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WOMEN IN MEXICO:

Mexico's Ambassador sees continuing role change

Can women expect to be treated as equals when they do business in Mexico? Mexican and Canadian cultural attitudes differ. But according to Mexico's Ambassador to Canada, women pursuing business in Mexico can be confident they will be treated seriously and professionally.

"There have always been many women in government and public life in Mexico," says the Ambassador, Sandra Fuentes-Bérain. "And in the media, the arts, the judiciary, even the Supreme Court. One of the major union leaders in Mexico — the education union, representing about 1.6 million people — is a woman, and there are many in the labour field. I'm not sure why, but there are fewer in industry, traditionally." It is curious, she notes, that when state enterprises began to be privatized in Mexico, suddenly fewer women were visible in government.

The quadrilingual Ambassador comes from Monterrey — "a very conservative part of Mexico" — where it was considered unusual, when she was a student, for women to enter the profession of law. Not only did she take her degree from Mexico's National University, she went on to advanced studies of economic law in London and entered the diplomatic corps.



Mexico's Ambassador to Canada,
Sandra Fuentes-Bérain

Ambassador Fuentes served in embassies in Great Britain, France, Italy and the United States before achieving the rank of Ambassador as Mexico's Consul General in Hong Kong. The latter posting, plus some of her departmental work, gave her the expertise President Salinas was seeking as implementation of the NAFTA drew near, and she presented her credentials in Ottawa in February, 1993.

The Ambassador suspects that women's roles may change in Mexico in the foreseeable future. For the moment, however, she sees women's

private sector involvement taking place at a more local level than in the large industrial enterprises.

"The financial crisis (in the early 1980s) forced women on to the marketplace. They have found a place in small or medium sized businesses, for example bakeries, things that may have grown out of a domestic situation. We're seeing a lot of unified family businesses."

She adds that, "In the rural areas, women are very active; they tend crops and take products to market while the men may be employed elsewhere. There are many women labourers — bricklayers and the like."

Before the crisis, Ms. Fuentes acknowledges, "A man would have had problems with his wife working. It's a fact that the woman is still seen as the household manager. However, if she resolves that, she may also look for a job; in the lower middle class, many couples are both working."

It's a matter of opportunity, the Ambassador says. "It's a question of education, which is open equally to men and women. In almost every department in the universities and colleges and technical institutions, there are now as many or more women students. Nothing

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