The Evolution of Union Women's Activism in Mexico City after Structural Adjustment

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Dans la foulée des ajustements structuraux au Mexique, la section activiste d'un syndicat de femmes a entrepris des dialogues publics sur les droits des femmes comme ouvrières. Face aux défis politiques et socio-économiques, ces femmes ont changé leurs stratégies organisationnelles pour prioriser l'importance des voix des travailleuses au gouvernement et dans la société civile.

Debido a los efectos negativos en la sociedad Mexicana que las políticas del Ajuste Estructural dejaron, un sector de mujeres afiliadas a sindicatos empezó un dialogo público sobre los derechos de las mujeres como trabajadoras. Enfrentadas a desafíos económicos, sociales y políticos, ellas han destacado la importancia de tener representación dentro del gobierno y la sociedad civil.

In response to Mexico's 1982 debt crisis, then-president Miguel de la Madrid ushered in a wave of structural adjustment policies that would ultimately lead Mexico on a path from a state-led model of development to a neoliberal one. The effects of structural adjustment and neoliberalism in Latin American are well known: privatization of state-owned enterprises and a hard-line stance against unions contributed to rising levels of unemployment and falling or stagnating wages. Furthermore, cuts to social services and subsidies made it difficult for people to make ends meet (Collier 71-117; Kleinberg). Structural adjustment's effects were gendered in important ways. The growing number of women entering the workforce out of economic need often engaged in precarious and flexible forms of employment (e.g., part time or in the informal sector). These jobs and cuts to social services, coupled with women's primary responsibility for care-giving labour, contributed to the feminization of poverty (Safa; Benería and Feldman).

But periods of crisis also create opportunities for the emergence of political actors, previously unorganized or silent, who add their voices to public debate about how to change society in order to redress hardship or exclusion. In Mexico, the debt crisis and economic shift coincided with the reinvention of the women's movement. And as more women entered the workforce out of economic necessity in the 1980s, there was a concurrent emergence of new attention of feminist groups to the discrimination women faced in the workforce.

Out of these groups emerged an activist sector of union women that since the 1990s has been advancing a public dialogue about the women's fundamental right for opportunities to engage in workforce on equal terms as men, free from discrimination and violence. But in an environment characterized by authoritarian labour unions, political stalemate, and a continued commitment to neoliberal economic policy, the organizational strategies of this group of women have had to shift. Ultimately, their shifting strategies show that the promotion of women's basic right to engage in the workforce free from discrimination will require that women workers' voices are represented within government institutions as well as in civil society.

Women in the Mexican Workforce

Mexican women did not have full political rights when either the constitution (1917) or the Ley Federal de Trabajo (Federal Labour Law, or LFT) (1931) were written. But the constitution was amended in 1974 to guarantee women's equality before the law. The LFT was amended around the same time to guarantee women's equality in the workplace and with respect to labour laws. Moreover, a new section of the LFT, literally titled "Women's Work," was added to address specifically the rights of women workers.

Although it was a step forward for women to have these rights articulated in federal law, the changes left

much to be desired. First, the section of the LFT devoted to "Women's Work" focuses on the rights as they relate to women's reproductive labour (e.g., maternity leave, access to daycare facilities), thereby legally reinforcing women's traditional social role and implying that only women have a responsibility for child care (CNMT 91-92). Second, the changes were initiated by the government just before Mexico hosted the 1975 United Nations World Conference on Women. The effect of implementing changes "for show" rather than as a result of social mobilization was that the changes were not accompanied by enforcement mechanisms and have never been effectively implemented (Lamas et al. 331-32; CNMT 86).

In fact, women continue to face discrimination in both the workforce and in unions. For example, despite laws against gender discrimination in the workplace and women's right to maternity leave, many women are subject to sexual harassment and pregnancy discrimination (CNMT). Because of occupational segregation, women are concentrated in jobs defined as feminine or more compatible with women's domestic responsibilities. These are typically lower-paid, less stable, and have less social value than those traditionally held by men (CNMT 3, 43).

Women's primary responsibility for childcare and domestic labour also creates a difficult balancing act. During the 1980s, women entered the workforce in increasing numbers,[1] but partly because of childcare responsibilities, they have often opted for temporary, part-time, or informal sector jobs—jobs that pay less, are non-unionized, and offer few, if any, legal protections. In the formal sector, women have found it difficult to participate in additional training that occurs outside of normal working hours. Therefore, women are less likely to advance at their job and earn higher salaries (García and Oliveira 72-73; CNMT 43-44).

These patterns were replicated within unions as well. Domestic responsibilities made it difficult for women to take part in union activities outside working hours. Women rarely held leadership positions in unions. And sexual harassment has been a problem in unions as well. Finally, the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of unions meant there were few sympathetic leaders who would address the discrimination of women.

Given their organizational capacity, union women might have been obvious activists to support women's right to engage in economic opportunities free from discrimination. However, before the period of structural adjustment, women's rights were rarely part of the union agenda, even when women were an important part of labour mobilizations. For example, from 1976-82 the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana (Telephone Workers' Union of the Mexican Republic, or STRM) engaged in a series of strikes. At the heart of the strikes were the telephone operators, the women who worked in some of the most difficult conditions in the company. Recalling the nature of the strike, however, one woman who was active in the union at the time noted that "the operators viewed the strike from the perspective of how to get rid of the reactionary effects of the old administration, but not with the gender perspective of today" (personal interview, January 14, 2003). But unlike the telephone operators of the time, other union women began to advocate for women workers' rights as part of the transformation of the feminist movement in the 1980s.

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The Evolution of Union Women's Organizing

During the 1970s, second wave feminist organizations led by well-educated, middle-class women tended to focus on issues like reproductive rights and domestic violence. Other women's groups were active during this decade, but there were tensions between "feminist" organizations and those whose work focused on issues surrounding class, ethnicity, and religion (Lamas et al.). Two events in the 1980s—the debt crisis and the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, which crippled the city's female-dominated textile industry—spurred collaboration between these two groups.

The economic hardship caused by these two events forced many women to break with their traditional housekeeping roles and to take on different economic and political roles in order to help their families make ends meet. In a movement that became known as "popular feminism," traditional feminist organizations became active along with popular sector women's organizations in the efforts to improve the material conditions of these women and their families.

Collaboration among women's

groups increased during the 1980s, and the women's movement became increasingly focused on policy-related issues that linked ideas about gender and feminism with issues of class and economics (Lamas et al.). Popular feminism therefore influenced the evolution of groups of union women who, with other allies in civil society, began a public dialogue on the importance of guaranteeing women opportunities to engage in the workforce in ways that did not leave them vulnerable to economic processes or discrimination. However, the organizational strategies of these groups have shifted over time in response to challenges posed by the political and economic context of Mexico.

Opening a National Dialogue Among Women Workers

In 1987 and subsequently in 1995, women from a variety of unions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) organized two Encuentros Nacionales de Mujeres Trabajdoras (National Meetings of Women Workers, or ENMT) with the goals of strengthening and broadening their dialogue about the condition of women in the Mexican economy and developing a national women's response to the problems they faced. The ENMTs provided union women and NGOs a space to collectively analyze the gendered nature of Mexican economic policy (e.g., structural adjustment and neoliberalism), public labour policies (e.g., pensions and labour law), union and workplace policies, women's needs as a result of these policies, and proposals for change.

The 1995 ENMT was the larger of the two meetings, bringing together 509 women from 89 unions and women's NGOs. One result of the meeting was the creation of a Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Trabajadoras (National Council of Women Workers, or CNMT). The CNMT represented a first significant effort to create a permanent, national women's labour organization that would develop a program of action supporting the rights of women workers and promote dialogue and solidarity among women workers in Mexico and abroad (CNMT; Román).

Another important outcome of the second ENMT, though it was not a stated objective, was the explicit acknowledgement that women needed to be actively engaged in the process of analyzing women's situation in the Mexican labour force, making proposals for changes to labour institutions and public policy, and mobilizing in support of these changes. The implication was that if public policies are to accurately reflect the interests and rights of groups within society, those groups need to be politically engaged. Accordingly, the women of the 1995 ENMT identified three important organizational strategies: raising awareness of the rights and situation of women workers (as the ENMTs began to do), challenging the patriarchal nature of unions, and becoming more involved in public policy discourse through civil society (CNMT).

Transforming Patriarchal Unions

Difficulty coordinating the CNMT meant that the organization was short-lived, and there was no subsequent ENMT. However, union women who attended the meeting continued to organize to support women workers. One important strategy was to try to transform unions into spaces that would respect the rights of women workers internally and promote them in public dialogue. The benefit of this, as one woman from the Sindicato Independencia de Aviación (Independent Aviation Union) commented, was that women could more easily effect change within their unions by accessing leadership positions (personal interview, March 24, 2003).

One of the groups that became engaged in the work of transforming unions was the Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas (Union Women's Network, or RMS). The RMS was formally established in 1997 with the goal of strengthening unions by training women to be active union leaders who can represent the interests of women workers and are dedicated to the struggle for women's rights (Gonzáles Nicolás). To achieve this, they began to conduct leadership-training programs for union women throughout Mexico. The RMS also trains its members to be facilitators of these courses. For some members of the RMS, the value of this organization was building solidarity among union women in order to promote change in a union environment with few women leaders and minimal attention to women's rights. As one founding member from the STRM noted,

> *…It is not the same for an isolated woman to go to talk to the secretary general of her union as it is for her to come with women from the electricians' union, the telephone workers' union, the petroleum workers' union, a bank union, and the health sector union, to talk about an issue that affects women. This is very powerful. So I think that when women unite on good terms for a certain objective, they achieve it, and they achieve it in a good way.* (personal interview, February 6, 2003)

In the past decade, the RMS has continued to conduct leadership training and have had some successes in bringing attention to the rights of women workers within unions. In particular, they have become recognized for their workshops on sexual harassment and were hired by the Instituto Nacional de Mujeres (National Women's Institute) to write and conduct a training course for women in Mexico's official union federations. They have also created a network of women, well placed

within various unions, governmental organizations, and other NGOs who can draw attention to the specific issues facing women workers in these different spaces.

Still, even the founding members of the RMS admit that the challenges women workers face are more than a single NGO can tackle. One founding member wondered if they had been able to improve women's leadership in unions: "I think they've become much more visible, the discourse is much more "out there." But actual women in [leadership] positions? I haven't done a count, but I don't think [they've increased]" (personal interview, May 1, 2007).

Another founding member agrees that operating in the union context has been a challenge, but positively emphasizes that the RMS has become regarded throughout Mexico for their expertise on the rights and needs of women workers and unionists:

> *An organization like ours cannot have a major impact in a society this big and with so many problems related to labour. However, we have become well-regarded. We are well-regarded with respect to union education, labour reform with a gendered perspective … and well-regarded by international donors, because we have done impeccable work.* (personal interview, May 8, 2007)

And so, the RMS continues its work—leadership training, awareness-raising, and analysis of the situation of women workers in Mexico, confident about the quality of the work they do, but aware that the number of challenges they face require a line of attack beyond a union focus.

Establishing a Voice in Government

Even if the RMS and other organizations have been able to raise greater awareness about the situation and rights of women workers, they have not had great success bringing a gendered perspective into debates about labour policy. This is partly due to the fact that since the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s, every Mexican president has pursued economic policies that have focused on capital investment over workers' rights. Partly, noted one congressional deputy from the Party of the Democratic Revolution, this is because Mexico's political parties are actually resistant to reforming the LFT (personal interview, May 14, 2007). And partly, this is because there is still only a nascent movement of women workers in civil society. One RMS member commented that although the roots of a movement of women workers were in place, to speak of a movement "implies a process of creating networks at the national level [and] of having a link with the state, which is more than there is today" (personal interview, May 14, 2007).

Recognition that working in civil society alone is insufficient to generate the kind of policy changes that will address the vulnerability and discrimination of women workers has led to a realization that union women must have a voice within government. Discussing the work of the RMS, one member commented, "…if women are in Congress, there will automatically be a result in the unions. It isn't the case that being in the union will have results in Congress" (personal interview, May 8, 2007).

In 2003, Rosario Ortiz, a founding member of the RMS from the STRM, was elected to the Mexican congress. She has used her time in office to bring a gendered perspective into debate about reform of state institutions (personal interview, May 14, 2007). In an effort to replicate Ortiz's success, in 2004-05, the Mexican office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation ran an 18-month political leadership program for 24 women who hold union leadership positions. The goal of the program was to give women the tools enabling them to run as candidates for public office. According to its coordinator the importance of the program was two-fold. First, it instilled confidence in the union women: "One of the big advances [from the program] is that union women consider themselves capable of achieving the roles that have historically been men's" (personal interview May 8, 2007). Second, she emphasized the importance of having working women's voices in the legislative/policy debate:

> *The national labour laws are not up-to-date with women's rights and the demands of half the population….We believe that it is very important that … progressive women and women committed to … the movement of women workers can arrive in the legislative space, can push for*

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reforms or labour laws that recognize the reality of the labour force. (personal interview May 8, 2007)

Five of the women who participated in the Foundation's program have gone on to higher positions in their unions or positions in various local and national government institutions. One participant who subsequently became a consultant with the National Women's Institute emphasized the importance of the program, noting that in this fairly conservative organization she was the lone woman with a real perspective on the challenges of working women (personal interview, May 17, 2007). Without her voice, there would be no working women's perspective on public policy. This new attention to gaining public decision-making positions reinforces the conclusion from the 1995 ENMT that public policy will not respond to the situation of women in the Mexican economy unless women are active agents in pushing the issue. However, whereas the ENMT focused on building a movement in civil society, union women are now realizing that a voice in civil society is insufficient for achieving change.

Conclusion

Structural adjustment led to more women working in more vulnerable jobs with a substantially weakened social safety net. But the crisis of structural adjustment also contributed to the emergence of an activist sector of union women dedicated to creating a public dialogue about the vulnerabilities and discrimination faced by women workers and advocating policies protecting women's right to seek employment and work free from discrimination.

There is still much to be done for Mexican women to achieve gender equity in the workplace. The Mexican economic context and political climate do not lend themselves to union/class based activism, and there continue to be varying degrees of resistance to demands for gender equity at all levels of Mexican society. However, it is clear from the evolution of union women's organizational strategies that there is an awareness of how these barriers must be overcome. Specifically, the evolution has shown that it is insufficient for women to work only at the level of civil society. Developing strong organizations within civil society is important for bringing important issues into national discourse, such as the RMS's focus on sexual harassment. But such activism within civil society must be complemented by having a seat at the table where public policy decisions are made.

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[1]In 1976, 26.9 percent of women were part of the economically active population (EAP). This increased to 31.5 percent by 1982 and to 37.4 percent by 1987 (García and de Oliveira 43).

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