

## MOVEMENT



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# The 1968 Student Movement And Gender Equality

*...the true heroines of the student movement: those anonymous women whose names aren't well known, who go unrecognized. But some of them gave their lives. If we have gained democratic freedoms, it's due to them.*

ANA IGNACIA AVENDAÑO  
(Leader of the School of Law, 1968)

## Introduction

Among the issues not taken much into account when scholars think about Mexico's 1968 student movement is gender equality. One central idea in these pages is that the student mobilizations of that year paved the way for many other expressions of democratic freedoms. This happened in the public's awareness, in the sphere of local

and national political life, and in social relations. Thus, after the painful events of that year, in the last third of the twentieth century, concerns about the inequality between men and women began to unfold in a growing sector of Mexican society. This growing consciousness has taken place gradually and not always explicitly; and in its origins, it was circumscribed to small groups of people in intellectual, artistic, and student milieus. However, with time, it expanded to broader sectors of society.

It is true that the issue of equality was not among the main demands of the student movement, led by the National Strike Council (CNH). What is more, the vast majority of CNH members were men. Similarly, the issue did not come up in the assemblies in the dozens of schools that mobilized in the UNAM, the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), the Normal Teachers School, or the University of Chapingo. Neither was it present at the mass demonstrations that wended their way through downtown Mexico City between July and October, or in the banners, leaflets, or posters, the proclamations, or the discourse of the infinite number of brigades that spread out through

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the capital of Mexico in those months. Even so, the mobilizations of 1968 awakened concerns that, as we shall see here, fostered the quest for gender equality.

## Democracy and Gender Equality

One general starting point for this article is that, the more democratic a society, the more gender equality is affirmed. From here, it follows that if the 1968 movement fostered democratic demands, even though it did not explicitly achieve greater equality between men and women, inevitably it would bring with it a more egalitarian society in this sense also. This is borne out by what happened in the years afterward. This process unfolded despite the fact that the Mexican political system continued to be authoritarian and repressive in the 1970s and the decades following. In this order of ideas, after the student movement in Mexico, democratic spaces opened up with greater freedom of expression and organization. Even if only in a relative way, they tended to encourage greater participation by women in the different fields of cultural, artistic, and academic life, and, to a certain extent, also in politics.

Accordingly, greater consciousness of equality became perceptible as a series of day-to-day relationships and practices began to take on strength that emerged from a society with greater margins of democracy and civic participation. Channels for women's participation also gradually broadened out, even increasingly at the level of private business executives and important government posts. For the first time, a few women became governors or ministers of state. In addition, during the following decade, the number of women deputies and senators grew, as did their participation in important positions in the judiciary.

## Women and the '68 Movement

As mentioned above, the members of the movement's collective leadership, the CNH, were majority male. However, we have the record of 15 women participants; the best known were the representatives of the UNAM School of Law, Ana Ignacia (La Nacha) Rodríguez Márquez and María Esther (La Tita) Rodríguez, outstanding activists in brigades and in their school assemblies.<sup>1</sup> Ignacia Rodríguez

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was detained several times and ended up in the Santa Martha Acatitla prison, together with María Esther Rodríguez, for more than two years. They were not the only women students in prison for having participated in the movement. In an interview Ignacia Rodríguez gave to the *El Universal* daily, she said that there had been two other *compañeras* from the Law School imprisoned with them: Amada Velasco and Adela Salazar de Castillejos.<sup>2</sup>

A record exists of 13 others who were members of the CNH: Dana Aerenlund, Patricia Best, Adriana Corona, Oralia García, Mirthokleia González, Mareta Gutiérrez, Consuelo Hernández, Ianira León, Eugenia Mesta, Erlinda Sánchez, Marta Servín, Eugenia Valero, and Rosalba Zúñiga.<sup>3</sup> This list of women leaders of the movement may not be complete, but at least it shows that they undoubtedly were part of that student leadership body, showing that women not only participated as rank and file members, but in the leadership.

Like them, hundreds of women students participated outstandingly in the debates in the assemblies at their campuses and fortunately did not go to prison. Significantly, many had an impact on the decisions made about strategies and enthusiastically participated in the hundreds of informational brigades that spread out all over the city every day. Even though they did not necessarily formulate feminist proposals in the discussions, the simple fact that they participated opened up spaces for women's cause. Among the many 1968 activists, we should remember María Antonieta Rascón, at that time a student in the UNAM National School of Political Sciences, who had a singular progressive influence on the movement, using forceful arguments. Years later, she would be an outstanding figure in Mexico's feminist movement and the author of several pioneering works, such as *La mujer y la lucha social en Mexico* (Women and Social Struggle in Mexico), a historical review of women's struggles in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the day-to-day activities at the schools on strike, the women worked with singular enthusiasm and camaraderie on writing and printing leaflets and making

banners and placards. Some were particularly skilled at these tasks and even led their male colleagues. In these concrete tasks was where women students participated significantly as the equals of their male *compañeros*. Although this was not a profound change in gender roles, unquestionably, for many, it was the first time they put themselves in a situation of being the equals of the males.

They also occasionally spoke at the rallies that punctuated the huge marches, proving their ability as orators and their solid thinking and analysis, thus winning their *compañeros*' recognition. Some also stood out in the constant discussions that took place in the Committees for Struggle in the striking schools. Frequently, they were no longer *soldaderas*,<sup>5</sup> cooking for the strikers and then washing the dishes. It became very common for these tasks to be carried out jointly by men and women. This meant that not only did the women gain ground in terms of equality, but also that the male students became aware that the subordination of their *compañeras* could not continue.

### The Weighty Heritage of Centuries

Another consequence of the '68 experience is linked, though in a limited, indirect way, with the break with old, outdated customs deeply rooted in Mexican society for centuries. People began to question the role of women as subordinate to male hegemony. Very particularly, an offensive began against the very entrenched values of that very primitive *machismo* prevalent in many sectors of Mexican society. These changes could be felt above all in Mexico's academic, intellectual, and artistic communities after '68.

Better conditions for women in Mexico have come about above all in the urban middle classes and are circumscribed to rather small sectors of society; among them are women professionals, those with university educations, literati, artists, company executives, public officials, or politicians. But even in these sectors, the gains cannot be said to apply to all women.

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### Institutions of Higher Learning And Gender Equality

It is probably in university life where we can most clearly see that advance in equality between men and women. One example is the changes in enrollment in the country's two main institutions of higher learning: the UNAM and the IPN, whose students were fundamental protagonists of the '68 movement. In the 18 years of this century, the proportion of women enrolled at the UNAM has remained at about 51 percent. In the current school year, 2017-2018, of a total UNAM population of 349 515 in all levels (high school on), 177 903 (50.9 percent) are women.<sup>6</sup> In the same school year, IPN enrollment was 177 983 students, 64 964 (36.5 percent) of whom were female and 113 019 (63.5 percent) were male.<sup>7</sup> While female enrollment at the Polytechnic Institute does not match that of the UNAM, it is also true that the number of women students at the IPN has increased considerably since 1968, when they only made up 10 percent of the total.

We could say that the changes in the gender composition of enrollment in Mexico's institutions of higher learning would have taken place even if there had not been a '68 movement, but what we can also venture to say is that it is very probable that the movement did contribute to speeding this process up. What is more, I think that the movement can be credited with the relatively swift transformation of gender relations in the university sphere. Added to this is the increase in research and teaching staff, where the number of women academic personnel has continued to rise.

The solidity of equality and how fast it unfolds depends on the extent to which real democracy is practiced and democratic values advance in Mexican society. The existence in the UNAM of the Center for Gender Research and Studies, as well as the diverse measures and programs designed to combat gender harassment and violence are important factors in fostering that transformation. Other institutions of higher education have also implemented programs and measures similar to those of the UNAM. The IPN created the Polytechnic Gender Perspective Unit, which has implemented different actions for years. Outstanding among them is the June 18, 2010 decision to offer male workers paternity leave when their children are born or they adopt. The aim of this measure is "to promote the father's emotional, responsible ties, not only

when their sons and daughters are born, but throughout their lives.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Situation Today

Half a century after the '68 student movement, we can say that the process of gender equality is far from complete. Many advances in women's participation in the sciences, the arts, the world of work, in politics, and above all in university academia undoubtedly exist. However, there is still a long road ahead for Mexican society to be more just with regard to real conditions of equality between men women and men.

It would be truly foolhardy to say that the '68 student movement fostered an important change in the situation of Mexican women, since many forms of inequality still exist. In a country in which the values of a patriarchal, sexist culture are deeply rooted and which can be seen in all social sectors, much is left to be done. A reality in which harassment, rape, and femicide are daily events,<sup>9</sup> and where women are paid less than men for the same work shows just how much is still pending in the sphere of gender equality.

Neither can we ignore that domestic violence is taking place every day in innumerable homes, with the result that women victims frequently require hospitalization. The judicial system, which is not characterized by its moral irreproachability or its efficiency in administering justice, contributes to maintaining this situation; in addition, impunity is rampant and the ratio of complaints made to incidents of violence for which no complaint is made remains very low. Even so, although limited to small sectors of society, the achievements are still important, above all in decreasing prejudices and slowing stubborn misogyny. Plus, legislation does exist—although it is not always followed to the letter—that offers at least a certain degree of legal security that did not exist 50 years ago.

## Prospects for the Future

It is difficult to break down deeply-rooted old beliefs that have existed and been reproduced for millennia. We cannot ignore that, as Barbara Burris wrote, all of us, men and women, have grown up in institutions that have created

inhuman attitudes in us,<sup>10</sup> reactive attitudes in the face of true gender equality. What is certain is that these prejudices are not emerging only now: they have always been there on the surface. This means that the idea that male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of exploitation takes on new depth of meaning.<sup>11</sup> And it is perpetuated in a society in which the corrupt justice system and crime prevention apparatus do not usually fulfill their functions, making them the main cause of impunity. But it is also reproduced due to prejudices and daily practices that have prevailed since time immemorial.

Although in our country perhaps not very many men and women see gender equity as an essential aim, it is true that their numbers seem to be growing. The fact that institutions of higher learning foster programs aimed at gender equity leads me to think that, at least indirectly, the experience of '68 has had an impact. Above all, in the coming years, these institutions and the people who are part of them will be key for advancing equal relations between men and women in Mexico. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 “Historias del 68: la Nacha Rodríguez, un privilegio seguir viva,” *Proceso* (Mexico City), October 2, 2008, <https://www.proceso.com.mx>, accessed July 24, 2018.
- 2 Teresa Moreno and Pedro Villa y Caña, “Voy a morir sin saber qué pasó en el 68,” interview with Ignacia Ramírez, *El Universal* (Mexico City), “Justicia y Sociedad” section, March 12, 2018.
- 3 Ángeles Márquez Gileta, video, <https://regeneración.mx<Sociedad>EquidadyGénero>, accessed July 22, 2018.
- 4 María Antonieta Rascón, *La mujer y la lucha social en México*, Women's International Resource Exchange (WIREF), 1989.
- 5 The *soldaderas* were women who accompanied the revolutionary armies—and occasionally took part in the battles—during the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution, famous for their bravery and constancy. [Translator's Note.]
- 6 Series Estadísticas UNAM 2000-2018, [www.estadistica.unam.mx/sideu.php](http://www.estadistica.unam.mx/sideu.php), Table 3, Población escolar, accessed July 24, 2018.
- 7 IPN estadística institucional, [www.gestiopnestrategica.ipn.mx/Evaluación/Paginas/Estadisticas.aspx](http://www.gestiopnestrategica.ipn.mx/Evaluación/Paginas/Estadisticas.aspx), Hoja estadística institucional, several tables, accessed July 24, 2018.
- 8 “El IPN a la vanguardia en equidad de género,” *noticias.universia.net.mx*, accessed July 20, 2018.
- 9 In the first half of 2018, an average of two feminicides were committed every day, according to the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Safety System, making a total of 387 at this writing. See Fabiola Martínez, “Se perpetraron 387 feminicidios en el primer semestre,” *La Jornada* (Mexico City), July 27, 2018, p. 3.
- 10 Barbara Burris, “What Is Women's Liberation,” *It Ain't Me Babe* vol. 1, no. 3, February 1970 (Berkeley), 1970, quoted in Marta Acevedo, *Ni diosa ni mártir...: la mujer de hoy en lucha por su liberación* (Mexico City: Extemporáneos, 1971), p. 102.
- 11 Ellen Willis, “Consumerism and Women,” quoted in Marta Acevedo, *Ni diosa ni mártir*, op. cit., 1971, p. 109.