

Feminism in Mexico, an Underground Stream

Women from different classes have contributed to Mexico's feminist movement.

Mexican women share with their Latin American sisters a common history of poverty, political repression, economic crisis and the constant put-down of their attempts to develop and assert their cultural identities. This heritage has clearly had specific implications for Mexican women, whose oppression also comes from a combination of religious influences, cultural traditions, social values and stereotypes, and machismo.

Today Mexico has an egalitarian legislation which establishes legal equality between men and women, with some protective laws covering mothers and minors. Nonetheless, this is a mere formality which has had little effect upon the daily lives of most people. For example, formal education is beyond the reach for much of the general population, but even more so for women, whose illiteracy rate tends to be much higher than for men.

Statistics relating education and fertility are revealing. At the



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Feminism is well-received on campus

age of eleven, when few girls are menstruating, approximately 792 out of 1,000 females attend school; by the age of 12, some 700 attend; but at 13, when most girls have their period, only 502 out of 1,000 go to school. This trend continues throughout the years. By age 15 only 171 out of every 1,000 go to school, and 34 have already given birth to their first child. By age 19 only 32 young women are studying, while 234 are mothers of one or more children. It's obvious that in this society motherhood is still considered the most appropriate occupation for women. Additionally, the number of single mothers is very high. A recent study carried out in Mexico City revealed that 30% of the households were headed by women.

Many government programs have been aimed at childcare

times more women working than there were 50 years ago. The majority of women in the 50-60 age-bracket have never worked outside the home.

I could go on and on, but the point I want to arrive at is that, given these conditions and more, why has the feminist movement in Mexico remained so small, and why hasn't it been able to mobilize around this situation? Why is it that after 17 years of activity the movement is still barely visible in the Mexican political arena?

A correct understanding of the dynamics of the Mexican feminist movement must take into account the nation's peculiar political development. In a country without strong and independ-



Evangelina Corona, leader of the seamstresses' union, speaks at a rally commemorating the 1985 earthquake

and related services, but this continues to be one of the biggest health care problems in the country. On the other hand, nearly 3 million women have illegal abortions every year, and some 90,000 die as a result of the terrible conditions under which most of them are performed.

Working women face discrimination in terms of access to certain jobs and training, as well as in their wages. To this must be added the burden of the double work-day, often 100 or 120 hours a week, with its repercussions on women's health, personal relations, overall productivity and possible political participation. Female employment is basically limited to domestic services, clerical work, nursing and work in the garment and electronics industries, in addition to the more traditional trades of prostitution and street *vending*. Yet, in terms of numbers, domestic service is still the most important female occupation in Mexico, one out of five gainfully employed women is a maid.

Statistics compiled during the 1980 show that only 27.75% (6,141,270) of the total female population over 12 years of age (22,128,930), is economically active. Women make up only 27.8% of the labor force. Between 1930 and 1970, total employment in Mexico grew by 252%; the male labor force grew by 214% while the female force increased by 1034%, that is to say, by four times. This means that basically the same proportion of men work now as in the thirties, but there are four

ent political organizations, with few non-government controlled unions and with a very limited democratic tradition, the appearance of an autonomous feminist organization has been a feat in itself. It has taken a long, hard struggle for this to happen, and a small core of women has been basically responsible for the achievement.

However, I think that the overwhelmingly middle class composition of the movement is one of its biggest problems. In Mexico, differences between the middle and the working classes are very marked; even the middle class itself draws important distinctions between lower, middle and higher middle class. And the daily life of middle class Mexican women is very different from that of their North American or European counterparts. One of the mobilizing forces of the feminist movement in the United States and in Europe was the awakening of women to their domestic oppression. Thousands of housewives began questioning their roles in the family, the isolation and the burden of housework, etc. The factor that motivated them was their confrontation with the daily housework.

Middle class Mexican women, even lower-middle class and sometimes working class women, don't experience this oppression in the same way that housewives elsewhere do. For one thing, they can avoid the problem of housework and evade the internal tensions this brings into family life, especially

Photo by Rafael Bonilla

Women and Work in Mexico

According to the IX and X Population and Housing census, the economically active female population went from 20.6% in 1970 to 27.8% in 1980. The percentage distribution of women in the work force was heaviest in the tertiary sector (commerce, services and transportation), followed by concentration in manufacture, electricity and construction, and with female employment the lowest in the primary sector (1980 data, see Table).

The percentage of women employed in transformation industries went from 20.6% in 1970 to 26.3% in 1980, an average annual growth rate that was greater for women than for men. This would seem to sustain the idea that there is an ongoing substitution of male labor by female workers.

employment tends to concentrate in small and light industry, whereas large-scale industry still hires relatively few women. Thus, what we find is a type of employment whose main characteristics, among others, are unstable employment, technological backwardness and persistent financial woes.

On the other hand, export-oriented draw-back industry registered the highest levels of female employment. Work in the *maquiladoras* has helped many women escape unemployment, although not poor working conditions; wages paid in Mexico's draw-back factories are usually lower than those paid for equivalent work in other countries.

Jacinta Patricia González Rodríguez

Nonetheless, feminine em-

the confrontations between husbands and wives. These women have a kind of shock-absorber, a buffer, in the form of another woman who takes on the household load.

Mexican feminists are middle class, most of them are either university students or professionals. There are few secretaries or teachers, and you never find a factory worker or a maid in their ranks. Everyone has a maid, or at least a cleaning woman who comes some days a week.

Mexico, as foreign women say, is a paradise. You can have live-in help for as little as \$40 a month. Good salaries run up to \$100 a month in Mexico City; in the provinces wages are lower, and sometimes servants receive only room and board. In

ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION BY SECTOR AND SEX, 1980

Totals	E.A.P	Men	Women
All of Mexico	22,066,084	15,924,806	6,141,278
Economic Activity			
Agriculture	5,699,971	4,957,340	742,631
Mining	477,017	322,464	154,553
Manufacture	2,575,124	1,897,522	677,602
Electricity, Gas and Water	115,932	91,883	24,049
Wholesale and Retail Trade, Restaurants and Hotels	1,729,296	1,137,568	591,728
Construction	1,296,337	1,082,634	213,703
Banking, Insurance, Real Estate, etc.	405,754	308,998	96,756
Social and Personal Community Services	2,418,114	1,159,249	1,258,865
Insufficiently Specified Activities	6,552,037	4,284,704	2,267,333
Idle Workers	124,391	85,534	36,857

Data from the X General Population and Housing Census, 1980, as published in the *Resumen General Abreviado* in 1984 by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e informática.



A mother in the Puebla mountains; peasant women are the hardest-off

exchange for their meager wages, maids are expected to work 14-16 hours daily, with one free day a week, usually leaving their work done before going out. They accept miserable working conditions because they know that many others, even less fortunate than they are, will work for less. They are usually in a very weak position to bargain.

So, generally speaking, Mexican middle class women avoid the housework. This helps them avoid the sort of conflict middle class women in the U.S. and Europe have to confront, like

Photo by Rafael Bonilla

who minds the children if both husband and wife have a meeting to go to. Middle class Mexican women don't need the growth and development of the feminist movement in order to have certain demands covered, like for example having someone who cares for their children, childcare centers, etc.

Not needing an organized struggle to improve one's own living conditions has resulted in a very theoretical movement. This is revealed by the fact that being a feminist in Mexico is basically an intellectual position, with little effect on our daily lives. This characteristic also probably determines our incapacity—as a movement—to connect up with women from other social sectors. This trend has changed somewhat following the earthquake in Sept. 1985, but generally speaking, even



Photo by Rafael Bonilla

In the front line of feminist struggles, seamstresses at a demonstration

though some feminists are undeniably committed (especially Socialist and Christian feminists), the movement as a whole is far removed from the needs of most Mexican women.

Yet despite these limitations, what Mexican feminists have done is to place women's issues on the political agenda. Over the past years we have been struggling on two different levels, the ideological and the more specific day to day organizing and work. Given the reasons we've been discussing, we may have done more work on ideological aspects. Yet not only have we had to confront conservative forces, but also progressive and leftist ones as well.

Often ridiculed and characterized as sectarian, we've had to fight for the political recognition of our position, and in doing so, we have led other political forces to revise their concept of what is and what isn't political. In this way many organizations have started to discuss such would-be personal (i.e. trivial) questions as sexuality or housework. In turn, the discussion has highlighted the existence of power relations between the sexes, relations which permeate all social classes and cut across class lines.

What results has the struggle yielded? Answers vary according to the criteria we use. If we make a quantitative evaluation of our development, our gains appear to be meager: there are few feminist groups and some of them have fewer than a dozen members. But if we measure the movement's cultural, intellectual and political impact on society, the results are really wide reaching. ★

Marta Lamas