



*The Right to Nutritious Food* (hand embroidered with silk thread).

William H. Beezley\*

## Indigenous Women Embroider Their Rights in the Shadow of '68<sup>1</sup>

**T**his essay reflects on the repercussions the 1968 movement had on Mexican daily life for the next 50 years. One word is key in this effort of retrospective understanding five decades on: Tlatelolco. With regard to Tlatelolco's political consequences, we can look at the efforts made all this time to democratize Mexico's

political system, above all the mechanisms for electing government officials, as well as in the proliferation of programs and protest and struggle activities against repression through culture in film, music, or literature. Most people agree that electoral democracy now exists, although of course the significance of the word "democracy" goes way beyond voting.

One important aspect of democracy in the country is the recognition of women's rights, the first of which emanate from the 1917 Constitution and its multiple amendments. Outstanding among them is women's right to vote, won in 1953.

In 1968, women students at the UNAM and other universities and women in other spheres of life played im-

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Photos courtesy of Semillas Fund.

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**In Coyomeapan, indigenous women formed a collective to embroider 27 pieces to inform the other women in their community about their political, human, and civil rights.**

portant roles despite the prejudices and resistance of some men. There are many examples, as Elena Poniatowska points out in her book *Masacre en México* (Massacre in Mexico). They were actors in the struggle against repression and the defense of their own rights. However, today, many Mexican women, particularly those of indigenous origin, do not know their rights and, as a result, do not exercise them.

This is the context for my research about the women embroiderers of the Sierra Negra, specifically from the town of Coyomeapan in the state of Puebla. In that Nahuatl-speaking region, several indigenous women formed a collective to embroider 27 pieces of silk and wool cloth to inform the other women in their community about their political, human, and civil rights. The result of their work

was the exhibition “Embroidering My Rights.” The project was supported by the National Human Rights Commission of Mexico and the non-governmental Mexican Society for Women’s Rights (Fondo Semillas, or “Seeds Fund”).

Each of the 27 pieces of cloth measured 48 x 24 inches and was worked on by a member of the collective, taking a fundamental women’s right as her theme. Among them are the right to vote; the right to democracy; to equality; to justice; to food; to freedom of movement; to be elected to office; to peace; to access to education; to a life free of violence; to a healthy environment; to health; to participate in the benefits of science and technology; to a nationality; to freedom of religion; to freedom of association; to freedom of expression; to preserve traditional usage and customs; to life; and to decent housing. All the rights displayed on the pieces of cloth are included in the Mexican Constitution.

The rights represented in this embroidery refer to community traditions. For example, to indicate that women have the right to express their opinions, two of the pieces, about the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of religion, include balloons to indicate speech, a very common symbol in the codices painted before the Spaniards arrived to Mexico. These pieces were first exhibited in the community itself, and later at the National Museum of Folk Cultures in Coyoacán, Mexico City, and at other venues in Puebla. For example, they were displayed at the headquarters of the Comprehensive Family Development System (DIF) in Tehuacán, particularly the piece about the right to a life free of violence.

In addition to the embroidery from Coyomeapan, women in other places have embroidered their rights and reflected their lives on cloth. Their embroidery is not only a vehicle for artistic expression, but is also conceived of as a form of social struggle with the aim of informing people, just as the '68 student striker information brigades did. At the same time, it plays a role as a product of the women’s labor that can bring in money for their families.

For example, in the community of indigenous women in Xochistlahuaca, Guerrero, the axiom seems to be that women weave and embroider; they weave and embroider everywhere;



*The Right to Vote, Susana Ábrego Pacheco (hand embroidered with yarn).*



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*The Right to Education and Culture.*  
(hand embroidered with yarn).

they weave and embroider all the time; eight hours a day on average. A person can live on Mex\$100 a day in Xochistlahuaca. The blouses that these Amuzga women take a week to make are sold on Sundays for anywhere between Mex\$120 and Mex\$200. This will feed a family for only a day or two, and that is if they are lucky. This income is only viable if they sell to a private party. However, most of what they make is sold to an intermediary who then resells them in markets outside the communities. They purchase lots of about 50 pieces and set the price; as a result, the indigenous producers have to lower the price of their labor considerably.

In the mestizo town of San Francisco Tanivet, Oaxaca, we have a special case: there, the embroidery focuses on local inhabitants' concerns. Among these are their problems involving corn production, their children's education, their disappearing traditions, and family members' migration to the United States.

In San Francisco Tanivet, they have created many other embroidery pieces as a result of a government educational program in support of women in the community, introduced by Marietta Bernstorff, a teacher from the city of Oaxaca.

Other groups of women make duvets to express the violation of their right to life. For example, one shows the victims of Ayotzinapa, with the names of all the young disappeared students. Others deal with the issue of mi-

grants who have died attempting to cross the border with the United States.

As a result of the considerable support that women embroiderers have received, in September 2018, two exhibitions of textiles of opened, expressing the interests of women from Mexico and other Latin American countries. The exhibit "Transitional Justice and Art-Textile" opened at the Anáhuac University, and "Footprints: Memory, Stitches, and Steps" opened at the National Museum of Cultures. Similarly, different groups from Mexico City, Chiapas, Michoacán, and elsewhere exhibited embroidery and textiles showing what women think about their families, communities, and rights.

The embroidered pieces represent these women's voices, since this is a way that they can defend and express their rights, traditions, and ways of life, all in the shadow of '68. **MM**

## Notes

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