

# Reflections on a Revolution

## Notes on Mexican Women Then and Now<sup>1</sup>

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Women soldiers at Buenavista, Mexico City.

Araceli's knarled hands knead the corn dough in a smoke-filled lean-to next to her kitchen, as the 5 a.m. sunlight begins to squint through the slats. She will make about 48 pounds of tortillas like she does every day. By noon they'll be on the table in houses all over the 500-inhabitant town she has lived in her whole life, half-way between Mexico City and Toluca, the capital of the State of Mexico.

This is the twenty-first century: 100 years after the Mexican Revolution. So much has changed, but so much looks so similar. Araceli may well develop a serious lung condition from working over a wood fire in an enclosed space, like thousands of other women have for centuries in Mexico, but her daughter has a high-school education and a job in a library, definitely a step up after working as a cashier in a huge outlet clothing store along the Mexico City-Toluca highway. And

Araceli herself took up tortilla-making to earn her living after trying other ways: the last was renting videos and DVDs out of her front room.

Women's lives—their work, their family life, their educational opportunities, the health care they can expect, their social standing, and political participation—have changed strikingly over these hundred years. The country has clearly gone from being overwhelmingly rural to mainly urban;<sup>2</sup> average life expectancy rose from 34 to 75 years between 1930 and 2000; the conditions in which women do housework and care for children and the sick, still almost exclusively their responsibility, have changed enormously: the majority have running water, gas for cooking, indoor toilets, and homes with flooring.<sup>3</sup>

In 1910, women made up 14 percent of the work force, and by 2008, they were 38 percent, with most of that increase over the last 40 years. Almost 4 million women 15

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years or older (under 4 percent) are illiterate today, but 92 percent of girls between the ages of 6 and 14 attend school—not the best possible numbers, but still a huge change from a century ago.

And, by the end of the twentieth century, 95 percent of women of reproductive age knew about at least one type of contraceptive, and at least 78 percent could expect to give birth in a hospital or clinic, lowering maternal deaths considerably.

Today, women's participation in public life is incomparably greater than it was a century ago: women did not get the vote until 1953, but they are much more visible in public positions than 100 years ago, with 140 women deputies (28 percent of the total) in the present legislature. Mexico has had two more women candidates for president since human rights activist Rosario Ibarra de Piedra was the first woman to run in 1982. Election laws stipulate that no more than 70 percent of a party's candidates must be from a single gender—a round-about way of saying that at least 30 percent must be women.

On the other hand, women continue to be almost exclusively responsible for housework, 18 percent still cooking on wood fires and 13 percent trying to keep children healthy and house clean with dirt floors. They continue to earn 84 percent of what their male counterparts do and work for pay five hours more a week on average; and to support their families, they are swelling the ranks of the burgeoning informal sector. Despite a higher public profile, the recent case of eight women deputies who after being sworn in tried immediately to resign to leave their seats to male running mates showed that the 30-percent quota laws were only formally being adhered to. Plus, Mexico has the unfortunate privilege of having coined the term “femicide,” stemming originally from the cases of more than 300 women missing and/or murdered in the U.S. border city of Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s, a phenomenon since discovered to be a nationwide—and even international—trend of increasing violence against women just

because they are women. The deployment of the army nationwide in the “fight against drugs” has brought with it increased incidence of rape by military and police personnel;<sup>4</sup> and the growing influence of organized crime in the country has sparked increasing concerns about human trafficking, mainly of women and children.

These contradictory changes are the result of struggles by working people to improve their lives, both during and after the 1910-1917 Revolution, combined with the needs of capital itself to modernize the country and create better conditions for it to compete in today's world.

#### SO, WHAT DID WOMEN ACTUALLY DO DURING THE REVOLUTION?

The most significant, life-changing activities women carried out in the revolution at the outset were related to their families. Hundreds of thousands of women were uprooted from their homes, traveling with the armies of Zapata, Villa, and Carranza—initially people's, not regular armies. Under these radically different conditions, they continued to be responsible for the same kinds of jobs they had done in the home, with the exception of tilling the land: making tortillas, cooking whatever was at hand, washing clothes, and nursing and caring for injured soldiers. But these activities were no longer carried out inside four walls, essential as that was for family survival: now, they were essential for the survival of the armies; because they needed water for all this work, they often acted as scouts to decide where the armies should camp. All this put women in the middle of public life at its most raw. It was an unparalleled upheaval in the lives of a large part of the female population, changing not only experiences but horizons and expectations.

One of the Revolution's most famous *corridos* is about these women, called “Adelitas”:

Popular among the troops was Adelita,  
The woman the sergeant idolized,  
And besides being brave, she was pretty.  
So much so that even the Colonel himself respected her.

Some of them, of course, risked their lives as couriers or spies, or took up arms themselves. And, as with any mass movement, a few individual women rose through the ranks to be put in positions of command. Zapatista Colonel Rosa

Bobadilla and journalist and activist Juana Gutiérrez de Mendoza, who participated in drafting Zapata's Ayala Plan, are cases in point. In the North, Elena Arizmendi promoted the creation of the Neutral White Cross, organizing nurses and medical students as the Porfirio Díaz-dictatorship-linked Red Cross stood on the sidelines.

Both before and during the Revolution, women of the middle and upper classes, particularly, but also some working women, set up all-women's organizations to discuss, analyze, publicize, and fight for women's rights. From 1904 to 1907, *The Mexican Woman. Monthly Scientific-Literary Magazine to Promote the Evolution and Perfection of Mexican Women* was published, arguing for women's right to access to the professions in order to become better homemakers. Two textile workers, the sisters María del Carmen and Catalina Frias, set up the 300-strong Daughters of Anahuac on the outskirts of Mexico City in 1907 to defend the rights of women workers who sympathized with the Flores Magón brothers' Mexican Liberal Party. After Victoriano Huerta's February 1913 coup against the Madero government, María Arias Bernal, Inés Malvaez and Eulalia Guzmán formed the Women's Loyalty Club, to hold weekly vigils at the gravesite of the assassinated president. In time, these gatherings became massive and a symbol of resistance to the usurper's government. From 1915 to 1919, Hermila Galindo and her team published more than 200 issues of the weekly *The Modern Woman*, demanding women's right to vote and throwing its support to the Carrancistas.

And, in 1916, over a thousand participants attended two famous Feminist Congresses in Yucatán, promoted and financed by Carrancista General Salvador Alvarado, then governor of the territory, and organized by, among others, Hermila Galindo. Participants, mainly school teachers, focused their discussion on women's education and job training, but also delved into suffrage and sexual hygiene. The government's objective was to modernize and secularize society, though participants expressed many other aims.

#### BUT WHAT DID ALL THESE STRUGGLES ACHIEVE FOR WOMEN AS WOMEN?

In 1915, Zapatista authorities issued a family law eliminating illegitimacy, recognizing common law marriage and establishing a woman's right to divorce. The Carranza government instituted the right to divorce and remarriage in December

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1914. After the victory of the Carrancista forces, the 1917 Constitution established in general the right to work and have unions, the right to the land and the separation of Church and state, all important building blocks for future rights. More specifically, it stipulated equal rights to wages and to work for men and women, plus certain protections for women workers who were pregnant. The Family Relations Law passed the same year gave married women the right to sign contracts, participate in litigation, and equal rights to custody of their children as men; however, it also stipulated that adultery by the woman was always grounds for divorce, whereas in the case of men, there were a series of caveats.<sup>5</sup> The new law also compelled married women to have the husband's permission to work outside the home—a provision this writer had to adhere to as late as 1975. But neither the Constitution nor later legislation enfranchised women despite the fact that dedicated Carrancista and feminist Hermila Galindo proposed it to the Constituent Assembly. To the contrary, the first electoral law gave the vote exclusively to men.<sup>6</sup>

It was in the years following the Revolution proper that working people's fight for their rights bore other fruit that women shared in: greater access—not just the formal right—to education through literacy campaigns, carried out in mainly by women teachers in rural areas (1921-1922); making contraceptive advice available—Margaret Sanger's famous pamphlet was translated into Spanish—in Yucatán hospital clinics;<sup>7</sup> the right to divorce by mutual consent, and women's right to custody of the children, established in the 1928 Mexico City Civil Code after a prolonged campaign by feminists; the right for single women and widows who were breadwinners to be full members of the collectively farmed *ejidos* with the same formal right to the land as men (1927); and the right to maternity leave and to not have to perform dangerous jobs, established in the 1931 Federal Labor Law.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1930s, with a strong Communist Party presence, both rural and urban unions organized, spearheading the fight for decent working conditions, wages, and other rights. In

1935, women peasants and teachers organized massively in the United Front for Women's Rights (FUPDM) to demand their rights, including the vote. Finally, in 1938, Congress passed a law giving women the vote with the public approval of President Lázaro Cárdenas. But the law was never published in the *Official Gazette*, so it never went into effect. It was not until 1953, with the FUPDM, long dissolved into the ruling party, that the Institutional Revolutionary Party finally "gave" women the vote.

So, despite all the sacrifices, despite women's massive and specific participation in the revolutionary process and later struggles, before the state was completely consolidated by incorporating all the mass organizations into its structures, and despite certain measures to "modernize" the country with more or less positive consequences for women, what women gained from the Revolution was only partial recognition of their rights and demands. It should come as no surprise that women's organizations—along with unions, peasant and urban residents' organizations—were absorbed into the PRI apparatus, completely eliminating their autonomy and political punch.

#### HOW IS THIS RELEVANT TODAY?

The twenty-first century opened with the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) ousting the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from office after 70 years. Three years earlier, the center-left Party for the Democratic Revolution (PRD) had won the mayor's seat in Mexico City, where one-fifth of the population lives; and six years before, the Zapatistas had taken over a small but significant corner of southern Mexico. Against a backdrop of deepening PRI-PAN neoliberal policies—even as they began to be discredited internationally—the scene was ripe for social, economic and political polarization as all forces fought for the upper hand.

By 2006, soaring unemployment and growth of the informal sector of the economy, cutbacks in public spending, including education and health care, the implementation of U.S.-backed measures to open a swathe of gigantic public works in a corridor reaching all the way to Panama, growing use of police and the military to quell discontent throughout the country, and the government offensive targeting unions particularly, led to a situation ripe for explosion.

Major social movements emerged, almost all involving women like in the previous century. Indigenous women organized to create new kinds of municipal governments in

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the Zapatistas' "caracol" movement in Chiapas. Peasant women opposed the building of the huge La Perota dam in the state of Guerrero. Mazahua indigenous women defended their water supply from being channeled into Mexico City and destroying their way of life. Peasant women opposed President Fox's attempt to expropriate their land to expand the Mexico City Airport in San Salvador Atenco. Miners' wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters fought to get their men's bodies brought up from the bottom of the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila after a 2006 cave-in killed them. Thousands of them proudly called themselves "Adelitas" and took over the Senate building to prevent a law privatizing Mexico's oil refinery operation from being passed without even a debate. In Oaxaca, hundreds took over radio stations and broadcast for 21 days to end a media blackout of the 2006 movement in that state to oust the PRI strongman governor. And women workers and relatives went on hunger strike in 2010 to protest the firing of 44 000 electrical workers.

Repeatedly, women organize around general demands, very often in women-specific groups, sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes at the initiative of the male-led organizations. Inevitably, individual women come to the fore as natural leaders.

But the main dynamic is that the contradiction their activity creates both at home and in the struggle itself with their traditional roles can lead them to put forward some form of specific demands addressing their oppression. The central political problem posed is whether this will blossom into a full-fledged movement for women's rights. This depends on the overall movement's internal development—including how long it lasts—the degree to which the women's organizations are under the tutelage of the male leadership, the ways women's demands are posed within the general movement, and the kind of support and links that can be made with other women's organizations regionally or nationally.

The proof that women's massive participation and even self-organization in political or sectoral movements has not been enough to end discrimination and inequality is that these

movements were not equipped politically to respond to the PAN/PRI joint offensive against the right to choose launched in October 2008.

A month after the Mexico City PRD-controlled Representative Assembly voted in April 2007 to decriminalize abortion for women up to 12 weeks pregnant and provide the service in public hospitals for free, the PAN-appointed head of the National Human Rights Commission filed an appeal questioning the law's constitutionality. But in August, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the legislature. Undaunted, in October, the ruling PAN and the opposition PRI began a joint onslaught in state legislatures to establish the fetus's "right to life" in state Constitutions. By May 2010, they had managed this in 18 out of 31 states, plus legislative changes to penal and health codes in some states, with assenting votes by individual legislators from every single congressional party thrown in for good measure.

Feminist groups responded immediately locally, denouncing the measures and defending women jailed for having had an abortion, but only three states coordinated with each other. Eventually a public campaign was launched to oppose the offensive in September 2009, and in December, 39 organizations from 19 states launched a National Pact for Women's Life, Liberty, and Rights to demand the release of women prosecuted for having an abortion and the decriminalization of abortion nationwide, and to defend the secular state and the right to health.

Despite the feminist movement's relatively small size, local efforts combined with national pressure have had a positive effect: PRI President Beatriz Paredes had to publically retreat from her party's position; in a second round of voting in the Veracruz legislature, the PRI voted against its own constitutional reform; in a related matter, the Supreme Court ruled the use of the day-after pill constitutional in May 2010; and in April, PRD legislators formed their own network (including a few PRI adherents) to try to counter the measures and rein in some of their own party members who had voted for the state constitutional reforms. In September 2010, six women who, after miscarrying, had been sentenced to up to 35 years in prison for murder were freed in the PAN stronghold of Guanajuato. Though the war is far from won, at least a few skirmishes have been resolved favorably.

So, the experience of the Mexican Revolution is a cautionary tale for women today. Politically and socially, the kind of dynamics women experience in mass movements and the way that they respond to the contradictions that sharpen in

their lives because of them seem to lead to an initial awareness about the social—not merely individual—nature of their oppression, and to empower them as a group and as individuals. But the far-reaching nature of that oppression and the key role it plays in maintaining the status quo is such that more is needed to fight it.

It is not enough for women to participate in social movements and political activities; it is not enough for them to participate and organize *as women* in these activities; it is not even enough for women to put forward their specific demands in these movements. All of this is positive and necessary, but what is also needed is for women to have their own autonomous, cross-sectoral movement to put forward their own demands. And this is a lot easier said than done. ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is a greatly abridged version of an article published in the U.S. magazine *Against the Current* (September-October 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The little existing census data for 1910 shows that almost 70 percent of those economically active worked in agriculture and animal husbandry, while today, more than half are in the service sector, with one-quarter employed in industry or construction.

<sup>3</sup> In 1929, 45 percent of homes were still made of adobe and only 3 percent of brick or other solid materials; by 2000, 9.9 percent were made of adobe and 78.9 percent of solid materials. Sixty years ago, in 1950, only 17 percent of homes had running water either inside or outside the dwelling, compared to 88 percent in 2005. As late as 1960, 82.5 percent of homes still cooked on wood fires, while by 2000, this number had dropped to 18.1 percent. Only 20.9 percent of homes had bathrooms with toilets in 1960, compared to 86.6 percent in 2000; and as late as 1970, 41 percent of homes had dirt floors, a number that had dropped to 13.4 percent by 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The case of three indigenous Zapatista women raped by troops in 1994, the 2006 rape of 14 sex workers in the Castaños, Coahuila red light district by soldiers, the rape and sexual harassment by police of 26 women detained in a 2006 mass arrest in Atenco, State of Mexico, and the 2007 death of 73-year-old Ernestina Asencio Rosario, in Zongolica, Veracruz, after being gang raped by soldiers are merely the most publicized examples.

<sup>5</sup> For a woman to divorce her husband on the grounds of adultery, the act had to have taken place in the family home; the man had to have lived with his mistress; or the husband had to have mistreated physically or verbally or publicly insulted his wife.

<sup>6</sup> Despite this, local dynamics were often more progressive: in San Luis Potosí, women were given the vote for three years in local elections (1923-1926), and in Yucatán, several women were elected to local office in 1923 and 1924.

<sup>7</sup> This actually sparked a counter-measure in 1922 by newspaper *Excelsior*, which launched a campaign to make May 10 Mexico's Mother's Day, celebrated to this day.

<sup>8</sup> Although the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) was established in 1944, it was not until 1973 that the IMSS set up its first child care centers; at the same time, the Mexican government was also beginning a big push to lower the birth rate in accordance with McNamara's worldwide population control policies.