

# A Women's History Museum in Mexico

Patricia Galeana\*



Mar Hernández

Glenda Hecksher,  
*Integrated Coyolxahuqui*,  
86 x 54 x 19 cm  
(bronze on stone).



Patricia Pérez

Ángel Bolívar, *Women of Mexico* (detail), 1960 (oil on canvas).

**O**n March 8, 2011, International Women's Day, the rector of our university, Dr. José Narro Robles, inaugurated Mexico's first Women's Museum, the second in Latin America. Its objective is to ensure that women's history no longer be forgotten, that their contribution to the construction of our country be recognized, and women's human rights respected.

The first Women's Museum in the world was founded in 1981 in Berlin by Marianne Pitzen and a women's group called *Frauen formen ihre Stadt* (Women Form Their City). Today, there are 50 women's museum across the globe: 21 in Europe,<sup>1</sup> six in Asia,<sup>2</sup> five in Africa,<sup>3</sup> and two in Australia. In the Americas, the United States has 12; Argentina, one; and now Mexico has another.<sup>4</sup>

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The First International Congress of Women's Museums was held in Merano, Italy on June 11, 2008. It was presided over by 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, pioneer in the struggle for women's and children's human rights in Iran. The meeting's objective was to create the International Network of Women's Museums to make them more visible, promote their existence in all countries, and recover documentation about women's lives.

Conceived as an open book for the people, the Women's Museum was founded by the Mexican Federation of University Women and the UNAM.<sup>5</sup> It is located on a meaningful

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site for university life in Mexico City's historic center: the building housed the first university printing house.<sup>6</sup>

A visit to the permanent exhibition begins in the room dedicated to equity, which summarizes the museum's objective is to promote respect for women's human rights, a pressing need in Mexico, which ranks first for feminicides and gender violence among countries not at war: in 2010, 2 500 women were murdered.<sup>7</sup>

The journey through women's history in Mexico begins with a look at the condition of women in the country's original cultures. The Meso-American peoples conceived of the world divided into two equal parts that maintained equilibrium in the universe: the feminine and the masculine. For this reason, every masculine deity had a corresponding feminine deity. However, in practice, women had fewer rights than men, depending on the existing political system.

In the Mexica Empire, women's condition did not fit into that dual world view; rather, they occupied a secondary position. They did not participate in political life or in public religious rites, and they participated little in commerce. They occupied themselves with reproductive and domestic tasks, as well as making cloth and clothing. In the Mayan cities, by contrast, there were even cases of women rulers.<sup>8</sup>

Women's lives during the colonial period are presented through the houses where they were more or less confined: the family home, the house of God, shelters and correctional facilities, and brothels. Marianism, or the imitation of the Virgin Mary, was the model to follow for the 300 years of New Spain. For women, there was no middle ground: their conduct could only be



Guillermo Ceniceros, *Duality and Equity*, 80 x 100 cm, 1997 (acrylic on canvas).

that of self-sacrifice or that of sin. Their lives played out in the sphere of the private, in silence. Very few were able to break out and transcend this situation: Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz did it, but she suffered the consequences.<sup>9</sup>

Women participated actively in the construction of Mexico. In the struggle for independence, there were women leaders and "transgressors";<sup>10</sup> some became well known not only because of their support for the insurgency, but also for transgressing the boundaries of what women "should be." Thousands whose names have been lost not only accompanied and cared for the insurgents, feeding and nursing them, but also worked as spies and couriers. Some took up arms themselves, while others were the prize of war, raped, jailed, or executed to put down the insurgency.<sup>11</sup>

With independence, women's lives did not change a great deal until the victory of the Liberal Reform, when what survived of the old colonial regime was suppressed. Women's participation was needed to change structures, consolidate the national state, and reform society; and to participate, they had to be educated to be good citizens.



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Ivar Hernández

Clementina Díaz y de Ovando Room.

The victory of the Liberal Republic brought the establishment of free, mandatory, secular primary education and the creation of a secondary school for young ladies, the school of arts and trades for women, and the normal school for women teachers. This gave women access to an education similar to the one men received, not only religious training, but the opportunity to enter the university. All this constituted a profound cultural revolution.<sup>12</sup>

During the Porfirian dictatorship, Liberalism stopped being revolutionary; a conservative regime was imposed and freedoms were suppressed. The concentration of both power and wealth increased inequality until it sparked a revolutionary upheaval. The social insurrection demanded not only political, but also social rights. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women had begun to organize political clubs against the dictatorship. The participation of normal-school-trained women teachers was fundamental to this: they created awareness about injustices, organized anti-reelection clubs, and participated in every revolutionary process, in all the groups, collaborated in writing plans for the nation, and disseminated their ideas through periodicals.<sup>13</sup> They also bore arms and commanded troops, with some promoted to the rank of colonel.



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"From the Feminist Revolution to the Present" Room.

An essential part of the social revolution was the group of *soldaderas* who accompanied all the revolutionary armies, feeding and nursing the troops, serving as spies, curriers, and as soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Women made the Revolution, but the revolution did not do women justice: it did not recognize them as citizens. An exceptional, small group of women from the state of Zacatecas had applied for citizenship in 1824, but they never received an answer. Almost a century later, the Revolution pushed them to participate politically.

When the 1917 Constitution did not recognize women's political rights, their struggle for suffrage continued. In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, many women's associations emerged.<sup>15</sup> A few states gave women the right to vote and run for office in local elections from 1923 to 1925,<sup>16</sup> but the few local deputies elected had to resign from their deputyships when the governors who had supported them left office.



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Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez (1773-1829).



Esther González painted Sister Inés de la Cruz especially for the museum.

It was in 1947 when President Miguel Alemán got women the vote in municipal elections. However, women's suffrage in federal elections was not given until the administration of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines in 1953, after the United Nations recommended to countries lagging behind that had not yet recognized women's citizenship that they do so as a condition for there being democratic regimes.

The trip through Mexican history with a gender focus concludes in the "From the Feminist Revolution to Present Day" Room. Here, we find information modules by decade, from the 1950s to 2010.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1950s, something decisive for women worldwide was invented. Thanks to the contribution of Mexican chemist Luis Ernesto Miramontes, who invented the contraceptive pill in October 1951, women were able to exercise their reproductive rights with greater freedom.<sup>18</sup> In the 1960s, the 1968 movement marked the lives of university women, who not only demanded the liberalization of the political system, but their sexual freedom as well. In the 1970s, the struggle to legalize abortion began.<sup>19</sup> Also in the 1970s, Article 4 of the Constitution was amended to establish the equality of men

and women before the law, an important step.<sup>20</sup> During the 1980s, for the first time a woman was appointed to head a ministry, the first woman ever ran for the presidency, and the first opposition senator was elected.<sup>21</sup> In June 1996, Mexico ratified the Belém do Pará Convention. As a result, in July the Law to Lend Assistance and Prevent Family Violence in Mexico City's Federal District was passed, and a year later, family violence and rape inside marriage were classified as crimes under federal law. These actions were also the product of UN recommendations, and were an initial platform for Mexican women to have access to a life free of violence.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Supreme Court handed down a decision declaring constitutio-

#### Museo de la Mujer (Women's Museum)

17 Calle República de Bolivia, Col. Centro, México, D. F.  
Open to the public: Tuesday to Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.;  
Saturday and Sunday: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission Free  
For information, scheduling guided tours, and activities,  
call Federación Mexicana de Universitarias  
at (55) 5622-2637/38; [www.femumex.org](http://www.femumex.org).

**Soldaderas were essential to the social revolution; they accompanied all the revolutionary armies, feeding and nursing the troops, serving as spies, curriers, and soldiers.**

salaries are between 13 and 33 percent lower than men's. The feminicides in Ciudad Juárez and other cities, as well as the fact that 47 out of every 100 women suffer from some kind of violence, are concrete evidence of the grave situation Mexican women are facing.

All of this shows how much work we have before us in defending women's human rights in Mexico. An appropriate legal framework is required, as is a formal and informal educational system that can generate a new culture, a mentality that will overcome all kinds of discrimination



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*House of Prostitution* (video), duration, 1 minute, 17 seconds..

nal the law that stipulated that a person who had an abortion when the fetus has congenital defects (that is a eugenic abortion) should not be punished.<sup>22</sup> Later, the Federal District Legislative Assembly approved the decriminalization of abortion before the end of the twelfth week of pregnancy in Mexico City, guaranteeing pre- and post-abortion counseling.<sup>23</sup>

However, the Catholic Church condemned these laws and began a national campaign with support from authorities and political parties. As a result, by 2010, 18 states had established "right to life from the moment of conception" clauses in their legislation.<sup>24</sup> This has constituted a step backward in Mexican women's reproductive rights and their criminalization. Many women have been jailed and sentenced to up to 35 years in prison, something unprecedented in Mexican penal history.

Today women are under-represented in the three branches of government on a federal, state, and local level. The constitutional precept of equal pay for equal work is not followed. Both in lower-level jobs and managerial positions, women's



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Glenda Hecksher, *Guadalupe Tonantzin*, 103 x 86 x 40 cm (bronze on stone).



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Sebastián, *Dress*, 168 x 162 x 33 cm, 400 kilograms, 1985 (acrylic enamel on iron).

**A people goes as far as its education allows it. Although illiteracy is higher among women because of their lack of access to education, when they are able to exercise this right, very often they get better grades.**

and prevent violence. For that reason, in the framework of the 1995 UN call for the Decade for Human Rights Education, I proposed creating the Women's Museum in Mexico.<sup>25</sup> The idea resulted from the impact the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem had on me; I thought that the discrimination women have suffered down through history should be shown publicly to promote the reaction against it.

We are aware that a people goes as far as its education allows it. Although illiteracy is higher among women be-



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"From Teachers to Revolutionaries" Room.

cause of their lack of access to education, when they are able to exercise this right, very often they get better grades. In the UNAM, women are the largest percentage of recipients of Gabino Barreda Medals.

The common denominator among students of both genders with the highest grade-point averages is that they have mothers with more schooling. This is why the best investment a government can make is in the education of women, since they are the ones who reproduce cultural models. The best way to measure how civilized a people is is the condition of its female population; and in the Women's Museum, we want to contribute to overcoming our deficits. **MM**



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Raúl Anguiano, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1947 (oil on canvas).  
Federation of University Women (Femu) Collection.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Four in Germany; three in Holland; two each in Austria, France, and Italy; and one each in Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Rumania, Spain, Sweden, and the Ukraine.
- <sup>2</sup> Vietnam has two; and China, India, Japan, and Korea all have a women's museum.
- <sup>3</sup> In the Ivory Coast, Gambia, Mali, Senegal, and the Sudan.
- <sup>4</sup> Of all these museums, 22 focus on women's history, seven on art, six on collections, and five on ethnography and folklore. Seven are virtual museums, and the others are site museums.
- <sup>5</sup> The Federation of University Women (Femu) is a national organization of academics affiliated to the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), the world's first university women's organization, founded in 1919 to promote pacifism. Since then, it has become a consulting body to the United Nations.
- <sup>6</sup> The building is located at 17 República de Bolivia Street. The university printing house was founded in 1937 to ensure that university publications would be of the best quality at the lowest cost, to reach the largest possible readership. This is where the first issues of *Revista de la Universidad de México* (University of Mexico Magazine), *Gaceta* (The Gazette), and all the university's didactic materials and publicity were first printed. Outstanding among the first books printed there were *Historia del pensamiento filosófico* (History of Philosophical Thought), by José Vasconcelos, *La universidad y la inquietud de nuestro tiempo* (The University and the Concerns of Our Time), by Luis Chico Goerne, and *Tratado elemental de biología* (Elementary Treatise on Biology), by Isaac Ochoterena.

- <sup>7</sup> Chamber of Deputies Special Commission on Femicide.
- <sup>8</sup> In the room dedicated to this topic, the visitor can see the difference between the myth and the real lives of Meso-American women through illustrations, original pieces from these cultures, a contemporary sculpture of Coyolxahuqui by Glenda Hecksher, electronic informational displays, audiovisuals, and three-dimensional recreations.
- <sup>9</sup> The "Marianism in New Spain" room has a seventeenth-century articulated virgin, and a painting of Sister Juana, done especially for the room by Esther González.
- <sup>10</sup> Josefa Ortiz, Leona Vicario, Mariana Rodríguez del Toro, and Gertrudis Bocanegra; or María Ignacia Rodríguez de Velasco y Osorio Barba, known as "La Güera Rodríguez" (Blondie Rodríguez).
- <sup>11</sup> In the room dedicated to "Women Insurgents," we find photo-sculptures of the most outstanding heroines and lithographs depicting the activities of the women of the time.
- <sup>12</sup> The museum's Freedom and Education Room is framed, quite literally, by a reproduction of the door to the university and boasts photos of the first women who graduated from it. Margarita Chorné y Salazar was the first woman in Latin America to be awarded a degree, in dentistry. Matilde Montoya studied medicine in university classrooms.
- <sup>13</sup> Dolores Jiménez y Muro wrote the Tacubaya Plan and the prologue to the Ayala Plan; Juana Belén participated in writing the Ayala Plan, and published *Vesper*, while Hermila Galindo published *Mujer moderna* (Modern Woman).
- <sup>14</sup> Their photographs are on view in the "From Teachers to Revolutionaries" Room, where visitors can also listen to revolutionary *corrido* songs.
- <sup>15</sup> The United Front for Women's Rights brought together about 800 groups from around the country, with a total membership of almost 50 000, to fight for citizenship and the right to vote.
- <sup>16</sup> Yucatán, San Luis Potosí, and Chiapas.
- <sup>17</sup> In addition to the national and international historical context, it underlines Mexican women's political and economic participation, and the current state of their health and education and with regard to violence.
- <sup>18</sup> Made with the compound called norethisterone, the Mexican Academy of Sciences classified the invention as the most important Mexican contribution to world science in the twentieth century; in 2009, its discoverer was awarded recognition as the most outstanding graduate of all time from the UNAM School of Chemistry.
- <sup>19</sup> The Coalition of Feminist Women and the National Front for the Fight for Women's Liberation and Rights (FNALIDM) were founded in the mid- and late 1970s.
- <sup>20</sup> February 3, 1973.
- <sup>21</sup> Minister of Tourism Rosa Luz Alegría; Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, first woman presidential candidate; and Ifigenia Martínez, first woman opposition senator.
- <sup>22</sup> January 29, 2002.
- <sup>23</sup> April 24, 2007. See Patricia Galeana, "Impacto social de la penalización del aborto," Lourdes Enríquez and Claudia de Anda, eds., *Despenalización del aborto en la ciudad de México* (Mexico City: PUEG, UNAM, 2008), pp. 55-58.
- <sup>24</sup> Grupo de Información en Reproducción Elegida (GIRE), "Leyes sobre aborto en México, 2008-2010," December 2010, <http://www.gire.org.mx/contenido.php?informacion=70>.
- <sup>25</sup> The museum's documentation center is named after Clementina Díaz y de Ovando, the lifetime president of the Mexican Federation of University Women and the first woman to head a research institute in Mexico. In addition to the art work already mentioned, sculptor Sebastián and painter Guillermo Ceniceros did works especially for the museum. Also on display is the splendid oil painting by Ángel Boliver, *Women of Mexico*, the symbol of our museum, as well as work by other outstanding artists: Federico Silva, Raúl Anguiano, Pablo O'Higgins, Laura Elenes, Namiko Prado, and different young artists. In addition, all manner of cultural activities, courses, workshops, lectures, book launches, and documentary screenings are held there, as are sessions of a gender film club, and literary and musical evenings.