

Mazahua Women in Mexico City

Mazahua women, members of an indigenous group from the state of Mexico and part of Michoacán, have gained recognition and identity and their own arts cooperative in Mexico City, where they have migrated over the last several decades. Their efforts to earn a decent living for themselves and their families, to form the cooperative *Flor de Mazahua*, and as such, to be independent of government and political groups, and to educate themselves, are all part of their struggle to express their pride and dignity as members of an indigenous group and as women, rejecting and protesting against discrimination and insults.

Rosa María Ortega, who has worked with the Mazahua women since 1985, and who is writing the memoirs of their struggle, relates their story. *Voices* presents this history, together with testimonies from *La Lucha del Pueblo Mazahua* (The Struggle of the Mazahua People), published recently by the Mazahua Center and the Mexican United Nations Association.

Rosa María Ortega



Photo by Mariana Yampolsky

The Mazahua migration to Mexico City is the result of hunger, poverty, unemployment, unjust distribution of land, soil erosion, injustices suffered by the Mazahua rural community at the hands of local bosses (caciques) who operate hand in glove with imposed authorities, the discrimination suffered as indigenous people... With no other alternative for survival, the Mazahuas have come in thousands to Mexico City in search of a better way of life, and for space and recognition that society— even in their place of origin —has denied them.

In the 1960's the problems of migration had a qualitative change: not only were men migrating, but women were now arriving in the city with their children. These women confronted a hostile atmosphere in the capital, where they dedicated their energies to selling fruits, nuts and seeds and other products on the streets.

Felisa Segundo Mondragón: "I came to the city aged 8, I spoke only Mazahua and my aunt helped me. I didn't know anything about the city - neither the language, nor the traffic lights, nor about the police who came by and threatened us and took away the lemons and peanuts I used to sell.

"After a short time on the streets I began working as a maid, I didn't know about electricity and telephones and doorbells, but I soon learned. My boss made me change my clothes, she said if I went to the shops dressed as a Mazahua (in a silk skirt and embroidered blouse), they wouldn't attend me. She told me I looked horrible dressed like an indian. Also, she changed my name because she didn't like Felisa.

"From that time, I became confused and anxious about speaking my own language. Because when I spoke Mazahua, I got treated badly. And so when my son was born, I didn't teach him Mazahua, I thought, if he speaks my language, he'll be treated badly too."

On the streets, the Mazahua women were victims of various acts of hostility and malice by the police, ranging from confiscation of their produce, beatings, even rape, and detentions in prison for 72 hours periods. These were young women, often mothers.

Juan Esquivel Avila, now grey-haired, respectfully addressed as *Tía Juanita* (Aunt) by her community:

"I worked selling on the streets for about seven years. During that time they put me in prison many times, they would take away whatever I was selling and they would put me in the prison *La Vaquita* for 72 hours. They used to bathe us with cold water at 5 o'clock in the morning. I think it was part of the punishment, so that we'd stop selling, but I always went back to work. What else could I do?"

This was an offensive situation, and women began to express their demands for respect for their right to work. Following talks with Mexico City authorities (DDF), the Mazahua Center was opened in 1972, with the aim of providing social protection and employment for this community of migrants. The Center was equipped with sewing machines, cloth, thread and so on, all that was needed for the production of embroidered blouses, table cloths and napkins, dolls and shawls. In the beginning, the DDF also provided teachers, who gave literacy classes, as well as two meals a day and a wage for their work. Within a short time, the Center became a center of exploitation disguised as a program of social assistance. The Center never accomplished its declared objectives, the women were not trained, nor were they paid a just wage for their work.

The Center had administration staff, employees of the DDF. Mazahua women were in charge of the services—cleaning, preparing meals and providing child care—and worked on the production of crafts. Their number grew during the 1970's, reaching up to some 800 women.

The Center functioned with a revolving fund of 50,000 pesos each week. This paid for the food, for cloth and thread, and maintenance costs. The finished products which left the Center each fortnight, were worth around 1 or 1.5 million pesos. The goods were sold in the Mazahua shop, which belonged to the DDF, but we didn't know where the money went to.

Agustina Mondragón Paulino: "I used to earn 3,000 pesos (one dollar) weekly. I used to cut the cloth and make dolls—I'd make 20 or 30 dolls every day, and I was paid seven pesos for each one. That was in the Center workshops; at night I'd take extra work home, I'd embroider until one in the morning, sleep a little, and get to the Center around 8 a.m. All together, I'd manage to make 3,000 pesos each week."

In spite of the low wages, the women stayed at the Mazahua Center because it was a place where they could speak their own language, dress in their traditional costumes and be with their own people. They could identify themselves as Mazahuas without people despising them or scorning them. That's why the women

Photo by Mariana Yampolsky





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stayed in the Center over those 15 years, sewing, embroidering pretty designs, ruining their eyesight and damaging their lungs, they embroidered their very hopes!

"That tablecloth I was telling you about, it measured 2.5 meters, took 15 days to a month to embroider. The embroiderers received 1,500 pesos; it was sold in the Mazahua shop for 35,000 or 45,000 pesos."

1985, the Watershed

In this year, the DDF transferred responsibility for the Mazahua Center to the Delegation of Venustiano Carranza (one of 16 political divisions of the city), and this delegation, ignoring the importance of the Center for its participants, announced that it would close down the Center, due to lack of funding, the poor physical conditions of the Center (it was, and still today, is located in the market *La Merced*). They invented a bunch of pretexts to make the women leave, obviously reasoning that they would accept this decision and obediently go away from the Center—as if they had various alternatives for survival.

The Mazahua women began to organize so as not to lose their place in the city and their employment. A period of several years of visits to government offices, to law courts, to newspaper offices, radio and television stations, was to follow. The women proposed that if the Delegation did not have money to pay them, they would form a cooperative and manage for themselves the production and sale of their goods. They asked the authorities for the physical space and for the equipment.

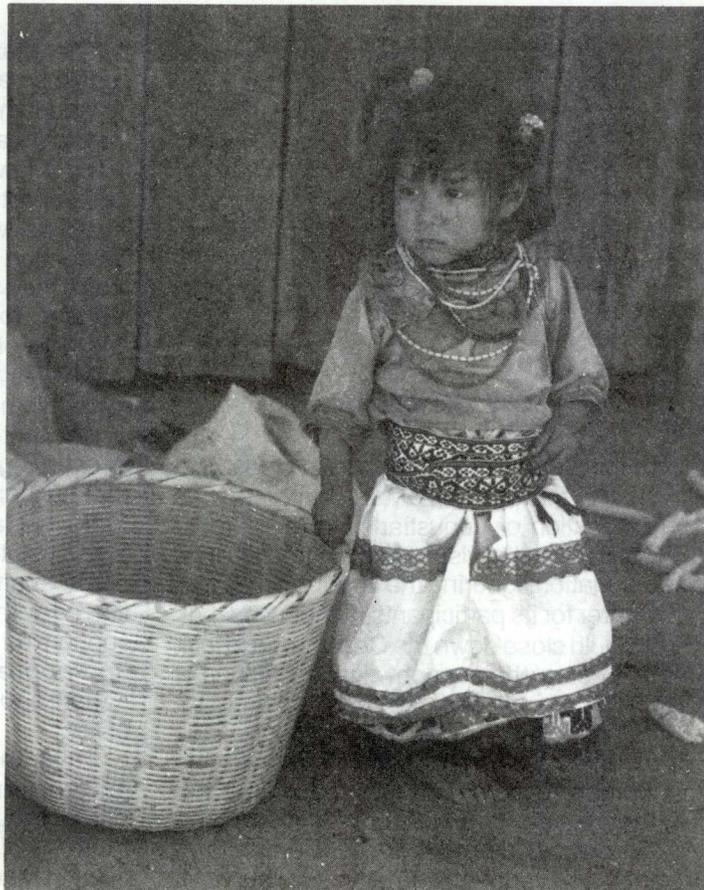
"We put up with government officials threatening and insulting us by day, and with husbands beating us at night."

"Five years later, if we are forty women in the Center, only ten of us are still with our husbands. But those men who have stayed with us, have learned a lot, they support us in our troubles and conflicts, and appreciate that we have all won—thanks to those efforts—a better quality of life."

Thus, they had to fight their battles in government offices and in their homes. The bureaucrats argued that the government could not give the women the sewing machines, because the machines



Photos by Mariana Yampolsky



Yampolsky Mariana

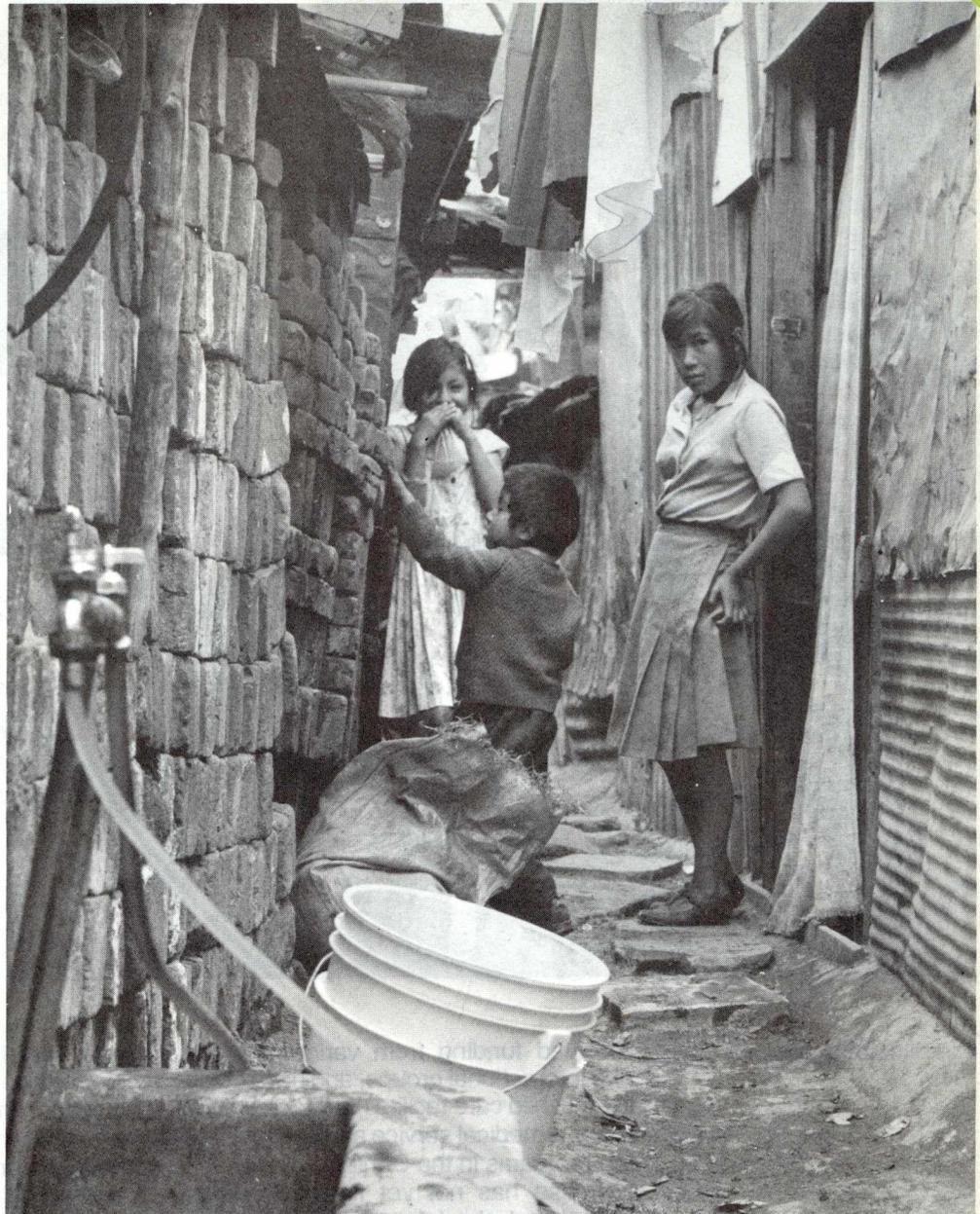


Photo by Mariana Yampolsky

"belonged to the nation". They refused to listen to the women's reasoning: "But we are part of the nation!"

Negotiations broke down, and 22 sewing machines were embargoed in 1985, along with raw materials and finished products valued at 5 million pesos at that time.

All was demagoguery, lies and humiliations. The women had no money and the authorities took away their working tools, merchandise and raw materials, but the women did not lose their spirit and their determination to be respected, listened to and recognized by the society as indigenous peoples, as human beings with capacities and limitations like any other. They were determined to win their struggle for better living conditions, for better working conditions, for their own cultural values.

The Mazahuas formed a legally constituted group (civil association) in 1987, and sued the Venustiano Carranza delegation for the embargoed sewing machines and materials. They won this case, but so far, say Felisa and Agustina, they have only received the finished products and cloth - which were all falling apart, due to moths and other aspects of poor storage conditions during the embargo. As for the sewing machines, they say, "they must be all rusty iron and rotted wood by now, after five years".

Since 1985, the Mazahua women in Mexico City have made advances in their efforts to maintain their Center by themselves. At first they went to sell food in certain schools, with that money they managed to buy cloth and thread to make and sell more handicrafts, gradually they have increased their assets. They have



Photo by Mariana Yampolsky

received funding from various national and international groups, and have established child care facilities, a kitchen/dining room, a medical service and various training programs in the Center.

Felisa has not yet finished primary school, but she has studied accounting and does the books for the Center. In the clinic, the women take courses to study herbal medicine, massage techniques and other healing methods. In 1990 they set up a workshop for metal crafts, where the older children are beginning to learn new skills. This workshop arose out of concern for the adolescents, "they needed something to do, we don't want them roaming the streets getting into trouble".

Felisa, Agustina and Rosa María agree that the Center has meant years of struggle, but their reward has been that they have learned a lot. Rosa María, coordinator of the group for five years, took a course organized for grass roots organizations on how to conduct a legal process on domestic disputes, about laws on domestic violence and divorce and so on. Later she was able to sue the father of her children for their food allowance. "It

was very hard, but it was a wonderful experience. I won the food money for my children! I'm very grateful for this training, we need more of this kind of thing. We have to transmit knowledge and increase our self help capacities."

The women have more confidence in themselves as Mazahuas and as women. "We don't deserve to be humiliated, to be called ignorant Indians." Among their objectives today, the women are working to re-establish their cultural values - thinking over what it means to teach the Mazahua language to their children or not - and to consolidate their own survival strategies. "We don't want to be in the city forever", says Felisa. "We want to go back to our villages and create workshops there, teaching what we've learned here." If this becomes a reality, future generations of Mazahuas will not have to migrate to the city, they will be able to make their living in their home towns.

"We're making new designs for our embroidery and blouses", says Agustina. And thanks to their experiences in the Mazahua Center, the women are making new designs for that fabric called life. ■



Photos by Mariana Yampolsky

