak, but I can't even answer.



It's true there really are maize gods here in our Zapotec village. Our goddess of tender maize is *Pitao Ko Shub*. Our ancestors made sacrifices to her to ensure a bountiful maize harvest.

JESSICA ARACELI MARTÍNEZ ZÁRATE ZAACHILA, OAXACA

The goddess is still represented each year at the Great Festival of the Mountain *Lani Roo Daan Zaadxil* in our village, Zaachila.

I'd been thinking about representing the goddess at the festival for a while but the possibility seemed far off. Then the opportunity popped out of nowhere when I wasn't even thinking about it. There was a call for candidates and I signed up because I thought it could be a good opportunity to show people what I could do.

I'm 21 years old and **work at the community radio station** here in my village. I'm in charge of the technical side and I also manage a program focused on helping to revive our native language, which has been disappearing over the generations.

I had to present a theme for the competition and I chose *didxsaj* which means "maternal language" in Zapotec. Although I was nervous about being in the competition, I said to myself, "I'm going to fight for this dream," and I don't know how but I had the privilege of being chosen.

The local leaders came to my house with gifts including soft drink, fireworks, beer and brandy, to ask me formally to represent *Pitao Ko Shub* in the Great Festival of the Mountain.

I designed my own dress, which has the figure of an owl representing my Zapotec culture and, on

the lower part, maize to represent **my role as the goddess of maize**.

My headdress is made of maize dough. It has peacock and pheasant feathers and is decorated with maize and a pre-Hispanic figure from our Villa de Zaachila. I also have a scepter.

When the actual festival came, the authorities performed the traditional *mañanitas* ritual in the archaeological grounds to announce the start of *Lani Roo Daan Zaadxil*. Then I went home with my escort of five maidens and four warriors to make our final preparations for the festival.

Then the authorities came again to ask me to attend the festival with their gifts: fireworks, drinks and brandy. I think about 250 people came to our house with brass bands and delegations of dancers.

Then we moved in a big procession back to the archeological grounds where all the delegations were represented. Well, the truth is I don't know how many people were there but they counted about 8,000! I gave the welcome speech in Zapotec then danced a pre-Hispanic dance with my escorts. That's how I opened the Great Festival of the Mountain.

When my grandmother was young she also danced with a delegation, but she wasn't a goddess. She used to harvest maize and has sold cobs in the market for about 35 years, and she's still doing it today.

She said to me, "To me, it's wonderful for me that my granddaughter is representing our culture." Like many people here, my grandparents have always been farmers. They work in the fields and sometimes I plant maize with them.

Most people here used to grow their own maize, beans and peanuts. But not any more. Now

they go into the city, to Puebla or to who knows where, to buy their maize and peanuts. So we are gradually losing our planting tradition. Then there's the issue of genetically modified maize. Everything's changing.

Many of us youngsters do other things, whether it's studying, working or hanging out, anything but living our traditions. We prefer other things to reviving or being present in our own culture, which is where we come from and who we are, our people.

Instead of enjoying what was before, little by little **we're losing our culture**, our traditions, and also our custom of planting. I'd like to say to my children in the future, "Let's go to the field, because that's what your grandparents did." That's why I was proud to represent *Pitao Ko Shub* for my people. I'm here so I can do something, can't I?



Coming to live here was tough because it's cold and mountainous. We had to clear the land but we don't burn because our settlement Toluca is in the El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve.

MARÍA ISABEL PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ TOLUCA, CHIAPAS

They told us we couldn't touch the trees because if we continued to cut down and burn the forest, it would be gone forever.

It's difficult for us farmers who live here. But it's nice to think we're rich in clean air, water, plants and animals. This has a great value for us because we realize one day it may be lost. Future generations won't have the same benefits.

We see many animals that city people never do. They just see them in a book, but we see deer, squirrels, monkeys, even tapir drinking water and walking in the forest.

Sometimes the **wild animals eat the maize**. It's sad because the farmer works hard but doesn't get much benefit. We can't kill the animals, so we look for different ways to plant and look after our maize.

Many people go and stay overnight in their maize field or take a dog to look after the crop. If you're not prepared to do that, you have to accept that half of what you plant is for you and half is for the animals. So we go whenever we can.

They say when the animals hear noises and smell smoke, they realize people are nearby and stay away. Even if you do look after your maize, they still eat about a quarter of the crop, and this happens every year. The animals have to live off something and look for food just like us.

My father was a farmer and worked his land, growing pumpkins, beans, coffee, plantains and bananas. If there was any surplus, he'd sell it or give it away. He died in a landslide when I was seven years old and my mother had to work even harder than she did before to support her seven children. She had an oven and I started going out to sell bread when I was eight years old. It was hard because I had to carry the bread in a basket on my head.

I also worked in the maize, but since we were children, they didn't expect much of us. We loved going to fetch maize cobs with a sack and machete. We were experts at cutting the maize and liked to eat it roasted, toasted, fried or boiled.

When I was a teenager, I liked going out with my friends. I really wanted to be a nurse, but apart from this, well you just think about getting engaged, getting married and all that. Then I met my husband.

I was really sad the first time I came here with him. Toluca is the remotest community in the district. It's a mountainous place with rough terrain. It rains a lot and it's much colder than where I was born.

We came to live here because my husband was from here. He had his land and we had to work; **as always, the woman has to go where her man goes**. You meet your in-laws, get to know different people and make new friends. That's how it is.

My father-in-law had given my husband his own small plot of land, though it was just bush. So we started working and thinking about having children, what to grow to eat and how to survive. We began growing coffee because it's the main crop in this region.

We also planted maize because it's a blessing from God. **If you have a maize field you have food**. If there's no coffee, we can always drink water, but we have to plant maize so the family doesn't go hungry and we also have to feed the laborers who help harvest the coffee.

I go out to the field with my husband, walking up hill and down hill for about an hour. We work the land together: if he plants, I help him, and if he weeds, I do too.

We women are used to working just like the men. It's fun putting on a shirt, trousers and working shoes, knowing this is how we make our living. We enjoy what we do.



My mother will be 94 in July. She's always been a very active woman, though very submissive to her husband. Even now, she still grinds with her own mill.

MARÍA DOLORES CHÁVEZ ZUÑIGA RINCÓN DE MIRANDILLA, JALISCO

One of our neighbors lived 103 years. I saw her sweeping with her broom just before she died. Maybe there weren't so many chemicals in the food they used to eat? Not to forget all the physical labor one had to do.

Imagine going to wash clothes in the river, crouched down, scrubbing and scrubbing, moving your whole body all day, then fetching water and grinding. And what did you grind with? I still remember seeing women grind with a *metate*.

Hardly anyone had land: people worked as sharecroppers for a landowner who only gave them enough to survive. At harvest time, some people got nothing more than a few husks.

Other people like us got to keep the grains that was left on the ground for the chickens. We swept them up and saved them for making tortilla dough.

My father worked for the *patrón* and my mother stayed at home, but we never went hungry because he also had his own plot. We children were the ones who did the plowing and sowing and everything else.

I worked on the land to help my parents until I was 19 years old. Then I got married thinking I'd be better off but I was worse off. I'd work with my mother-in-law early in the morning then go to work in the field with my husband.

Even after moving into our own house, we worked as sharecroppers for the same landlord. Until my husband went to work up north and bought his oxen and this eight hectare plot I still have. At least now we plant for ourselves.

I'm 75 years old but it was our bad luck that my husband died 21 years ago. I was left in charge of everything with my son Heriberto. Little by little, my other 10 children went their own way and I kept working with this boy until I was 60 years old. Then I told him I was tired.

I have **11 children and 10 of them are working in the United States**, all legal. My oldest went when he was 17 years old. Then his brothers went, one after another. Lately, even I've been going back and forth like Maria the Indian, neither here nor there.

If you ask me I think life is harder there. They have to pay the bills and the rent at the end of every month so everything they earn disappears. Whereas here, we eat well and go to bed on a full stomach, though only God knows what will happen when we wake up the next morning.

Now I let my son work the land however he wants but I'm still the owner. I always watch over my land because it has been a sacred thing for me, ever since I was born. It is how we managed to survive. They say to me, "Mama, leave it! You can depend on us." But I say, "Look, what if you suddenly turn your back on me? Imagine how hard it would be for me if you don't come to see me when I'm about to die!"

I've always been tough with my husband and my children, even sometimes with my grandchildren. Because the men here, like everywhere else, always have this same belief that they're the ones in charge. They say women have more freedom

now. But the men keep tormenting us and refuse to give up their machismo.

Its always been their mentality. I remember how my father thought a woman was **like a cat for looking after the home, a machine for having children** and a servant to look after him.

In my case, no. I fought and fought with my mother about this and I'm still fighting. But my father died with his machismo still in place and I still say to her, "If my husband had treated me like your's did, I'd still be cursing him even while praying over his coffin."

I'm still tough with my children and everyone else! Like I say to my daughter-in-law, "Stand up for your rights! We women have rights!" If you don't learn from your mother-in-law, who else are you going to learn from?



I'm 16 years old and I'm studying beauty therapy so I can work in a salon. I also drive a tractor to help my parents on the farm. I think I'll continue doing both jobs in the future.

**MARÍA FERNANDA ALFARO RIVAS
COAMILPA, ESTADO DE MÉXICO**

First we fill up the tractor with diesel and attach the subsoiler, the plow, the harrow, whatever implement is needed to do the job, and check nothing is faulty. Then we have breakfast and go to work.

Maybe you're going to dig a furrow, plant maize or cover the seeds with soil. Whatever you do you have to cross yourself before you start and keep looking back to make sure you don't hit or scrape anything.

During the planting season we start around ten in the morning and sometimes, if we're really behind, we keep working until it gets dark. On a long working day, I drive for about four hours. My arms get really tired from driving and moving the levers to raise and lower the implements and it's hot sitting on the tractor; you have to wear a hat.

I like the work; since I'm a **farmer's daughter** and we live in the country, we have to work the land. Another reason I like doing this is not many women know how to drive a tractor so it attracts people's attention.

I just started driving the tractor last year. It wasn't that hard to learn because my father had already taught me how to drive his pick-up when I was 12. Once you can drive a pick-up, driving a tractor is easy, though the steering's harder on a tractor than a pick-up.

The pick-up is a three ton '79 Ford with a manual gearbox. I had to sit on a cushion so I could see out properly. Dad told me to **press the clutch, let it go slowly** and accelerate... but I was so nervous it stalled and he told me off. We tried again and that's how I started driving.

Before I had to walk about two hours to school. Once I could drive the pick-up, I took it to school. My friends were surprised. Many of them asked me to teach them to drive.

My grandma Lucía has worked for years as a combivan driver on a bus route from Otumba to San Juan. She's 63 years old and she's still driving because she says she needs the money.

Before that, she used to work on the farm with my grandpa, planting maize and beans. My grandpa also tapped maguey for making pulque: that's how he made his living. My grandmother did the plowing with the oxen, though it wasn't usual to see women working like that. My father also plowed with horses before he bought his first tractor. When I was girl, I liked to watch him yoke the animals then get to work.

Lately I've started driving the combine harvester. It's very different from driving a tractor because there's a lot to move. You have to lower the cutter bar, lift it and check you're cutting straight. You also have to judge the spaces you're going into so you don't hit anything.

I'm motivated by curiosity and also I'm a woman so I have to get ahead. Not just driving the tractor or the combine harvester, but learning other things like beauty therapy too.

When I finished high school, I said to myself that I had to keep studying. But I didn't like college, so I chose a short course. There was mechanics, carpentry, cookery or dressmaking. I chose

beauty therapy because I like cutting hair, doing nails and makeup and all that.

Driving a tractor is also a good job for a woman. I don't agree with people who say driving a tractor should only be man's work just because women didn't drive before. Now we all have the same rights. All of us can do it.



That's my older sister Martha beside me in the photo. We live together but we work apart. When I was a girl, my father took us to weed with a hoe but I didn't like farming much, and when I was six I went to school.

AZUCENA ALEGRÍA FLORES AGUADULCE, CHIAPAS

My father didn't let any of my brothers and sisters go to school, just me, because my mother wanted me to study. She wasn't happy about none of us studying because she herself finished high school and went to college. My father didn't pass first grade, but he was the one who gave the orders at home.

When I left high school I did a dressmaking course to learn how to make clothes, but I didn't finish because I had a baby and had to stop my studies. I was 18 years old when my first daughter was born.

My father had died but my mother was here and my brothers and sisters had kept on farming. I started working with them again out of necessity. It was hard but I knew what to do and I also liked working with my sister while my mother looked after the baby.

Sometimes **we got up at midnight to grind maize** and make tortillas for the nine laborers we hired to help with the field work. They started first; then we would come at nine to work in the field for a few hours before going home at about one o'clock in the afternoon to cook again.

When the men got home at four in the afternoon, their food had to be ready. Then we'd go and look after the pigs, do the laundry, take a bath

and wash dishes and do all the other chores that had to be done. We went to bed at eight then got up again at midnight.

I got married when I was 24 and went to work with my husband in Ocotal, carrying my one-month-old baby girl and **crossing the mountain**.

At first, it was hard living there because we had no electricity or running water. The house was made of laminated sheets. The roof lasted a year before it started leaking. When I went to work with my husband, I took the baby with me and made her a little hammock in the bush.

When she cried because she was hungry, I'd feed her and then she'd sleep in her hammock. As soon as she fell asleep, I'd start slashing with the machete again. I tried to guess what time it would rain, so she wouldn't get wet. That's how I worked with my husband.

I still work with him today and we help each other. With the children there are more hands to help than before. It's been seven years since we came back here to grow maize and beans on this land my mother lent us because over there the land is only good for growing coffee.

My sister used to work with my mother but now she has her own land. She gets help from laborers who she pays to do the hardest work because she can't do it all herself.

I find working with my husband and my children makes the money go further and the harvests bigger. I work in partnership with my children. We divide our work among us and my husband's is separate. We work like this to see who has the best luck. In the end, we put all the money together and each person takes his or her share.

It was hard for me to go back to farming because I couldn't go on studying, but now I'm happy with

things as they are. I like working the land. We also have pigs, which we sell, so we're not short of money.

Some women say they don't work in the field because that's what their husbands are for. But I say we shouldn't get used to just our husband working because **what will we do if he dies?** Women who don't do anything don't know how to work, so how are they going to eat? If my husband goes off with another woman, I'll be on my own, and if I don't work, I'll die.

My son is going to college now, but he also likes working in the fields. One of my daughters is the same but my other daughter doesn't like studying or working in the field.

I say to my sister, "That one worries me because if she finds a partner I don't know what will happen. Maybe she'll come and live with me?" Like my sister says, whatever happens it's not going to be easy.



The hurricane lifted up the soil and tossed almost half of our maize field as far as the road. A big hole opened up on the other side of the field. I still haven't gone back to plant over there because the earth takes time to settle and I'm afraid of falling in.

CRISTINA GARCÍA DE JESÚS ZACATIPA, GUERRERO

Then the wind came and flattened the whole crop. Most of the corn fell over and this happens year after year. This is why I take my candle to the middle of our plot and pray for protection.

We get up at five thirty in the morning to take flowers to the church to be cleansed by St. Michael, because he's the one who helps us in the maize field. Then we go and decorate the plot.

I make the sign of the cross before going into the maize. Talking to the Lord, I say I am very grateful because He gives us our harvest so we can live for another year, as long as he grants us life.

We **decorate the maize with flowers** as far as we can manage because if we decorated the whole field it would take us all day. We place crosses of flowers in each corner of the field and over there where we go in and out. Then I light my candle and thank the Lord.

In the photo, I'm with my daughter Ávida, who came with me so I wouldn't be alone. She hasn't been able to hear or speak since she was born. Now she's 18 and goes to high school in Xalpa, walking with her friends, about half an hour downhill and then up again in the afternoon. They have to rest a bit on the way because their books are heavy and it's hot.

The truth is when I was small, I didn't study much because before I was born there was a fight between my village and another village over the land. They burned down all the houses, the maize, everything! From then on, my parents were poor. They didn't have money or enough maize to eat.

When I was eight years old my aunt came to visit from Cuautla and told my mother, "Over in Morelos some people need a girl to look after their child." "My daughter is too young," my mother told her. "She can't go yet. She doesn't even know how to speak Spanish." Because here we only speak Mixteco.

I was brave enough to say, "Mami, I want to go. I'm going to see if I can do something because we don't have maize to eat." My mother used to grind a ball of dough as small as this, which she got from who knows where. She would make tiny tortillas for us to eat. But we didn't get full on that.

My mother asked, "But how can you go like this? You're so young!" I told her, "No, Mami, I'm going!" And off I went with my aunt to work there, even though I was so small I didn't know when they were going to pay me. They gave my pay to my aunt and she sent it to my mother. And even though it was very little, she could buy maize with it so they could eat.

When I was 12, I was sent to work for the daughter of the same lady in Mexico City. "Oh, it's so pretty!" I thought, "There's **so many lights and this village is so big!**" I worked for four years then I came back here again. That's when I met my husband and suggested to him, "How about going to work in the city since there's no money here?" He said, "Let's go," and off we went.

Later we came back here again and my husband said, "We're not both going to be able to work. You stay here and I'll go out to work on my own. Now we have three girls and your mother isn't going to be able to look after all of them." I've stayed here ever since then, planting maize on my father's land.

At first I thought, "I'm not going to farm because my husband's working over there and he'll send me money." But no, it didn't turn out like that, because the money wasn't enough. That's why I say **I'm both the mother and father of my children**. It's not easy, since my health is not so good these days, but the truth is, I like the land and if I don't plant, I'm not happy.

Now I'm used to planting every year. If we don't plant, well, we don't get maize and we have nothing to eat. If we do plant, well the little we grow allows us to eat during the year for as long as it lasts.

After decorating the maize in the field we go to church. We pray and have a procession in honor of Saint Michael. This has been the tradition in our village since the time of our grandparents, who taught it to us, and well keep up this tradition until God takes life from us. We're not going to give up our tradition.



Clearing the jungle to plant maize is hard work. We sweat and suffer in the heat. Mosquitoes bite. There are also ants, and sometimes we meet big snakes that we kill with a stick or machete.

**MANUELA GÓMEZ CRUZ
LÁZARO CÁRDENAS, CHIAPAS**

I was 12 years old the first time I got hold of a machete to help my parents, clearing, planting beans and maize and working in the coffee.

I always go to work in the maize field with two or three other women, as this is our custom. When we feel like it, we also plant maize and do other work with the men. But beans is mostly what we women plant and the men plant the maize.

Once in a while I plant with my husband and my uncle, but the children don't help out yet. Seven or eight neighbors go together to sow a field, and the next day they go to another one. When it's our turn, I make food for everyone.

When the maize is mature, we harvest the cobs and carry them home. It's hard work as each sack holds 200 cobs and it's about an hour and a half downhill walk from the field to the house. You get home tired, make tortillas and then go back with the others to bring another load.

Every morning, we women wake up early, make tortillas and go to the field. When we're back from the field, we continue working in the kitchen, washing clothes, making food and looking after the children. So the **ones who work most here are the women**, but I like working this way, according to our custom.

At home we speak Tzeltal, sometimes a bit of Spanish, but most of us only speak Tzeltal. We **women try to speak Spanish as well as we can** but it is a bit difficult for us when we go out of our own community.

Like my husband says, our custom here is to work in the field with the machete. This is how we make a living. Some children who don't want to work in the field manage to study and follow their career. But those who don't manage to complete their education and get a job come back. They have to do the same as their mother and father did.



We give breakfast to the maize. Maybe a cup of hot chocolate or coffee, *atole* and bread. Then we burn copal incense and serve the main meal to the maize as our grandparents taught us. It could be fried chicken or turkey, whatever we have.

MARICARMEN DÍAZ PEREDA OZTOCINGO, GUERRERO

See how we put the maize here beside the table. We also put flowers, a candle and the saints: the Virgin of Guadalupe, St. Michael, St. Jude, the Holy Child, the Three Kings, St. Peter, the Souls, Father Jesus, and the Virgin of Juquila are all here.

Before **giving food to the maize**, we go to the field and place flowers all around the edge of the plot. We kneel in the middle of the field to offer a candle, then select two or three of the best maize stalks to decorate and take home. After we give food to the maize, we take it to church.

My grandfather said it's important to keep up this tradition for the Festival of Saint Michael so he'll bless the maize and it will give a good yield. This is why we decorate the maize field, offer food to the maize and take it to church to be blessed.

I grew up with my grandparents. My mother separated from my father and had to go to Mexico City to work. I was nine months old when she left. From then on I grew up with my grandparents and my aunts and uncles. We all lived together, and when my aunts and uncles went out to work, I stayed with my grandparents. They looked after me.

My grandfather took me to the maize field when I was three years old. Ever since I was small, I liked how he carried the maize. So I asked him, "Cut me a small stalk because I want to carry one too." He'd always decorate a small maize stalk for me on this day.

I got married when I was 14, but my husband didn't take me with him to work in the field. We lived with my mother-in-law for six months. Then we decided to live apart and he went to work over there, on the other side, out of necessity.

At first, I was thinking of going myself, because he was ill, so I said to him, "I'm going to the United States so I can send you money and you can get better." But he didn't want me to go, as he is the man and he was afraid what people would say.

"You're not going to support me. I'm the one who's going to go," he said. **"If I die in the desert, just think that I didn't make it."** And that night he went.

You think lots of things, don't you? Like what might have happened to him, how he is, or if he only made it half way. But he did cross over and spent two years working to pay off his debt before he could afford medical treatment.

My husband is well now. He's been working in the United States for about 11 years. I work in the maize field: I hire the oxen for sowing and sometimes I carry the spray pump, working alone, spraying the weeds and all that.

The truth is, going back to work in the maize was hard. It's very tough work because you have to look after the house and the maize field too. One woman but has to do the work of two people.

I have to do my work as a housewife, looking after my children, but the hardest work is in the

field. When I harvest, I have to lift sacks and carry them and do all the work my husband used to do.

We eat all the maize we grow. Sometimes the harvest is poor and if we run out before the end of the year we have to buy maize. That's why I'm thinking of going again.

Two years ago I tried to get across, **walking in the desert three days and two nights** with my backpack, water, everything. Then the immigration police caught us and took us back to Nogales. From Nogales I tried again, but they caught us again.

I spent two months at the border and tried seven times to get across, but I couldn't. So I went back to work in the maize, but I'm still thinking of trying again because I want to be with my husband.



I live on the oldest hacienda in the region but my parents don't just magically conjure up money for me as if I were a princess. They're earning it by the sweat of their brow. You have to work.

LIZETH CHÁVEZ SOSA MIRANDILLA, JALISCO

I'm 16 years old and I think being young helps you take risks. It also helps teach you how money can be made through effort and dedication and if you really want to, you can plant your own crop.

This year I planted three hectares and now the maize is almost ready for harvest, so things are going well. But I don't do all the work alone. My father has always helped me and the laborers do too.

The size of the ranch is 73 hectares. Maize is planted on most of it, but not all, since we also have about 100 head of livestock. My father must have about fifty or sixty hectares of maize. We plant between May and June and harvest in January. At the moment he's compacting silage with the tractor to feed the cows.

When I was small I'd go to the paddock with my father to take fertilizer or maize on the tractor, and I'd play there all day between the grass and the river.

When I was older, I started to help him spread the fertilizer. He drove the tractor and I sat on the spreader, watching and pouring fertilizer into the containers whenever they were empty.

Then I started helping him plant, walking behind the tractor. Sometimes the seeder didn't cover the seeds properly, so I would cover them. I liked

working in the field with my father more than staying at home mopping and sweeping.

What I like the most is the harvest because it's relaxing. You're not worried that maybe it's going to hail or the maize is going to rot or a strong wind is going to come and spoil your efforts.

When I was 12, I saw how my brother planted on his own initiative and did well. So I said, "You know what **Papi, I want to plant.**" "That's fine," he said to me, "whatever you want. How much are going to plant?" "Just one hectare Papi, not more." Then I borrowed some money from him to add to what I had saved up.

I did well my first year. The price of maize was good. I don't remember exactly how much I produced but I think it was about five tons. The next year, I increased to two hectares. The price of maize was four pesos and I produced about ten tons, so I earned a lot.

Now I'm going to college but I don't get stressed out. It's not as complicated as it seems. I spend my vacations planting in the field and when classes start, I do the work on the weekends. Since I only plant a little, it's not that much work.

The truth is, I'm not sure what the future holds for me. My dream is to have a career, some good businesses, and travel all over the place learning about new cultures, new cities and different things. But if I have children, I wouldn't want them to get used to the city. I'd bring them to the farm so they could get dirty and do what I did as a child.

I don't agree that working on the farm is only for men. When my mother was small, about my age more or less, they would take her with them to the field from sunrise to sunset and it was no problem. Now **we're living in the 21st century,**

everything's changed. We've revamped with a new way of thinking.

Being a woman doesn't restrict me or make me feel less than a man. If my brother can work on the farm why should I limit myself by saying, "I'm a woman, I'm delicate!" Obviously not.



Belonging to the epoch I do, I saw how my grandparents made their altar for All Saints Day and I'm going to keep doing the same as they did for as long as it's God's will, since cross my heart, I love these customs.

LUGARDA CASTRO VELÁSQUEZ SANTIAGO TUPATARO, MICHOACÁN

First you set up the table and arrange a curtain so it covers one side. I place the image of Our Lady of Good Health from Pátzcuaro and arrange the tablecloth. Then I add cempasúchil flowers that we call "flowers of the spirits" and a white plant for the little angels in heaven who come.

Then I arrange the flowers around the edge of the table, so it looks modest yet attractive, and lay a cross of cempasúchil flowers like this. Last of all, we **hang up maize cobs to signify we are farmers** and this is how we make our living.

Once the altar is ready, we light the candles, though we make sure to blow them out again when we go to the cemetery to greet the souls and place flowers on the graves. In the evening we say the rosary three times and everyone walks in a procession praying and singing.

These customs take place on the first day of November. They say all the souls who never have their own special day come for a party. So many children and so many adults who don't have a name or a birthday!

In our house, the offering is for my grandparents. My grandfather died many years ago, but my grandmother lived until I was a young lady of 16. Ever since then, we've been making this offering for them every year, and for my parents too.

All of our generation were farmers. I only went to primary school: first grade, second grade and third grade, again and again. I **stayed at school for nine years and repeated the same three grades**. There were no telephones, no cars, just animals like oxen, donkeys and horses.

My father beat my mother whenever she didn't get the food ready quick enough. Actually, he'd hit her for any little thing. As a child I didn't understand, which was why I started staying with my grandmother. I liked living with such an old lady.

She also loved me, probably because I looked like my father. I swear the reason I'm still here today is because of her. She left me her whole inheritance, including her house and five and a half hectares.

My father had land too. My husband was what they call a sharecropper, meaning he worked the land and got half of the harvest. Sometimes when I was alone, I'd go to the field with him, though I went early in the morning because I didn't want people to see. Once we started a family, he didn't give me much to do in the field because I had to look after the children.

Later he went to work in the north. By then the kids were much bigger, so I'd go and work with them, slashing and removing the maize stalks. I'd take a pot of beans and some pieces of dried meat roasted with chili. We enjoyed eating in the field.

I still like going to the field, even though I'm too old to work. Now I'm 84 years old and everything is different. As the saying goes, I'm **eating the fruit of my labor**.



Our ranch is called Mount Macuala. That big mountain over there is Cerro Grande and the other one is El Fraile. It's quite peaceful living here with no electricity or phone.

JUANA PADRÓN MÉNDEZ MACUALA, GUANAJUATO

My house is made of stone and my father-in-law's is made of tin sheets. Our water comes through a hose from a spring on the mountain to the tank. From there I fill buckets for cooking and turn off the hose when they're full.

At night, whoever goes outside takes a lamp and each room has a solar powered bulb. If it's cloudy and the plant doesn't charge, we use candles. Of course I have a cell phone, but I can only use it when I go to San Luis. Life here is different from the city with its conveniences.

I get up at four in the morning to make the *nixtamal*, add the lime then cook it with firewood that my husband fetches. Sometimes we go to fetch firewood together in the pick-up or carry some-home on our backs.

I grind the maize with a hand mill, turning the handle around and around. It takes me about half an hour to do the grinding then I make the tortillas in the light from the bulb if there is light, **otherwise, with the candle**. At six I have to get the girls up. I give them breakfast and drop them off at school on my quad bike.

It's about an hour from our house to the school because it's all dirt roads with a lot of ups and downs. When it rains a lot we stay home because the streams run fast and I'm afraid they'll carry us away.

Here on the ranch we have cows, donkeys, rabbits, **coyotes, foxes, snakes** and other animals. My husband goes off to work with his cattle or do a bit of fencing while I make cheese and do other chores in the house with my father-in-law.

The maize field belongs to my father-in-law and I guess my husband as well, since they work together. I harvest the tomatoes that grow there, and when there's pumpkins, beans or maize cobs, I go and collect what I need. I use the maize to make tortillas. Otherwise what would we eat?

My parents also grew maize. When I was little I helped them to clear the field, plant and harvest the maize. But I didn't like working in the field that much. So I left home and went to work in San Luis.

First I volunteered at CONAFE giving classes, then I went to school and worked in a factory at the same time. We had to pack things to distribute and sell them. I liked working there.

When I was 22 years old I got married and we came to live here. **"Where do you want to live,"** my husband asked me, "here on the ranch or in the city?" "On the ranch," I told him. I don't know why, but I've always liked the ranch.

We've been here for seven years and I don't regret it. I feel happy living here with my two daughters: Yesica, the youngest one, is six and Jaqueline, the oldest, is seven. I want them to study and do something with their lives.

I also studied but I didn't finish my education. Who knows? Maybe in the future my daughters will also end up living in the country? No matter what they study, I want them to have a different life from mine.



We always make an offering to the earth before we start to plow. I make the sign of the cross and pour soft drink on the soil just behind the oxen where the plowing will start, so the maize grows and the harvest will be good.

MARÍA DOMINGA AYALA REYES ATAYIKI, OAXACA

Our grandparents made this offering with brandy because there were no soft drinks. Apart from this, the custom is the same. Another custom we have here is to choose the biggest maize cob and put it on the table with the Virgin of Coquila and the saints, so they share the fruits of the harvest with us. They say that if we don't do it, the rain might not come and the crop might not grow.

My husband Emiliano ran away from home when he was nine years old and found work in a butcher's shop. When he was 15, he went to the United States, walking for two weeks across the desert with a group of twenty men and five liters of water. When he got to the other side, he worked as a laborer until they caught him. He was imprisoned because he didn't have papers and then deported.

When he came back here to Coquila, we worked in our fields together until he had to go north again because we couldn't make enough from our small plot to support the family. That's how I learned to plow with the oxen.

We started looking after the oxen when they were small; they were used to me. So I started thinking, "Can I or can't I?" In the end I decided to yoke them up as there wasn't a man to do it.

It was difficult at first because I didn't even know how to fix the plowshares. A neighbor helped me yoke the oxen up, and yes, I could work. Now I could plant beans and peas. Then I said to myself, "**Maybe I can plow the soil to plant maize?**"

The first time the furrows were a bit crooked because I didn't know how to order the oxen to go straight. I was really sore the next day, especially my arms. But I still had to get everything ready, make my tortillas and yoke the oxen up again. Gradually the pain in my arms and my bones went away.

My neighbors said I was very brave to have a go at yoking the oxen, as they'd never seen a woman doing that. Here the woman walk in the front leading the oxen and the man follows behind with the plow.

I spoke to my husband on the phone, but he couldn't believe I was working with the oxen. Then after a year he came back. We started working together and he said, "Come on then, show me how you worked."

When he saw how I worked he believed me and we started to work together. I decided to go on working with the oxen and he accepted it. Sometimes if the neighbors need to plow, I tell my husband, we make a plan and go together. But if he hasn't got time, I'll do it.

Sometimes I work seven hours in the field; then I have to go back and put the *nixtamal* on, make the meal and feed the chickens and pigs. I go to bed at about nine. The next day I get up at three or four in the morning, depending on the work and how far I have to go.

At the end of a day's work, I'm very tired, because **it's not the work you should have to do** as

a woman, is it? But sometimes you have to help yourself out of necessity. Also, it's nice working with the oxen because you learn.

Life used to be harder for us women because only men were taken into consideration. There were no rights and there was no support. But it's different now. We have **more rights, more space** and everyone's considered.

Maybe elsewhere they say plowing is men's work, but I don't agree because I don't think working with oxen is that difficult. I find it easier than before because I've got used to the work. So I'll keep going until I can't do it any more.



The woman in the picture is my mother. Her name is María Concepción Domínguez Cervantes. In the corner of the picture frame, there's a snapshot of my father, Simeón Velásquez Lara. He grew maize, beans and wheat. That's why my son went and cut the maize plants and brought them here for the offering.

MARÍA ROSA VELÁZQUEZ SANTIAGO TUPATARO, MICHOACÁN

We believe the souls of the dead come to visit us on the first of November and we also make this offering for them.

In addition to the maize stalks, we use cobs, cempasúchil flowers, fruits like guava, oranges and bananas, bread, candies in the shape of animals and little angels, a wooden horse carrying fruit, soft drinks and cans of beer. It's not that my mother liked to drink a lot of beer, just a glass once in a while, so we offer them to her.

Yesterday we invited people to come and say the rosary and **share atole and tamales** with meat. We made about 300 tamales and used black maize from our fields for the *atole*.

When I was a child I helped my father in the maize field. All of us children helped him to plow, plant and gather the harvest, and my mother brought the food. We liked it but by the evening we were very tired. "I hope it rains so we can go home!" I'd say.

My mother told us she also went out to plant with my grandparents. She would say to my grandfather, "Come on Papi, let's go home!" "As soon as we've finished the maize," he'd say. She and the others would throw big fistfuls of grain

to finish sooner. When the maize came up, my grandfather would say, "That's why the maize finished so quickly; look where you threw it!"

In those days, everyone had their oxen and cart; they'd pack and load the maize in sacks and the oxen would pull the cart. My father had his oxen. They were fine, massive beasts and I'd climb on the cart when there wasn't a load.

My mother would **get herself ready and ride her horse** to ride to Pátzcuaro. I'd ride behind my father, holding on to him. But not any more, because we have cars now.

I have seven children, just like my mother. We also have land, though now it's communal. Our sons who stayed here work the land a bit, but as there isn't much to do, they all go north. Now we only have one working here.

I still grab the hoe to dig a few small furrows, but it's not the same as it was. Now there are hardly any oxen, they just farm with machinery, the maize comes up and they throw on some fertilizer.

We still grow maize because it's how we feed ourselves. We always use it for tortillas. And we always bring some maize stalks for the offering on All Souls' Day. We leave them there for eight days and then we take them down. Now I'm content because I've made this offering for my mother.



Our company has seven tractors, two precision seed drills, three combine harvesters and five trucks to cart the crop to the granary. Everything is sold to the food and livestock industry

ALTAGRACIA GONZÁLEZ GASTELUM CAIMANERO, SINALOA

In the fall-winter cycle we work about 1,000 hectares. If we combine both production cycles, we're talking **about 3,000 hectares**. We don't have any inactive or fallow land here.

The company is called Agrícola El Cerro. It's a family firm that goes back generations and generations and it's been registered for 20 years. My brother in production, my husband in distribution and fertilizer sales, and me as General Manager make up the management board. I'm responsible for managing the entire firm including administration and making decisions about business partnerships and investment.

Only 10% percent of the land we sow belongs to us partners who run the company. The remaining 90% is leased from people who own land but have no intention of farming it themselves.

My father also worked his land but in those days farming was different. He sowed 70 to 100 hectares maximum and he didn't plant maize. He died in a motorbike accident when I was five years old.

In theory, my mother could have sold the land. But her will to support the family wouldn't let her question whether she should farm or lease or sell it. "If my husband can farm," she said, "So can I!" And she got straight to work farming the land.

When I was young, I always wanted to study, work and be independent. In 1989 I finished college as a graduate in Public Accounting and started my own accounting firm, which I still have today.

Back then, **I had my own accounting business and my mother had her agricultural business**. We were independent, but when the tax reform came in Mexico in 1989, she needed an accountant. And what was better than having her own daughter as an accountant?

I started as General Manager of the agricultural firm by accident because when my mother died, an administrative head was needed. The risk of financial disaster also loomed as those who knew the most about farming and production didn't know much about management.

We started growing maize because market conditions were right and the returns were higher than with other crops. Also, maize is a crop that's not so vulnerable to pests and climate conditions. It was a good decision for us.

I might regret doing other things, but not growing maize. We're in **the right time and place for maize**. Apart from this, we've done a lot to improve production. We started with yields of between seven and eight tons per hectare and 300 hectares. Now we produce over twelve tons per hectare and we sow over 800 hectares.

I'm not the one in the company who sows the seed, but I find the best seed in terms of price, quality and quantity—on time, when it's needed. That's my role.

It's not easy being a female manager in a business where farming is the main activity. "What do you know, you're a woman!" some people said to me, but now they know me and how I

work and we're getting results. Although they expect results from a man, they expect twice the results from a woman.

We also do agricultural policy work with farming organizations. This gives you confidence in what you're doing. It also enables you to learn what is being done in other areas so you can come back and apply it here.

You **can't farm in isolation**. You have to keep abreast of new technology, new information, business partnerships, do research and participate in forums to change public policy.

It's clear to me that women can farm because my mother did. If she could do that 40 years ago, I can do it now and my daughter can keep doing it for the next 40 years, right?



My husband's aunt Doña Chavela is standing next to me in the photo. She has worked on the land her whole life and she still helps us weed when we need extra hands.

MARÍA PAULA DUARTE RODRÍGUEZ BATURY, SINALOA

Her father didn't give her land because there were too many children. The boys got land but the girls didn't. She married a man who wasn't from here and he didn't have land either. Since then, they've both been working as laborers. Shes Mayo; I also became part of the same indigenous family when I married my husband.

My parents were hard workers. My father was a fisherman because he loved fishing, but we also had maize because he bought a plot with the profits from his shrimp sales, though the land was saline.

When Samuel and I got married, I became more attached to the land. He farmed with a *patrón* like many people here in Batury. They'd give their land to a *patrón* so their plots could be worked on because they didn't have the economic resources to do it themselves.

We had an agreement: we'd give the plot to the *patrón* and he'd offer us work. And he also lent us money. We needed money if somebody got ill or to buy shoes for the children. So you'd go and ask the *patrón* to lend it to you and pay him with the harvest.

Then at harvest time the *patrón* would do the accounts, and he'd give a quarter of the profit to the owner of the plot after subtracting whatever was owed to him. He kept the biggest share.

He was the one who drove new cars, bought more land and moved up. It was a very precarious life for us. Just **imagine how it was in the old days when the landowners had peasant laborers and you'll understand where we were heading**. We were going back to those days.

Then Samuel had a year when they stole his two harvests. They didn't even give him a quarter like they'd agreed. We had this worry, as well as the dream of recovering the plots. So we started to fight.

Here we belong to an indigenous group and everyone has land. But we couldn't manage to work our own land. So it was my idea that we should get together and look for some form of help to become independent.

The cooperative we formed together with all the indigenous communal landowners is called Yor-me Batury and its aim is that we all have equal rights. I knew the government gave support to indigenous people so we approached the government offices. They gave us about 30 requirements we had to meet to qualify for support.

So there was willingness but there wasn't much progress, until the government sent an agricultural engineer to advise us on how to improve production. He went and did everything he could to help us plant our plots for ourselves.

First we got some support with equipment. Then he suggested we **changed the way we worked** to no-tillage farming. He said we'd reduce our costs with this new method of sowing, though perhaps the harvests would be slightly lower than they had been using the conventional method that the *patrón* used.

It was the best option for us. The conventional method used to sow the plots was very expen-

sive and labor-intensive for us. We **managed to gain independence** due to this new no-tillage method.

The first year we sowed like this our neighbors said, "This land isn't going to produce anything the way you're sowing!" But we did well and harvested 103 tons of maize.

Now Samuel has a pick-up truck. He bought it with the second harvest. It might not be the most recent model but it's the first car I've had in my life. We drive along very happily in it.

We still get up and go to work in the plot very early in the morning. And even though we have the pick-up, we sometimes walk because we like walking and enjoying what we have in life.

We've lived through hardship and had many needs but we've faced life and struggled to live better. And we haven't lost touch with reality just because we have a car. We're not going to drive everywhere in a car just because we've got one.



Maize is like a baby girl because you look after her as she grows up and you do the same with maize. That's why we dress up our maize cobs so they look like us, with a dress, earrings and scarf, for our traditional new maize celebration.

MARÍA ISABEL FLORES AGUA HEDIONDA, VERACRUZ

We keep this tradition when the maize matures in September. Who is in charge depends on who wants to take the responsibility. We've been the organizers about five times.

We do this because **maize has feelings**. As they say, if you don't eat for one or two days, you don't even want to talk because you have nothing in your stomach. This is why we say maize is what makes us speak and it makes sense.

Maize has a life like a person: it's born when the seed is sown and grows old. But the next year when you go to sow again, it is born like a child again.

You invite your neighbors to join you for a feast on the day of the new maize celebration. So you need chickens, soft drinks, beer and brandy, and to carry out the custom in the maize field, you need flowers, a basket, colored tissue paper and about 100 pesos of candle wax.

We dress some of the maize cobs with the same Otomí women's costume that I'm wearing. Other cobs wear pants and a shirt. So they are dressed up as Otomí men and women just like us.

It takes about an hour and a half to get to the maize field where the custom begins because it rains in September so the path is muddy and you have to cross the stream. When you get there

with the healer, the men harvest the first maize cobs and place a cross of flowers in the field. They light candles, drink a shot and a half of brandy and bring some maize cobs home.

When the men go to the maize field, we women prepare the food to invite everybody to eat when they return from the field with the new maize. At about ten o'clock at night **we dress the best maize cobs** that are selected by the healer. The selected maize cobs are kept to plant again the following year.

Once the maize cobs are dressed up the trio begins to play. You dance, embracing the maize cob all night with a candle in your hands. You feel joy and happiness because there's new maize again.

We learned to dance watching the elders when we were girls. I didn't go to school because I grew up without a father; I was only six years old when he died. My mother used to walk all the way to the town to bring bread, and when she got back, she'd sell it.

Our house was made of wooden planks with *papatla* leaves for the roof. We only spoke Otomí, as we still do today, and our clothes are the same as the ones worn by the maize cobs.

I never had shoes, even after I grew up. Now I'm 56 years old but I only bought my first pair of shoes 10 years ago. I still go barefoot to the maize field because I'm more used to walking like this.

When it's time to go and plant, two or three of us women take baskets of food. Ten or fifteen **neighbors work together**. They put a cross of flowers in the maize field again and pour an offering of brandy on the ground. That's our custom.

I don't want to lose our customs, but sometimes we can't afford to keep them because we don't have enough money. Everything is expensive so sometimes you think, "**Are we going to do it or not?**"

Now I'm ill. It's also been three years since we last organized the new maize celebration. That's another reason I don't feel well. Sometimes other people organize it, but now they're all evangelicals and don't respect our customs.

We're thinking of doing the maize celebration at least once more so my little boy can learn it. Let's hope this tradition isn't lost. If it is, I think the maize will get confused and so will the earth.



My grandmother was a tortilla maker. My mother did the same work and when we were growing up, she passed it on to us.

ROMANA MARTÍNEZ TOLEDO IXTEPEC, OAXACA

My father was a farmer. He prepared his land and sowed maize season after season. We were happy when he sold his oxen and bought a black and white television and a Rockola jukebox my mother used to play records on. She used to go to the market in Tuxtepec on the passenger train.

“My daughter, you stay with your father,” she’d say, “and look after him.” “Okay,” I thought, “I’m going to do what my mother does.” I’d **climb up on a chair to reach the griddle** and make a soft tortilla, but as I was only six years old, it wasn’t round but all misshapen. I’d put it on the griddle like this, then use tongs to turn it over.

When I was 10 years old my mother taught me how to sell the oven-baked tortillas we call *totopos* in the village. “If they don’t sell, trade them for cheese, meat or something, but don’t come back with *totopos*,” she told me. I went round to all the houses, knocking on doors. And when I got home, all I got from the profits was a soft drink.

I also helped my father in the fields because he had no money for hiring laborers. He would come up the field with his oxen and my mother, brothers and sisters and me following behind. That was our work and we had to do it.

When I turned 16 I got married. My father-in-law gave my husband a piece of land. Since he was

also a farmer, the work was the same. “Let’s go and plant,” he’d say to me. “Okay, I’m coming,” I’d say, “as soon as I finish my housework.”

Every day at two in the morning, I’d start heating my two clay ovens. At three, I’d put the maize on. At four, I’d take it off, wash it and go to the mill. When I got home, I’d do the housework. Then I’d take a bath and at six o’clock I’d start to make *totopos*. At eleven, I’d finish making a bagful and go to sell them in the market.

I’d leave my children with their father for a bit while I rushed off zoom, zoom, zoom to sell them. If they sold, great! If not, I’d exchange them for food for the children. I’d get home and my husband would go to work in the fields. I’d rest. Sometimes I’d go to work with him in the fields in the afternoon.

If we didn’t have maize my life would be very difficult because we’d have to buy it. Notice how the price hasn’t gone down despite the passing of the years. So how could we afford to buy it?

I’m going to be 49 in August. I discuss with my children, “How about if I stop making *totopos*. Maybe I could make *empanadas* (a filled pastry) or tacos in the afternoons.” Because sometimes I have trouble breathing. And the smoke? Well, I noticed after I turned 45 that I felt more tired. I’ve been saying to my husband, “Who knows? **Sometimes I think my lungs are smoked.**”

My work is hard! You have to get up early. The other hard part is tossing the tortillas on the griddle. The oven burns everything, even your hair. That’s why I’m thinking about trying something else. But then I ask myself what if I do and it doesn’t work?

My children say to me, “Its time for you to stop making *totopos* and rest. We’ll support you.” “No

my dears,” I say to them, “one day you’ll decide to get married. Who knows if you’ll find a good partner? That’s why I don’t want to get used to your money or stop working.”

Now things are getting complicated because I have diabetes and sometimes I feel sick. I ask God to let me live a bit longer so I can help my children get on in life. Now they’re all grown up, only my ten-year-old is left and I don’t regret a thing.

My oldest daughter likes making tortillas but my other girl says, “No, **I’m not going to be stuck there like you.** When I get married my husband will support me.” “Oh my!” I say to her, “each to their own.” I will continue doing this work just like my mother did, as long as I can.



To make this **Christ out of maize cane** I worked alone in the early hours of the morning so making tortillas or other housework wouldn't interrupt me. I managed to finish in time with only a few sleepless nights.

**MA CARMEN LARA RIVERA
SANTIAGO TUPATARO, MICHOACÁN**

Everything had to be ready for Palm Sunday in April. There was a competition and exhibition and we wanted to take it there. I got a big surprise when they gave first prize to our workshop.

The **same technique was used by our Mexican ancestors to make their deities**. Spaniards exploited the technique to make Christs out of maize cane for evangelization, as the figures were so light they could be carried in processions. It was also used to make ornamental altarpieces like the one we have here in the church in Santiago Tupatero.

The altarpiece in the church is made of maize paste. The surface has a thin layer of fine silver plate. You can see flowers and a shell in the middle and it's decorated with pomegranates. When they explained it to us they said the red of the pomegranate signifies the blood of Christ.

Here in Santiago Tupetero we are used to having courses like dressmaking and how to make deserts. Everyone signs up for all of them. But we were surprised when they announced a course on how to make figures of Christ from maize cane when the altarpiece in the church was restored.

Before that we only used to make toy airplanes out of maize cane and my older brothers used it

to make little bulls and carts. "How can the altarpiece be made of maize cane if it looks so much like metal?" we wondered.

Our teacher Antonio Hernández gave us the first course. Then Pedro Dávalos Cotonieto from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) came and explained how they'd restored the altarpiece and how we had to protect it from humidity because it's not made of metal, as we originally thought, but cane.

When we found out it was made of maize cane—and we have a lot here—we asked INAH to give us another course and we made a piece with a design of flowers from our region.

If it weren't for these courses, I think I would've been one of these people who migrate to the United States: most of my family is there now. We are 12 brothers and sisters but there's only three of us at home now: my father, a sister and me. My mother died and all the others went to the United States, like so many illegal immigrants do, risking their lives to cross the river. **But this space has kept me here.**

We've had the workshop for 15 years now. During that time, we've worked as a team on eight murals and a few large sculptures. We've also made some small figurines from everyday life: a woman carrying her baby with a child at her side, and a pregnant woman carrying her shopping bags. It reflects how the husbands go to the United States, then come back and make the wife pregnant. She's the one who has to deal with everything.

Some pieces are in exhibitions. They've just taken an exhibition down not far away in Tiripitio. Other pieces traveled for six years as part of a touring exhibition.

We also went to visit the United States to take some religious works of art we made for an exhibition of Michoacán culture, so our fellow citizens and brothers and sisters could get to know it.

When I met up with my sisters at the exhibition, one of the older ones said, "If I could've done what you're doing now when I was in Mexico, I wouldn't have emigrated." She would have stayed here. "Make the most of the opportunity," she told me, "since we can't." They're losing their roots.

Next I'm going to make a large human figure, a woman in movement instead of religious art. She'll have a naked torso and her hair down in a style women used before, with a long skirt that's going to fall like a cloak towards the back, decorated with shells and pre-Hispanic designs.

She will signify women's strength, which is sometimes denied us when what we women do is taken too much for granted. Sometimes it's hard for a man **to appreciate a woman's work, whether it's sculpture or tortillas**. This figure will symbolize how we value ourselves, at least how I value myself. It's a challenge to prove I can believe in me.



Ever since I was a young girl, I've come to rinse the maize for my *nixtamal* in this spring. No matter if rain falls or the sun beats down, this is our custom, so I have to do it.

NATALIA HERNÁNDEZ BAUTISTA TENANTITLA, VERACRUZ

At the house, we only get tap water once a week, so I don't rinse the maize there. I also like coming to rinse my maize here more than at home because it's easier. And even if I didn't like rinsing maize for *nixtamal*, I'd have to do it anyway because if I don't, we won't eat.

I have six children and a husband and we live with my husband's parents and two aunts. We've all spoken Náhuatl since we were small and I continue speaking our language because I don't speak Spanish, though I understand a little.

I'm the youngest of my brothers and sisters. My father died soon after I was born. Later my brothers and sisters got married. I was the only one who stayed with my mother to help her with the housework.

At school they told us to speak Spanish but we couldn't because we'd always spoken Náhuatl. I only studied until sixth grade. When I was 12 years old I was put in charge of the house because my mother had to work in the field.

So when I was small I learned to cook, make coffee, wash clothes, rinse *nixtamal* and make tortillas. Now I'm 42 years old and I'm still doing the same work as I did when I was a girl.

Sometimes I go to the maize field to fetch gourds and sweet potatoes or pick beans. But I don't go as far away as my husband goes to work be-

cause I have to make the food. My children take his lunch and help carry the maize home from the field.

It's our custom to put the first new maize on an altar in our house. My aunt, who's the oldest one at home, burns copal incense for the maize; then we prepare the new cobs for cooking. All the maize we grow is for the house, but sometimes if we don't have money we have to sell some to get by.

As for my dress, I choose the cloth myself and look for a woman who can sew me another one because I always wear a dress like this. I didn't like it when my daughter started wearing pants. It was worse when she cut her hair. I told her not to cut it because I have never cut mine.

We grew up with **our language, clothes, customs and the work we have to do**. The children are changing, but I'm not going to abandon the work I've always done and will continue to do until I get ill and can't work. Meanwhile, I have to do it and I do.

I don't know fear. If a snake comes along I'll kill it with spirit. Some cowards run away when they see a snake but I'm not embarrassed or afraid of anything.

ARMINDA SOLÍS GUILLÉN RANCHERÍA PUEBLO NUEVO, CHIAPAS

Life was hard on the ranch where I was born. My father came here looking for a place to live, found work and eventually managed to buy some land. We suffered a lot in those days and because I've gone through so much I know how to appreciate what I have.

Nowadays women are careful when they choose a partner. Back then, I didn't even think about whether this man was any good or not. We fell in love and I told myself "I'm marrying this man, **however things turn out, good or bad**, he's the one I'm going to marry. If he leaves me I'll move on, but I won't come back."

Parents were really tough back then! We had to get up at three in the morning to rinse our bucket of maize and grind it in the mill. And when I started my life with my husband, nobody gave me anything.

We bought an old tractor and these three hectares with the money we made from working. Then all of a sudden they offered us another 12 hectares. We paid it off little by little then bought another six. Now we've been here about 35 years and all together we have about 20 hectares. Of the maize we grow, we only keep enough for the chickens. The rest we sell.

Thank God I was able to have eight children. But when I had them, I didn't go to hospital. I had them here through my own strength. Not like women these days. Now they cry, "Doctor, doctor!" But I didn't go looking for help. My husband can tell you he didn't have to spend a penny on me to get his children.

I was very sad when my son Rodolfo went to the United States when he was 16. I cried because I didn't want him to go! "Don't go son!" I said, but he insisted, "I'm going."

"Okay," I said to him, "if you manage to make some money, buy some land." He took my advice. He's still working there, but now he has his land here and I look after it for him. When we finish harvesting, I'll say, "The harvest is done and your field made so much. Here's the money."

It was the same with the tractor. "Look son," I said, "I'll give you some advice. If we buy a tractor it'll pay for itself bit by bit with each harvest." So we went for a demonstration and saw a tractor that I just loved the minute I saw it. **I didn't need to be wearing pants to buy a tractor**. We did the deal and came to an agreement and that was it.

My other son Berzain is the one who drives the tractor. It's how he makes his living. In the evening he brings me whatever money he's made and says, "Take it Mami, this is what I've made today." That's how he reports.

All my boys are male chauvinists like their father. And where do they get that from? They're all totally stubborn, alive and kicking. The only difference is the ones who have studied more go further but they all like working.

That's why I don't want them to be in charge of the money. No way! They'll waste it! When we're

going to plant maize my husband Catalino asks, "Give me money for the tractor," and I give him money for three 200-liter tanks.

Anyhow, since we are the parents of our children we gave each of them two hectares to set up their houses however they want when they meet their women. Now each one has his own land. That's how we did things, and thank God, they all have nice houses.

Now all of them, including my son-in-law, say, "**You don't need to work any more. Why not stop?**" But I'm still working because I don't want anything from them. Why take my ideas and the satisfaction I have from working away from me?

It all depends on who you are. I've got my daughters-in-law and some are clever and some are lazy, but I don't need a husband. I say to my sons, "Right now your father's alive, but if he weren't here, I'd be doing the same thing," because I like working.

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"I keep working because I always feel better when I'm doing something. The large leaf is from the plantain tree and I use it for wrapping tamales," says

LIONSA PÉREZ VELÁZQUEZ
PUERTO RICO, CHIAPAS



ABOUT MAIZE CRP

The CGIAR Research Program on MAIZE is an international collaboration between more than 300 partners that seeks to mobilize global resources in maize research and development to achieve a greater strategic impact on maize-based farming systems in Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

CGIAR research is dedicated to reducing rural poverty, increasing food security, improving human health and nutrition, and ensuring more sustainable management of natural resources. It is carried out by 15 Research Centers in close collaboration with national and regional research institutes, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector.

Led by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) as its main CGIAR partner, MAIZE focuses on increasing maize production for the 900 million poor consumers for whom maize is a staple food in Africa, South Asia and Latin America. MAIZE's overarching goal is to double maize productivity and increase incomes and livelihood opportunities from sustainable maize-based farming systems.

As part of its emphasis on contributing to gender equality and equity in agricultural R4D, MAIZE has increased investments to expand the evidence base on how gender norms and relations intertwine with agricultural practices and innovation and the implications of this for agricultural research and development.

This documentary initiative expands these efforts, portraying an often overlooked side of maize-based livelihoods in Mexico, through images and testimonies of different women, who describe in their own words, their lives as farmers, food makers, artisans and vendors.

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