

And That It Is Customs Makes It Law by Susie S. Porter

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Susie S. Porter, in “And That It Is Customs Makes It Law,” highlights the class conflict and gender ideology during the 1880s and 1900s in Mexico. The laws denied females to take part in business, thus restricting their roles to homes. The women who tried to make a living through their talents faced legal sections during this period. Women struggled in the public space to receive the entitlement of working women, which resulted in class conflict. Cultural understanding of women during the period remained in constant flux. Practices of female seclusion remained visible during the period. However, the social relationships changed in the upper and middle classes as females represented them as the working class. Society’s rejection of working-class women was the result of customs, suggesting it was immoral.

Women during the period find themselves in predicaments and limited opportunities for survival. Women who were concerned about helping their families in miserable situations faced limitations. On the government’s act of removing the selling business of a poor woman, Trejo wrote, “I am obliged to plead to the father of us the poor, that he concedes what would be for me a fortune, that I will be allowed to sell my cakes, and God will compensate you for this act of nobility” (Porter 112). History of Mexico reveals that women like Trejo struggled to define the place for them. Gender ideology resulted in class conflict as the municipal regulations promoted the role of the concept of working woman. Society played a significant role in creating gender stereotypes and beliefs; “a gendered space approach argues that specific spaces have become associated with either masculine or feminine attributes” (Porter 113). Women were not allowed to take roles outside the traditional rules of feminism. The customs associated business with masculinity and eliminated similar opportunities for women. The social relationship between men and women was also dependent on the perceived differences between sexes. The customs were more focused on assigning power to the males and creating them as dominant members.

The changing roles of women in the public sphere were the result of conflicting relationships between vendors and the upper class. Several attempts were made to remove the feminine entry from public spheres, but their recognition as part of the working class increased with time. The struggles of vendors focused on receiving their rights and, more specifically, working rights. Trejo and other women wanted to change their lives by contributing to the society. They believed that only through work they could provide relief to their families and support them against poverty. The state took strict actions to remove women from public spheres as the laws instructed inspectors to remove the vendors’ fried and grilled food, coffee, and sandwiches because the majority of them were women. Irrespective of several laws passed to eliminate female vendors from municipal markets, they continued to sell their food. Porter mentions that the women “continue to abuse this tolerance,

occupying large sections [of certain municipal markets], interrupting the passage of pedestrians” (Porter 120). Mexican women in 1903 were ready to accept all the challenges to gain recognition as working class. The presence of women in public spheres increased with time as more women started their vendor business. By 1907, women had developed the strength to deal with social stigmas, but they were in no position to accept strict laws.

Gender ideology was also apparent as the presence of women on the streets was a direct question of morality. Women were able to justify their positions as the central cause for their existence in public spheres was money. The majority of the women engaged in vendor businesses were poor, widows, and lacked financial support. Under such conditions, they exhibited high motivation to work for betterment. Their presence was not a question of morality but the rejection of the idea that women can compete with men by taking similar roles. Immorality was a less relevant question for the males taking advantage of the women due to their repressed states. Males were reluctant to deny the rights of women even when they claimed in public spheres.

Gender ideology was the most prominent force in the promotion of such beliefs as the state and authoritative entities were not willing to accept new roles of women. The male tried to claim their rights to sell, which played a negative role, resulting in feminine repression. They denied females the same rights, moving them to the least profitable corners of the market. Porter captures the situation, “men in positions of power felt privileged to attempt to take sex from women who worked on streets regardless of their desires or marital status” (Porter 133). Males exploited females and tried to take advantage of the customs and laws. Customs put women in less favored states where they could not compete with males in public spheres. For years, women accepted restricted working spheres because they lacked the power to claim equal rights.

Class conflict illustrates femaleness in many ways as it portrays the less favored position of women when compared to males. Females remained victims of social sanctions and customs that denied their presence in public spheres. Society was accustomed to seeing females in oppressed positions irrespective of their efforts and talents. Feminine struggles and consistent efforts to gain working-class status changed social relationships. Males associated working women with immorality and identified them as unrespectable. Females never gave up and used their strengths to make a change by entering the public sphere. The need for money and a better life motivated women to work.

Work Cited

Porter, Susie S. “And That It Is Customs Makes It Law.” *The Working Classes and Urban Public Space* 24.1 (2000): 111-148.