

## COEDUCATION IN TRAINING RURAL TEACHERS IN MEXICO (1934-1944)<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

After the Revolution of 1910, the government opened rural normal schools to train teachers for rural areas. The schools underwent several transformations, but functioned as boarding schools for both sexes until 1943. During the administration of President Ávila Camacho, an attempt was made to reduce the influence of Communists in the Ministry of Public Education and in teachers' unions by launching a campaign against coeducation. The campaign was successful in a society fearful of interaction between the sexes in boarding schools. When these schools stopped being coeducational, the enrollment of girls increased, but the training of rural teachers changed considerably.

Key words: coeducational education, teaching training, rural education, socialist education, history of education, Mexico.

### Introduction

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the normal schools were an educational option that allowed women to participate as employed professionals. At the time, normal education was available only in the cities. After the Revolution of 1910, the federal government created regional normal schools, later called rural schools, that would be in charge of training teachers specialized in rural needs. Because of their location outside of the nation's main cities, where very few post-elementary educational institutions existed, the normal schools became an important site of new educational, cultural, employment, economic and political paths; i.e., new life opportunities for many young people in rural areas, and especially for Indians, orphans, and children of single parents (although numerically few) who had completed the first three or four years of elementary school. These new options not only had an influence on the young students, but also modified the histories of their families, generation after generation. The experience, however, was a function of the student's gender.

Between 1934 and 1936, the rural normal schools were transformed into regional rural schools. At a later time, they were once again established as rural normal schools, but from the 1920s until 1943, they were mixed-sex boarding schools. In the early 1940s, a reform modified their forms of organization, reduced their number and budget, and separated the girls from the boys, by school.

My aim is to analyze the functioning of the mixed-sex boarding schools, and the causes behind their transformation into single-sex schools. I base my analysis on reports from directors, teachers, and inspectors, of the group of schools. To further my study of the topic, I

shall focus on the case of one school, that of Tenería, in Estado de México, by using other sources such as the school magazine, student files, accounts from alumni and professional examinations. It should be emphasized that the functioning of these schools was very heterogeneous. The school at Tenería was one of the largest; due to its proximity to Mexico City, it had supervision, facilities, resources, and faculty not available at other schools. It was originally a farm school, was converted into a regional rural school, and from the early 1930s until the mid 1940s, was known as one of the best regional rural schools, without being an exceptional case.

### **From a Mixed-sex Boarding School to a Single-sex School**

After the armed conflict of 1910, the revolutionary government developed a mass policy aimed at all Mexicans' having access to education. Such a policy was essential for rebuilding the nation and educating the type of citizens required by democracy. The federal government accepted the challenge of opening rural schools throughout Mexico, in order to incorporate the nations' peasants into civilization. Rural schools were conceived as an institution open to the community: besides educating children, they were to extend their social and cultural action to young people and adults, both men and women. The nascent Secretariat of Public Education recruited elementary school graduates to teach at these new schools, even if they lacked special teacher training. The Secretariat was interested in opening institutions that could educate teachers specialized in the communities' needs.

Like the rural schools, the first regional normal schools or rural normal schools were organized as mixed-sex schools. Although some teachers—influenced by the pedagogical ideas of the rationalist school of Francisco Ferrer Guardia and other followers of the new school—advocated coeducation to allow girls and boys to study together, the main reason for the decision to create mixed-sex schools was the impossibility, due to the lack of economic resources, of supporting independent schools for each sex. The decision was not always well accepted by parents or all teachers.

In Tacámbaro, Michoacán (the site of the first regional normal school dependent on the Secretariat of Public Education—SEP), the teachers, Leobardo Parra, Marquina Castillo, and Isidro Castillo, insisted on keeping the windows and doors open so that passersby could witness the work and interaction of the teachers and their twenty-five students, thus dispersing the far-reaching suspicions and rumors that the girls were unclothed. They invited Bishop Lara y Torres to the weekly meetings they referred to as “a social type”, and the director would bring his wife, so that the society could confirm that they were a respectable family. The rumors of the time clearly involved other conflicts of a political, ideological and even economic nature—such as the opposition to lay schooling—and were not simply an attitude of rejection or reservations regarding mixed-sex education (Villela, 1972:26-27).<sup>2</sup>

During their beginnings, regional or rural normal schools were small schools that functioned practically like extended families. In 1928, after its initial experiences, the SEP decided that all the rural schools would function, as they had before, as mixed-sex boarding schools; as mentioned above, this decision was due more to budgetary limitations than to an interest in promoting coeducation. At the boarding schools, organized like homes, where all would cooperate in a setting of freedom, the director would take charge of the students as a father, while his wife would organize school life, and especially the attention given to the girls (SEP, 1928). At that time, 35% of the 661 students in the rural normal schools were female (SEP, 1930:634-637).

The directors of the first schools for training rural teachers included followers of the new pedagogical ideas that expressly defended coeducation and encouraged girls and boys to interact and participate in the same activities. Other directors limited that option. Yet both types of teachers promoted special supervision and protection of the girls, many of whom, as in Tacámbaro, were criticized for living in the mixed-sex boarding schools (SEP, 1928).

In the early 1930s, Narciso Bassols and other politicians and educators wanted rural schools, in addition to carrying out intense social and cultural work, to serve as important promoters of communities' economic development. Therefore, starting in 1934, they began to consolidate the rural normal schools and the agricultural centers (responsible for training young men as agricultural technicians) to form the regional rural schools. These schools offered professional preparation for rural teachers, preceded by preparation as agricultural technicians, and the number of schools grew to thirty-five. During the early years, most were awarded a budget, land and equipment for rural activities. All were asked to supervise the nearby federal schools and to perform serious political, cultural and economic work in their communities.

These schools were mixed-sex boarding schools organized through cooperatives in which all the students participated, along with an administrative board of teachers and students. (Over time, this board acquired an increasing number of executive functions.) Females obtained special representation. The schools tried to guarantee preferential admission to peasants' children, who were offered scholarships and a position upon graduation as a rural teacher. At the beginning, the SEP authorities did not believe that females could withstand the work in the rural areas; they were also concerned about the possible problems of interaction between young men and women aged 14 to 20. For this reason, the project that created the regional rural schools enrolled a low percentage of girls (SEP, 1933). Based more on family decisions than on government restrictions, as well as the preexisting enrollment of boys in the agricultural centers, the proportion of girls in the rural normal schools decreased. In 1936, only 23% of the 3,827 students were female.<sup>3</sup>

Debates on the direction to be taken by education in Mexico, however, were being dominated by postures that defended not only mixed-sex schools, but also coeducation. Based on the first six-year plan and the modification of the third article of the Constitution, which stipulated that education would be socialist, the authorities assigned greater importance to coeducation and the emancipation of working women, especially after 1935. The regional rural schools promoted the creation of women's leagues, and some were related to the Mexican Revolution Party—PRM formed in 1938.<sup>4</sup> While the girls were required to carry out the same activities as boys, discussions, even in the SEP, explored the usefulness of having the boys take home economics.<sup>5</sup> The policies that supported coeducation and women's emancipation were evidently linked to the growing discussion on women's right to vote.

Nonetheless, in 1938, strength was gained by the sectors wanting to limit the popular reforms of President Lázaro Cárdenas—reforms such as land distribution and socialistic education. These ideas coincided with growing concerns among teachers (independent from their opinion of coeducation) regarding the effects of having teenaged boarders of both sexes at the regional rural schools, given that the schools' size had modified, as well as the forms of student and student/teacher interaction. In 1928, most of the rural normal schools had approximately 60 students, but by 1941, enrollment had reached 100 to 200 per school, with almost 300 in some locations (SEP, 1930:607-606; SEP, 1941:154). Boarding schools could no

longer function as the extended family of earlier years: their size would not permit a guarantee of close supervision by teachers and employees. The situation was complicated by the expropriation of the oil industry in 1938, and the government's subsequent reduction of the regional rural schools' budget. Many were unable to hire sufficient personnel to teach the curriculum or ensure student safety. Most of the schools had no night watchman, electrical power, or matron to care for the girls (as the directors' wives had done in previous years).<sup>6</sup>

Under these circumstances, some of the directors believed that the girls would be in danger, and refused to accept responsibility for them. Several requested a conversion into single-sex schools. A minority believed that coeducation for that age of students, and in boarding schools, was not positive, especially for girls who spent their time "dreaming in class" rather than studying. Most were not against coeducation, but stated that they could not guarantee the young women's safety.<sup>7</sup> Some reported the problem as an argument of weight in obtaining a larger budget for their schools, while others acted for political reasons, on two different levels.

On one hand, in the mid 1930s, students began playing a more important role in the administration of each regional school. Although differences existed among schools, the discipline at most schools was supervised by the students, through student organizations. The SEP authorities, increasingly limited in carrying out inspections (due to a lack of budgeted funds), believed that the system was in danger because of the laxity of school discipline. Although the problem was less serious than the authorities believed, poor working conditions and personnel shortages had caused teachers to neglect their role as guides on the working committees.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, participants in school administration were no longer limited to the school's teachers and students, but also included union representatives and the Socialist Federation of Rural Students of Mexico—FECSM. In 1935, the teachers at the regional rural schools had formed a union (SUTESC) which, along with the cultural missionaries, represented the most radical wing of the teaching profession. These radicals were at odds with the federal directors of education and inspectors, who maintained more moderate political positions. The union formed the National Branch of Higher Rural Education within the Syndicate of Workers in Education in Mexico—STERM, which was really the first teachers' union with national aims. The Branch sustained policies linked to the Communist Party, as did the students, who followed in their teachers' footsteps by forming the FECSM. Starting in 1935, FECSM carried out partial strikes to demand better conditions for their schools, more teachers, and better prepared teachers who would support a revolutionary ideology.

In addition to the strikes, the teachers and students at some of the schools intervened in regional political affairs, such as land distribution or the formation of cooperatives to weaken monopolies, or even state political campaigns and the presidential campaign for Lázaro Cárdenas' successor. These activities, like the cultural missions that were disintegrated in 1938, "strayed from the fold" of an administration that wanted to concentrate power within the PRM through the confederations of the Workers of Mexico (CTM) and National Peasants (CNC), as well as a sole teachers' organization that would be more controllable and offer less room for action by the Communist Party.<sup>9</sup>

In July of 1940, the students at the regional schools, backed by many of their teachers, held a general strike—which they called off in exchange for the government's promise to meet their demands at a gradual pace. Yet the situation for the regional schools worsened. During the administration of President Manuel Ávila Camacho, opposition to socialistic education

increased, and a true hunt for “Communists”<sup>10</sup> began within and outside of the system. In 1940, the Revolutionary Front of Teachers of Mexico was formed; supported by CNC, it threatened the power of the Branch’s leaders as well as the STERM.

The SEP decided to disintegrate the regional rural schools and create separate practical schools of agriculture for the boys, and the rural normal schools, for boys and girls. Decisions were also made to limit these schools’ community activities, to reduce the agricultural land they worked, and to cut the number of schools in half. Resources were reduced even further (SEP, 1946). These reforms, as well as the clashes between the Branch and the Revolutionary Front, provoked serious conflicts in the new normal schools, which were utilized by federal inspectors of education, by those who opposed a socialist orientation, and the press, in an effort to modify the third article of the Constitution. In 1941 and 1942, the inspectors reported some political conflicts, yet they mostly compiled data on marriages, abortions, births and even suicides they believed had been caused by interaction at the mixed-sex boarding schools, which were handled by “Communist professors” who supported “exotic foreign theories” and were unconcerned about educating young people on the straight and narrow.

When President Manuel Ávila Camacho’s administration decided, under pressure from the political right and the international situation, to terminate the radical movements of Cárdenas and the program of socialistic education, Communism became a synonym of immorality.<sup>11</sup> This idea was promoted by Octavio Véjar Vásquez, the administration’s second secretary of public education, who proposed replacing Cárdenas’ educational program with a school of love that included a strong moralizing component. He was supported by the National Action Party, the National Union of Parents, SEP authorities and the Revolutionary Front of Teachers of Mexico. The group’s campaign did not reach a modification of the third article of the Constitution, but it permitted the Organic Law of Public Education, issued in 1942, to halt encouragement for coeducation.<sup>12</sup>

On September 9, 1942, Professor Luis H. Monroy, the director of pedagogical studies of the Secretariat of Public Education, wrote the following to the head of the area:

To date, the rural normal schools have been coeducational, since students from both sexes interact.

Although the regulations established for this interaction have been faithfully observed, since they have separate dormitories and the matron and a female teacher, if available, sleep in the girls’ dormitory, there have been *immoral events* to lament, although infrequently, that the directors have solved by marrying the *guilty parties* and removing them from school.

In order to prevent the repetition of these events, I propose concentrating the young ladies in those schools lacking in farmland, and concentrating the young men in the schools that have farmland; in other words, the existence of single-sex normal schools.<sup>13</sup>

In 1943, the rural normal schools, like the National Teachers School in Mexico City, became single-sex schools. The reports of directors and inspectors, many of which were published in newspapers, served in part to justify the schools’ transformation, limit their activities, and occult political repression. Many the directors referred to this type of problems to request a larger budget for guaranteeing the control of their students, but in the hands of the inspectors and educational authorities, the information was used to the benefit of conservative groups that attacked coeducation as part of dangerous Communist ideals.

The result was that the battle against the radical reforms of Cárdenas and Communism combined with patriarchal viewpoints of paternalistically protecting girls against bad influences.

The students at the rural normal schools complained. With the support of rural organizations, and groups of teachers, merchants and workers, they wrote to the nation's president, sometimes requesting and at other times demanding the continued use of mixed-sex schools. They defended coeducation, based on the third article of the Constitution. Since the government order was issued shortly after one-half of the schools closed, the wide response was due in part to the fear that students would either be expelled or the schools blocked. The government's decision was viewed as an attack on the popular institutions of the revolution and on the peasants themselves. The central argument of these letters, like the letters from parents, was that if the girls were transferred far from their homes, they would have to abandon their studies.<sup>14</sup>

The government did not cede. It established nine schools for girls and nine for boys, but was forced to listen to the families' central argument. Some students refused to transfer to the schools to which they were assigned, and various directors accepted the enrollment of young people of both sexes. The difficulties and delays in inspections meant that in practice, schools were able to allow their advanced students to finish their studies at the schools where they had started, without having to transfer.<sup>15</sup>

The available information does not reveal if parents refused to allow their daughters to transfer to distant schools, effectively leading to the interruption of their schooling. Yet sizeable increases in enrollment occurred once the schools became single-sex. In 1941, the enrollment of girls was only 26% of a total of 3,263 students; in 1944, girls represented 38% of 2,667 students; and in 1946, 45% of 3,514 students (SEP, 1941 and 1944).

As we view this matter from our days, we find ourselves before a paradox: in the 1930s, when coeducation was being promoted, the enrollment of females was low. In the following decade, the abandonment of mixed enrollment in schools limited the possibilities of building relationships between the sexes, yet schools' conversion into single-sex boarding schools encouraged the enrollment of more rural females. These girls entered an institution that was an important springboard for increasing their status and learning, and for entering cultural and employment spheres (they were offered positions as rural teachers) very different from what they would have had otherwise.

Such improvement can be explained in part by the transformation of the regional rural schools into rural normal schools, yet it was undoubtedly related to the schools' single-sex enrollment. In spite of petitions against single-sex schools, many parents, in addition to school directors and officials, were fearful of teenagers' interaction in boarding schools. For example, the female students at the Tenerife regional rural school pleaded with Margarita Hernández to enroll (which she would in 1938); Margarita wanted to attend the school, but the woman who was her employer at a tortilla producer in Tecomotlán was against the idea because "there the girls go to ruin very soon."<sup>16</sup>

As shown below, the "presumed Communists" who, according to the Revolutionary Front of Teachers in Mexico (Frente Revolucionario de Maestros de México—FRMM) proclaimed free love and all sorts of licentiousness, were paternalistic and protected the girls. During the 1930s, the teachers, directors, and students who formed part of the boarding schools' administration, followed strict rules to prevent courtship, as well as the so-called "illicit"

relationships and pregnancies. Courtship most certainly did occur, but the cases of sexual relations, pregnancy and abortion were few, and probably no more frequent than outside of school. The problem was that the boarding schools were being scrutinized by the authorities. The denouncements of 1941 and 1942 did not reflect an increase. Some were true yet others were rumors that no one wanted to research, like the anonymous claim that fetuses had been disposed of by the students at Tenerife. Other accusations were extremely dubious, such as the students' accusation in Salas, Chihuahua, that the school's physician had forced them to have sexual relations with him. (The students supported STERM and the physician was behind FRMM.) In a setting of polarized political struggle, the leaders of both sides appealed to moral criteria that were effective in a society fearful of the coeducational experiment.<sup>17</sup>

### **Mixed-sex Boarding Schools: The Case of Tenerife, Estado de México**

During the second half of the 1930s, the regional rural schools functioned with a very intense plan of activities. According to ideas that the schools should be self-supporting and that students should learn through practice, students became involved in all of the school's activities, with some exceptions (laundry, cooking, sewing, and the tortilla-making cooperative, which were exclusively for females). In Tenerife, the female students, directed by the matron, were in charge of washing and sewing the clothing for the teachers and students (from four to six hours per week); once a week, the girls in the second year of agricultural studies were responsible for cooking for the employees and students. They would begin this task at four in the morning by planning the menu and making the necessary purchases in the market (to learn to balance meals, and select the cheapest and best-quality goods), and would finish at nine o'clock at night. These activities were part of the home economics class, given only to the girls. The girls in all groups took turns with the laundry and cooking.

Some of the boys helped at times with these activities, but the operation and management of the cooperative for food and consumption (at school and outside of school during practice sessions) were the responsibility of the matron and the girls.<sup>18</sup>

Other exceptions existed. The educational authorities, the director of the school, and the director of the normal school were enthusiastic promoters of the liberation of rural women; emancipation that would break "the chains of ignorance, inactivity and poverty" by obtaining, through coeducation, "an exact judgment of things" (provided by historical materialism) and the freedom of action "at home and at work", to participate in "the redeeming struggle of Revolution".<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis on "action" and "work" associated with women's emancipation had its origins, however, in an urban cultural model that scorned women's work in the field as useless. The "action" was centered on two elements: first, on securing women's roles in the organization of the home and the control and maximum utilization of available resources;<sup>20</sup> and second, on obtaining (although with ambiguities) agricultural knowledge to allow girls to work at a later time "to aid field workers, or from their place at the rural school, to serve the annexes and answer people's questions"<sup>21</sup> (Civera, 1997:122-123). On one hand, greater control by women in the private sphere was being promoted, and on the other hand, women's participation (within limits) in the public sphere. It should be pointed out that these two aspects of change had been proposed in the region during the Revolution. With the mobilization and death of large numbers of men, the women in many towns and villages had

been forced to become more involved in the sale of agricultural and homemade products, as well as in the administration of family resources (Civera, 1997:122-123).

The educational authorities insisted that girls should participate, like their male classmates, in learning and practicing agriculture and livestock raising. Yet resistance existed within the schools, and the girls were exempt from heavy work, especially the care of large livestock. Since inspections were frequent at the Tenerife school, the girls participated in raising pigs and supporting work with large livestock. In 1935, the school magazine, *Impulso Juvenil*, showed photographs of the girls shoveling hay, and congratulated them for their hard work in an activity (raising pigs) usually carried out by males.<sup>22</sup>

The girls' activities increased when they became involved in raising small livestock. Sunday and part of Saturday were the school's designated rest days. Many of the boys went on weekend outings, but the girls were allowed to leave school only on Sundays, and not every week. On Saturdays, the girls did the laundry, and on Sundays, in contrast with the boys, they could leave school only under the supervision of a female teacher; yet due to a lack of personnel, such supervision was not always available.<sup>23</sup>

The girls should not be categorized as victims, however. According to one girl's account, the girls were close friends, independent from the boys in their dormitory activities and domestic work, on the weekends when the school was half empty, and in the Women's League; on expressing her memories, this former student almost always referred to "*nosotras*" ("we girls").<sup>24</sup> The girls used their limited spare time to study and especially, to participate in sports, which would play a fundamental role in their education and future work. They played among themselves, but preferred to compete along with the boys, either girls against boys or on mixed teams. They played basketball in uniforms they designed themselves, consisting of culottes below the knee. Thus both the boys and girls found a more or less equal space of interaction (at least in terms of contact, including physical contact).<sup>25</sup>

The students participated together in many other activities. Besides their classes, practicum and workshops, they worked in school government, which determined many aspects of daily student life at the boarding school. Independent from their number, the girls had a special representative, in addition to the student representatives for every class (generally boys). Through their representative, the girls were involved in decision-making in the public sphere. The girls tended to direct the recreation and hygiene committees, rather than the work or administrative committees. Outside of school, students of both sexes organized festivals, parties, plays, or literary discussions; they cleaned streets, did their practice teaching at schools, took school censuses, helped the peasants to organize in requesting agricultural credits, and many other activities.

In general, the work was divided by sex, but both students and teachers interpreted their experiences as joint work that contributed to forming a strong notion of *nosotros* ("we") as rural normal students, as members of the "Comunidad Roji-Negra de Tenerife" ("Red-Black Community of Tenerife") (as they called themselves), and as members of the extended school family that was referred to as a maternal figure in the rural normal schools' school song. This experience was reflected in the students' professional exams, which consisted of a dissertation on the work of rural teachers and a report on their first year of employment.

The girls tended emphasize matters like health, and some were enthusiastic about the discourse of emancipating rural women and improving their conditions as mothers and housewives. The boys showed more interest in economic activities.



All graduates referred to the need to gain the community's confidence in order to become its guide. Many female graduates interpreted the work of "agitation" and community organization, as they called it, as an important means of guaranteeing school attendance and support for the school in the form of materials, money and labor. In contrast, many of the male graduates "agitated" with political or economic purposes outside of the school setting.

In spite of these differences, the graduates shared many values and concerns, at times different from those considered by the educational policies of their student years or their teaching year in rural schools. Such values and concerns included interest in hygiene and the intent to solve a problem they considered fundamental—rural dullness—through healthy entertainment like dances, conversations, music, and especially sports. As students, they had interacted intensely in these activities.

The graduates' statements showed having adopted the discourse of rural teachers who devote themselves to the community. Many did so, however, by assuming an authoritarian posture as possessor knowledge and truth. They expected the work to be hard, and hoped to take valuable although restricted action in improving general living. They emphasized the importance of "not to allow themselves to be overcome by the setting", but to continue working. The graduates revealed the high value they attached to work, and their desire and skill in utilizing to the maximum the limited economic and material resources. They also showed initiative in attempting to obtain resources by becoming acquainted with people in power, such as government officials, teaching organizations, community property coordinators or merchants. Such attempts followed the tradition of using relationships, as well as their daily habits from boarding school.<sup>26</sup>

In mid-1935, the director of the school at Tenerife reported that the mixed-sex boarding school functioned without problems. Expulsion would be the punishment for violators, who would have become enemies of the common good, and for all possible violators. The separation of a couple that, "disregarding learned principles, planned to take their friendship beyond the limits and customs permitted in the home and in the extended family of the school", served as an example to prevent a repetition of the situation in "this interesting aspect of the school".<sup>27</sup>

The director, teachers, and students had rules to control the romantic relationships of students (and even teachers). The files indicate that a boy's chat with a girl through the window of the girl's dormitory (which, in contrast with the boys' dormitory, was supervised by a matron) was sufficient motive for public banishment by the director, who also notified the students' families. Recurrence would lead to expulsion. Couples discovered kissing or hugging were punished in the same way. At times, if they were good students, the parents were notified and the students given the opportunity to transfer to other schools. This type of rules remained in effect in spite of a new director (with a different political position) and the students' growing strength on the Administrative Council as well as in the supervision of discipline. On occasions, the students proposed lighter punishment than the teachers did, not necessarily reflected in their voting. While the female students tended to be treated more strictly than the males, Professor Guadalupe Cenicerros de Zavaleta argued that the punishment should be the same for both sexes if the same error had been committed. Yet even with equal punishment, the social effects were more severe for the girls, at school as well as at home.<sup>28</sup>

A student from the school explains how the students established informal rules to protect themselves from "immoral acts":

In 1940, a custom started at Tenerife that terrified the girls as their saint's day approached. They were congratulated publicly in a very special way. At breakfast time, when all the students were in the dining room, a student would stand, ask for silence, and say:

-Comrades, since today we are celebrating the saint's day of our dear classmate, Alicia Nuñez, I request our classmate, Luis Barbosa, to congratulate her on our behalf.

A murmur would be heard after these words. The chosen classmate, who had been the girl's first known boyfriend, would stand and answer:

-Since this honor is no longer mine, I gallantly cede the floor to our classmate, Rosendo Santacruz, so that he can offer the congratulations.

The murmurs would increase. Rosendo had been Alicia's second boyfriend.

Santacruz would publicly cede the floor to the third boyfriend, who would cede to the fourth, and so on until reaching the girl's boyfriend of the moment. The final boy had no other choice than to blubber, blushing from shame amidst grins and whistles, a few words of supposedly good thoughts and wishes. The beneficiary was unable to hear them. Her decorum had obligated her to leave the room, sobbing and embarrassed.

In defense of the girls' consciences, the line-up never surpassed five or six participants.

No one was saved from this custom [...]*A healthy and spontaneous moralizing spirit was behind this act. It tended to contain the romantic desires of the boy chasers. And many girls did in truth contain themselves, knowing what awaited them otherwise [...]*.<sup>29</sup>

This unwritten student rule was of course a restriction for the girls rather than the boys. The guilty parties were the girls, who could "lose control", or "commit mistakes", according to the Head of the Pedagogical Department. The same former student explained that "a rule of the girls at Tenerife, unstated and very old, stipulated that no girl should have more than ten boyfriends during her entire stay at the school. Woe to the poor girl who did not obey the rule!" He gave the example of girl who had had several boyfriends, and dropped out of school after the ceremony on her saint's day—which was begun not by the boys, but by the president of the girls' society.<sup>30</sup>

In 1941, the personnel at the Tenerife school, as in other schools, were very divided. The director was the leader of Branch and the physician was an activist in Front. One of their conflicts caused many rumors in the region. A girl was expelled for having undergone an abortion, which occurred in the director's absence. The director later questioned all of the physician's statements, but the student had left school. The setting was so confrontational that the boys would not allow the girls to go to the infirmary without the company of a female teacher or one of the boys. Because of this conflict, we know that the SEP ordered the school's physician to keep a record of the girls' menstruation. In this case, there is no information to prove if the records existed (although the SEP was assured they were). In 1942, the physician reported that the records were kept irregularly, due to the director's response to the resistance from the girls as well as from the matron or nurse in charge of the corresponding verification—because of the physician's negligence, according to the director and inspector. The inspectors never verified if the measure was being carried out (or at least not in writing).<sup>31</sup>

### Single-sex Boarding Schools

When the idea of mixed-sex boarding schools was abandoned, and the teachers and students were transferred to other schools, the schools' internal dynamics were modified substantially. The student movement was disassembled and the schools' forms of organization, work, and government were upset. An effort was made to overcome general feelings of deception and sadness. Especially the boys felt unprotected. The "indiscipline" and "political agitation" described by the directors, was more difficult to handle in the boys' schools than in the girls'. Proof probably took the form of the increased male presence in politics. A student at the school in El Mexe, Hidalgo, explained that the reforms generated "discontent with regard to the Secretariat of Public Education. The agricultural activities at school collapsed and discipline declined. The male students, *without the restraint of their female classmates*, became rough and aggressive. Teachers and personnel, as well as the boys themselves, suffered during these years of transition" (Serna, 1987:72).

After the separation of the boys' schools from the girls' on the orders of the educational authorities, all of the schools performed less community and agricultural work. The curriculum was modified, the agricultural acreage and budget reduced. The Secretariat of Public Education also limited the cooperative spirit that had previously been fundamental.<sup>32</sup> Some of the changes varied as a function of gender.

At the girls' schools, the students continued to carry out activities in home economics (cooking, laundry, etc.); they took turns and shared the work with their teachers. Their agricultural work was guided by the teachers of workshops and the corresponding subjects, but the scope of these activities was minimal. Given the insufficient budget, school repairs were limited or postponed.

More agricultural activities were carried out at the boys' schools (although much land remained idle), and more material work was done on the school buildings and in the communities. But the absence of girls affected other areas. At one school, for example, the director reported that the mural newspaper, previously prepared by the girls and female teachers, was no longer published; at various schools, the directors stated that the number and success of parties and festivals had suffered due to the absence of females to make the costumes, backdrops, and food. Practice teaching had to be completed at closer locations, to save money on food (previously prepared by the girls); even the boys' scholarships were reduced as the funds were used to pay cooks and laundry help.

On separating the sexes, the activities formerly carried out by the opposite sex were assigned to hired personnel. Yet the lack of personnel and teachers, because of the limited budget, resulted in an important decline in the schools' general activities, as well as in the activities stipulated by SEP.<sup>33</sup>

Hiring outside personnel for the work previously done by students, contributed to limiting the students' sense of cooperativeness and belonging in the rural normal schools. In the 1920s and 1930s, students constructed their schools from day to day. By 1944, students and teachers had begun to feel disillusioned by the promises and results of the Mexican Revolution. In earlier years, the Mexican Army had defended schools from outside attacks by the Cristeros, but in 1940 and 1941, armed forces entered the schools to interrupt internal protest movements.<sup>34</sup> In such a context, it was difficult to maintain the previous spirit of work and survival at school in spite of limited resources. Separating boys and girls by school was a factor of influence. It affected not only relationships between the sexes, but also the students' vision of their existence as rural teachers and citizens.

## Conclusions

Like the rural schools that the federal government decided to open in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the regional or rural normal schools were founded as mixed-sex schools, more for economic reasons than for pedagogical purposes. In 1928, these schools were organized as mixed-sex boarding schools that functioned as extended families, where students cooperated in a setting of freedom. Some teachers restricted student interaction, but other teachers, defenders of coeducation, promoted it while maintaining an attitude of protection and special supervision of the female students.

Starting in the 1930s, Narciso Bassols consolidated the rural normal schools and the agricultural centers to form the regional rural schools, with considerable weight on activities of an economic type. At the beginning, the authorities questioned the feasibility of females' carrying out the same activities as the males. Yet since the educational policies of the presidential administration of Lázaro Cárdenas attached importance to the emancipation of working women, and to coeducation, the regional rural schools promoted the creation of women's leagues, and insisted that the girls carry out the same activities as their male classmates—in spite of directors' and students' reserves.

The end of the decade, however, was marked by growing concern for student interaction. The schools were larger and had insufficient personnel to guarantee student supervision. In addition, the students participated more in school government, and especially in maintaining school discipline. Although many directors believed in coeducation, they expressed their concerns as an argument of weight in requesting budget increases. Other directors, not totally convinced of the virtues of coeducation, demanded single-sex schools.

Behind this debate was strong political disagreement between the teachers who defended socialist education (and promoted the organization of teachers and peasants in independent associations, with links to the Communist Party), and teachers associated with the CNC and the Revolutionary Front of Teachers of Mexico, who joined in the early 1940s with Octavio Véjar Vásquez (Secretary of Public Education during the administration of President Manuel Ávila Camacho) and other groups to attempt to modify the third article of the Constitution, to prevent public education from being socialist.

The regional rural schools' transformation back into rural normal schools, along with budget cuts, were the result of attempts to immobilize the most radical students and teachers.

Both sides used arguments that found an echo in a society still fearful of coeducation. Mistrust, present in some of the regions where the schools were founded, became evident when the percentage of female students grew significantly after the schools became single-sex. Some parents defended mixed-sex boarding schools by arguing that their daughters would be unable to stay in school if transferred to distant single-sex schools.

As seen in the case of the school at Tenería, in Estado de México, the students and teachers described as radical maintained strict discipline to prevent interaction between girls and boys from generating problems; particularly the girls were supervised. In other words, patriarchal and paternalistic attitudes prevailed: the girls were to be protected from the boys' influence and an assumed lack of control over their sexuality. On the other hand, when attempts were made to promote equal education and increased female participation in both the private and public spheres (ideas not limited to the boarding schools), school activities were divided by gender: the girls carried out the domestic duties, while the boys were involved mainly in activities of an

economic and political type. The differences, however, were not perceived by the students and teachers, who considered themselves participants in the school community.

The separation of males and females into single-sex schools had various consequences on school life and on students' preparation for their future roles as rural teachers. Yet while this change curtailed the possibility of constructing non-traditional relations with the opposite sex, it also permitted larger numbers of rural girls to attend school and study for a profession.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is the product of a conference presented at the Second International Colloquium on Women's and Gender History in Mexico, Guadalajara, 2003. I appreciate the comments by Mary Kay Vaughan and very especially, by Patience A. Schell, that enriched the initial version.

<sup>2</sup> Villela, Othon, 1972: 26-27. Various students from the first graduating class were present at the celebration of the school's anniversary. Villela based the book on their accounts.

<sup>3</sup> AHSEP-DEANR, "Ingreso de alumnos, 1936".

<sup>4</sup> *Revista de las Escuelas Regionales Campesinas*, July, 1939 (mimeographed publication, circulated by the SEP).

<sup>5</sup> SEP, 1941; AHSEP-DEANR, box 3288/411, file 8. I thank Jocelyn Olcott for having provided me with this information.

<sup>6</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from administrative inspectors, 1940-1942; Reports from special inspectors, 1940-1941; Reports from directors, 1940-1942; Santos, 1989, t. III: 123; AHSEP-DEANR, Documents related to personnel, 1937.

<sup>7</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from administrative inspectors, 1940-1942; Reports from special inspectors, 1940-1941; Reports from directors, 1940-1942.

<sup>8</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1940-1942; AHSEP-DEANR, student files, Tenerife, Estado de México, and Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, 1937-1945.

<sup>9</sup> Arnaut, 1998; Sepúlveda, 1976; Bonfil, 1992; Raby, 1974; Civera, 1997; Medina, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> It should be mentioned that "Communist" or "radical" were terms used to describe not only militant groups or sympathizers of the Communist Party, but also the defenders of socialist education or teachers who promoted organizing teachers, peasants and laborers in independent associations.

<sup>11</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from special inspectors, 1940-1941.

<sup>12</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from special inspectors, 1940-1941.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum from Luis H. Monroy, head of the Department of Pedagogical Studies, to the Secretary of Public Education, on September 9, 1942; AHSEP-Subsecretaría, box 9, file 1. Italics by author.

<sup>14</sup> AHSEP-Subsecretaría, Estudios para que las Escuelas Normales Rurales sean unisexuales, 1942-1944.

<sup>15</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1941-1944; interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco by the author on June 21, 2001, in Tenerife, Estado de México (for all cases that the interviewee is quoted).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco.

<sup>17</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, special inspections, 1940-41. At some schools, female students' mistrust was directed to school personnel rather than their classmates. An extreme case occurred in 1941 at the school in Huetamo, Michoacán. The female students' society complained to the special inspector that the director harassed the female students. The lack of a response to their complaints had caused several girls to quit school, and others to request a transfer; AHSEP-DGESIC, Report from the director of Huetamo, Michoacán, 1941; Special Inspection, Huetamo, Michoacán, 1941.

<sup>18</sup> AHSEP-DEANR. Report from the matron, Tenerife, Estado de México, December, 1934; interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco; AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1941-1942; Civera, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> See the articles by Guadalupe C. de Zavaleta, "Emancipación de la mujer" and Pedro Rivera (student), "Nuestra faena semestral", in *Impulso juvenil*, (school magazine at Tenerife), June 30, 1935. Prof. Zavaleta was responsible for the girls at the school.

<sup>20</sup> A word often repeated by the female students of that time, when recalling their experiences at the boarding school, was "aprovechar" ("take advantage of") in reference to the material and economic resources. Interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco.

- <sup>21</sup> AHSEP-DEANR. Letter from Manuel Mesa Andraca, Head of DEANR, addressed to the director of Tenerife, July 9, 1934.
- <sup>22</sup> *Impulso juvenil*, April 30, 1935.
- <sup>23</sup> AHSEP-DEANR. Report from the matron, Tenerife, Estado de México, December, 1934; AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1941-1942.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco.
- <sup>25</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Special Inspections, 1940-41; Reports from, 1941-1944; *Impulso juvenil*, June 30, 1935; interview with Prof. Margarita Hernández Franco.
- <sup>26</sup> AHSEP-DGEN, Student exams, Tenerife, Estado de México, 1937-1945. These statements are very similar to those on the student examinations from the school at Ayotzinapa, Guerrero.
- <sup>27</sup> AHSEP-DEANR, Report from the director of the school at Tenerife, first semester, August 23, 1935. The truth is that the number of applications received did not warrant limiting the number of girls accepted.
- <sup>28</sup> AHSEP, DEANR. Student files. Tenerife, Estado de México, 1937-1945.
- <sup>29</sup> The quote is from an autobiographic novel, *Ecos de internado*, written by former student José Vizcaíno. Various excerpts were published in an anthology by Martínez (1999:46). Italics by author.
- <sup>30</sup> Martínez, 1999:46-48. Ten boyfriends seem excessive, given the conservative context of the region. Unfortunately, for the moment we have no accounts to contradict this source.
- <sup>31</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Special Inspection, Tenerife, Estado de México, 1940-1941.
- <sup>32</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Special Inspections; Regulations and Bulletins, 1941-1944.
- <sup>33</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1940-1944; Reports from administrative inspectors, 1940-1944.
- <sup>34</sup> AHSEP-DGESIC, Reports from directors, 1943-1944.

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