The Involvement of Women in Mexican Politics and Economics

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Honors Senior Thesis
December 1999
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Introduction

During the summer of 1999, I traveled to Cuernavaca, Mexico to attend school at a Mexican University. Spending two months in Mexico, I had the opportunity to learn about the culture, history and lifestyle of the country. What interested me most was the involvement of women. Because Mexico is such a male-dominated society, the role of women is much different than in the United States. Although the role of women is different, they are in no way “behind” the U.S. in progress or mentality. They are merely on a different path to a different goal.

This paper is an attempt to describe the past, present and future involvement of women in Mexican politics and economics. It is not the entire story, but only events and occurrences that I see as being important. I hope that the paper will open the eyes of those, who are similar to myself prior to studying this topic, and have misconceptions about women in developing nations.
The Journey Begins: 1910-1940

Women in Mexico have a unique history of involvement in economics and politics. Though women traditionally participated nominally in these areas, the Mexican Revolution came as an awakening to women and opened the door for active involvement. Traditional roles of Mexican women changed with the widening of gender roles that occurred during the Revolution. In the aftermath of war women, confident in the progress made during the Revolution, began to organize politically and began the fight for equal rights, recognition and suffrage.

Mexico has long been a country where male dominance and female subordination command society. Machismo, strong male dominance, and hembrismo, extreme female submission, have their roots in the Aztec culture and the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The Spanish colonial experience was greatly oppressive to native Mexican women and the disparity between the sexes that already existed was increased by differences in caste and race (Macias 3). Social class differences have also been a problem since the time of the first Spanish colonizers. The Spanish persecuted indigenous people and those of mixed descent. The native Indians soon became the poorest group as a whole.

Even with the presence of machismo and tension between social classes, Mexican women have found ways to be central and active within society. In early Mexican civilizations, women were a vital part of the economy, participated actively in religion and played the crucial role of running the household (Macias 4). Female protest among the Aztecs was not uncommon and during colonial times, several women, including the famous poet Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, denounced male domination through their writings (Macias 4).

In the years preceding the Mexican Revolution, several small feminist organizations began an attempt to combat the many problems facing women at the time. Among their greatest concerns were lack of education for women, and the high number of prostitutes. From 1875 to 1910, under the rule of Porfirio Diaz, several schools for women were opened. By the end of the Porfrian era, thousands of middle-class women worked outside the home as primary schoolteachers and 1,785 women worked for the government (Macias 12). In the early 1900s women finally began to organize in mass, after the founding of a feminist newspaper, La Mujer Mexicana. Middle class and working women were the main followers of the movement.
In 1910, due to popular dissatisfaction rooted in the lower class and peasant population, the Porfiriato come to an end with the onset of Revolution. Women played a significant role in the destructive civil war. The war widened gender roles and women actively participated as nurses, propagandists, and even soldiers.

The Revolution was a time of great suffering for most Mexicans. The lack of sufficient food led many women to jobs outside the home. Young single women were likely to join the Revolution along with women whose husbands were already fighting. Soldaderas, female soldiers, most often resulted when a woman followed her man when he left home to join the fighting. If he died, the soldadera would become another man’s women, according to John Reed in his book *Insurgent Mexico* (Macias 41). The soldaderas did not normally bear arms or participate in the actual fighting, though some women did actively join in combat. If a woman proved herself in battle, then she could be made an officer and a leader of men (Macias 42).

The different revolutionary leaders had different attitudes towards women. Pancho Villa controlled parts of Northern Mexico. Carmen Ramos Escandon writes that Villa had to tolerate the presence of female soldiers, or his men would refuse to fight (Rodriguez 90). Villa relied on women to care for the wounded. Beatriz Gonzalez Ortega was one of the most celebrated nurses of the Revolution (Macias 39).

Emiliano Zapata was in control of a very poor area in Southern Mexico, where the soldiers depended upon peasant women for food (Rodriguez 91). During the Revolution, rural women became the farmers, as men left home to fight. The Zapatista army also had many women among the troops including several officers (Macias 43). One woman, Coronela Maria de la Luz Espinosa Barrera served as a Zapatista from 1910-1920. She rose from a soldadera to the rank of colonel in the Zapata’s army (Macias 42). She wore male clothing and proved herself as capable as a man on the battlefield. After the Revolution, La Coronela found it difficult to conform to the accepted role of a woman, instead she continued to smoke, drink and gamble long after the war was over (Macias 43).

Venustiano Carranza was the most liberal in his treatment of women. According to Escandon, “By recognizing pensions and ex-combatant rights for many women, Carranza sanctioned the participation of women in the Revolution” (Rodriguez 91). Carranza employed women in several jobs relating to the Revolution. Hermilia Galindo, the author of several feminist papers and the feminist journal Mujer Moderna, was employed by Carranza as a
propagandist (Macias 33). Carranza sought the support of woman and peasants mainly because he was loosing his support to Pancho Villa and Zapata. Galindo urged women to support Carranza through speeches and articles in her journal Mujer Moderna (Macias 34).

In the central state of Puebla, the revolutionary Francisco Madero was slightly more conservative in his treatment of women. Madero did not voluntarily allow women in his militia, but on several occasions, women helped out. Carmen Serdan, the sister of one of Madero’s supporters, obtained money and arms for the rebellion (Ross 123). Women helped defend Madero on more than one occasion. The sister, mother, and wife of a supporter, helped defend the house where Madero (Ross 124). Sara Perez, Madero’s wife, defended him and stood by him politically but took no active part in the revolution.

Women played vital roles in the Revolution. On the warfront they kept the soldiers fed and in good spirits. At home they kept the people of Mexico fed and cared for. Women protested and played an active role in opposing many aspects of the Revolution. Toward the end of the war, women were beginning to become more and more active in the political arena. The Revolution acted as a catalyst for the women’s movement in Mexico.

Several events that occurred during, yet not directly part of the Revolution are important to mention. Some modest reforms were produced during this period. In 1914, a decree announced by the Carranza government, authorized divorce and remarriage (Jaquette 200). The 1917 Law of Family Relations gave women the right to receive alimony, to own property, to take part in legal suits, and to have the same rights of men in cases of child custody (Jaquette 200).

The first congress dedicated to women’s issues was also held during this period. The First Feminist Congress in Mexico was held in Merida in 1916. The congress considered issues such as public schools, secular education, the need for sex education, and the political participation of women. Most of those attending were upper class elite women, who had some education. According to Carmen Ramos Escandon, the participants of the congress were divided on the issue of participation:

The feminists argued that women were the moral and intellectual equals of men and should participate as full citizens. The antifeminists contended that women were different from men and should never participate in public life, and the moderates suggested that women were still no psychologically ready to participate politically and that political rights should be reserved for men until women could be adequately prepared to exercise these rights. (Jaquette 200)
It is important to note, that at this time enfranchisement was a sought only by small numbers of radical feminists. At the 1917 constitutional convention meeting in Queretaro, Hermila Galindo presented demands of suffrage in front of an all-male assembly. Escandon states that “in her arguments, Galindo invoked the liberal concept of equality of individual rights before the law, she contented that as active members of society and taxpayers, women would have full political rights, especially suffrage” (Jaquette 210). Despite the valid argument Galindo presented, the congress only briefly discusses the issue and the majority was strongly against it. The 1917 Constitution did not deny women’s suffrage, but the 1918 National Election Law did, limiting voting rights to males 18 or over if married, 21 if not (Jaquette 201). Candidates for office were required to be “qualified electors” (Jaquette 201).

During the 1920s, despite the setbacks of the new Constitution, women became more involved in economic and political aspects of the nation. The continually increasing number of women in the labor force led to increased optimism for the future. Women were easily finding jobs as teachers, in women’s organizations and in newly created government agencies (Jaquette 201). Women’s organizations were fast growing, as women excitedly organized to fight for women’s rights. These feminist organizations drew support mainly from educated middle class women, schoolteachers, professionals, and office workers. Escandon notes that many of these organizations were tied to labor unions or the Communist party (Jaquette 201). Some influential groups during this time were the Mexican Feminist Council, and the Mexican Sections of the Pan American League of Women (Jaquette 202).

During the 1920s, several Mexican states heard the demands for suffrage and granted women the right to vote. Chiapas became the first state to enact complete equality of political rights for women when in 1925 it allowed women to vote in state and local elections (Jaquette 202). By the end of the 1920s the political parties began to take notice of the women’s movement. Women’s suffrage became part of the agenda of the political parties (Rodriguez 92). In 1929, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (today the PAN) included in its statement of principals the need for women to become active in civic life (Rodriguez 92). The Partido Nacional Antireeleccionista included women’s suffrage in its political platform (Rodriguez 93). The political parties received most of their support from upper-middle class and the elite of
Calling for suffrage and pressuring the political parties was action reserved for the wealthy, not the average woman.

In the 1930s women’s organizations gained strength by expanding beyond urban middle class to women of all economic classes and lifestyles. The most important development for the women’s movement at this time was the emergence of a new women’s organization: the Frente Unico pro Derechos de la Mujer (the unified front for women’s rights, FUPDM). A movement closer to the people, the FUPDM concentrated on practical measures to improve the daily life of women (Rodriguez 95). The group advocated lower taxes, lower electricity rates, and lower rent, for women who sold at local markets (Rodriguez 95).

The FUPDM was instrumental in gaining support of lower-class women. Grassroots organizations were established in rural communities to invoke broad feminist mobilization. According to Escandon, the FUDPM relied heavily on the president at the time, Lazaro Cardenas to aid the cause of women’s suffrage, and Cardenas saw opportunity to amass the support of a large number of women (Jaquette 203).

In spite of the unified mass organization of women, and support of the President, when proposals to amend Constitution Article 34 were brought forth, failure was eminent. The changes would have made women eligible for all rights of citizenship including suffrage. The amendment was approved by the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, and ratified by all 28 states in 1939 (Jaquette 204).

In order for the amendment to take hold, Congress had to formally declare that the amendment had been ratified and was in force. The FUDPM staged mass demonstrations during 1939 and 1940, and President Cardenas pleaded with legislators, yet nothing was done (Jaquette 204). According to Escandon, the only explanation is that legislators feared the masses of enfranchised women voters would voted against the government’s reforms and support the conservative opposition in the 1940 presidential election (Jaquette 204). Another explanation is that the male controlled government was simply not ready to face women voters, perhaps due to the longstanding influence of social machismo. Whatever the case, the defeat of their unifying issue proved too great to overcome, and in succeeding years the women’s movement faded away almost entirely.

For the women of Mexico, the early part of the century was a time of enthusiasm about the future. Women were willing to work towards goals of equality, suffrage and a better
tomorrow. The Revolution changed the perception of gender roles and empowered women to action. Though not all of the goals were met, the era is characterized by advances, particularly in the organization of women into groups and action coalitions. By the end of the 1930s Mexican women had set the stage for the future.
A Period of Inactivity: 1940-1968

While the Revolution brought enthusiasm and mobilization, the next era was a time of inactivity as women’s organizations sank in defeat. The political climate changed with the 1940 election of President Manuel Avila Camacho, and the election marked a turning point in Mexican politics. Camacho, a moderate, lessened the tension between church and state that had been at its peak during the revolution. Women in this era won only one major battle: suffrage, which was granted almost fifty years after the fight began. Women fared better in economics during this time; growth in industry and World War Two enabled more women to enter the workforce.

Women’s organizations suffered from the disorganization that occurred during the period. With the election of Avila Camacho, the most influential women’s group of the last three decades, FUDPM, lost its assertiveness and political visibility (Rodriguez 99). The women’s organizations of this era focus mainly on non-political issues. Social programs became the new cause, specifically issues such as maternity leaves, production cooperatives for working women, reduced taxes and rents, and legislation for domestic servants (Rodriguez 99).

Despite the lack of mobilization, women achieved many small advances. In 1947, women earned the right to vote and hold office in municipal elections. President Miguel Aleman appointed women to high positions (Jaquette 205). The next president, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, had promised the women’s group Alianza de Mujeres Mexicanas (Mexican Women’s Alliance) that if elected he would help grant woman suffrage (Jaquette 205). After his election, the president of the Alianza, Amalia Castillo Ledon presented him a petition with half a million signatures (Jaquette 205). Cortines succeeded in changing the electoral law and the constitution in 1953, giving women the same rights as men (Jaquette 205).

In July of 1954, women used their newly acquired status to elect the first female to Mexican Congress. Baja California Norte had just become a state and held elections for governor and representatives to the legislature. The local Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) nominated a woman, also a lawyer, Sonora Licenciada Aurora Jimenez de Palacios. She became so popular that the rival party allowed her to run unopposed (Morton 85). Jimenez de Palacios became the first woman deputy to congress. When officially seated by the chamber, she gave a speech about herself, Morton summarizes the
speech in his book: “she spoke of herself as a modest married woman who had to practice law to help maintain her family and insisted that she would conduct herself in this manner” (86).

In the 1955 election, four women were elected to the national Congress, although in the election, women’s voting patterns proved nearly equivalent to men’s (Jaquette 205). The number of voters in the 1958 presidential election nearly doubled, as women arrived in mass to exercise their newly awarded right.

Another important accomplishment of this era is that an increased number of women acquired jobs outside the home. The massive foreign investment of the 1940s led to industrialization and urbanization, which opened new opportunities for women in the labor force (Jaquette 204). The middle class grew as the economy expanded. Women found most of their jobs in production, although these were the worst paying jobs (Pablos 106). Post-war Mexico proved an even better time for women, as a new economic scheme allowed more women to become part of the workforce.

The new class of women, the urban, middle-sector-working women became the primary members of women’s organizations during WWII. When Mexico joined the allied forces, previously organized women’s groups rushed “in defense of democracy” (Miller 115). The Alianza Nacional Feminina was more than just a ladies aid society. The membership brought women together to discuss important issues. Francis Miller states in her book that; “the older women had invoked the ideals of independence to call for liberty and equality for women as well as men; the young women believed that the ideas of democracy should apply equally to both sexes” (115).

Although the gains of this era were small, they gave women hope. The hard work of the previous era finally began to pay off. Women achieved the right to vote, and people became accustomed to women playing a role in politics. World War II gave rise to new jobs and women’s societies. Elite and middle class women found a place in public roles, in what would be the beginning of strong political activism.
The women of Mexico again began to organize in the 1970s, after almost thirty years of inactivity. In 1968, when hundreds of students were killed during a protest, the women of Mexico knew it was time to act, and began organizing to combat social problems. At the same time, New Feminism began to take hold among the more educated women. As the movements continued into the eighties, an economic crisis plagued the nation. Women’s groups began to cooperate and focus on efforts to find employment for women and provide services to impoverished women and children. The destructive 1985 earthquake, instead of devastating women became a unifying force of action. Women in this era focused on social issues and the bettering of society.

The 1968 massacre of student protestors proved to be a turning point in the mobilization of women. Throughout the year, the momentum of the student movement continued to build. On October 2, 1968 the students held a large rally in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas at the center of a housing development, Tlatelolco, in Mexico City (Miller 5). By late afternoon six thousand people had gathered to rally against the slanted priorities of the Mexican government. At 6:10 p.m., ten thousand troops entered the square and opened fire. Hundreds died, yet the government refused to recognize the deaths. In fear of the government, the church would not hold services for those killed, nor would the newspapers run obituaries. In the weeks following the massacre, the mothers of those slain, began to fight back, in what would become the first of many “Mothers’ movements.”

Jean Franco writes “the Mothers’ movements involve transforming mothering and transferring it from the private to the public sphere” (Miller 8). For most women, motherhood is central to life and identity. For lower class women, mothering is the most important duty. Kathleen Logan describes why poor women become involved in social issues: “The key to poor women’s motivation to mobilize, lies in their self-definition as mothers and their commitment to fulfilling the responsibilities attendant in the social practices of motherhood” (152). The conditions under which many poor families live, prevent women from carrying out the duties and responsibilities of motherhood.

During the 1970s, Mexican women began to organize as social activists, seeking to achieve small, practical goals. These social movements occurred in both rural and urban areas,
when women were able to incorporate activism into their everyday tasks (Rodriguez 116). The women involved came from a different social class than before, they were lower class and poor women. They focused on issues such as cleaning up urban neighborhoods, ensuring that people had clean water and making sure that their families and friends had enough to eat. In the cities of Monterrey and Guadalajara, poor women established organizations to combat chronic water shortages that occurred in outlying low-income areas (Logan 151). The women staged protests again and again, until their voices were heard and the city fixed the problem.

The second form of women’s mobilization that occurred during this time was called New Feminism. This kind of feminism was more intellectual, and was made up of young professionals, students and middle class-women (Jaquette 206). The movement questioned women’s roles in society, and was concerned with the inequalities between women and men in everyday life (Jaquette 206). Many new women’s groups formed during the early 1970s. The women of Mexico joined with the world in celebrating feminism and planning for the advancements of women. 1975 was declared International Woman’s Year by the United Nations. The UN World Conference on Women convened in Mexico City, in June of July of that year. The participants included 133 UN member states, 23 specialized agencies of the UN, 10 intergovernmental organizations, eight liberation movements, and 114 non-governmental organizations (Nijeholt, et al. 1998). At the conference, governments were forced to examine for the first time, the position of women in their societies (Nijeholt, et al. 1998). The delegations from most countries debated the key principals of equality between men and women. At the Women’s Tribune, an alternative conference for NGOs, women met and discussed development programs and actions. The conference was a valuable learning experience for women, as they shared contrasting views and experiences.

In 1976, still invigorated from the occurrences of the previous year, six of the major Mexican women’s groups unified, in order to focus their efforts on specific issues (Nelson and Chowdhury 451). The new coalition was called the Coalicion de Mujeres Feministas (Coalition of Feminist Women). The Coalition focused on issues of abortion, rape, and the defense of battered women. It dominated feminist organizations until 1979, when the Frente Nacional de Lucha por la Liberacion y los Derechos de las Mujeres, (National Front in the Struggle for Women’s Liberation and Rights) was formed by leftist women and some former members of the Coalition (Nelson and Chowdhury 452). The Frente Nacional eventually caused the fall apart of
the Coalition. By the early 1980s none of the coalitions remained intact. New Feminism had become fragmented and ineffective, mostly due to lack of support from the majority: uneducated women.

Yet some of the women’s organizations that started during the 1970s did not die out. Some of these groups realized that a broader base of support was needed; it was imperative to have the lower class women on their side. The groups that sought the support of all women triumphed in the end, by surviving and entering another decade. These groups recognized a need to inform women at all social levels of the exploitation of women as workers, the oppression of women in the private sphere, and the need to better social and economical situations for all (Jaquette 207).

Gaining the support of lower class women would not be easy. The women’s group Mujeres in Accion Solidaria (MAS, Women for Solidarity Action) became involved with textile workers in their effort to build relationships with lower-class working women (Jaquette 206). At first their efforts were unsuccessful because the textile workers were more concerned with labor-union issues than with organizing as women (Jaquette 206). These types of problems were common in the attempt to establish alliances with the lower class.

During the late 1970s, the women’s movement began to become more successful in building cross-class alliances. The women’s organizations began to cooperate with social movements. Women of all classes had long been social activists in their own realm. The idea was to focus on small goals that were more social in nature, rather than broad and often symbolic objectives. Politically, the groups pushed for women’s factions within the major political parties. Feminist groups appeared in the PRI and the Mexican Communist Parties (Jaquette 207). Many labor unions also began to incorporate separate women’s alliances.

The economic crisis of 1976, which lasted into the early 1980s, led to many urban popular movements. High rural to urban migration, along with insufficient government and private investment in housing and public services led to an urban crisis (Rodriguez 118). There were problems in the sewage systems, lack of clean water, poor transportation, shortages of housing and few schools and health care for the new outlying neighborhoods (Rodriguez 119). The worst problem was the lack of housing; people would move to the cities from rural areas and build shacks out of cardboard and scraps of tin. With the help of student leaders, the people of these new neighborhoods began to form neighborhood coalitions (Rodriguez 119). Women
became the most active members of the coalitions, because housing and domestic life has long been the realm of women (Rodriguez 121). These coalitions became known as urban popular movements, many of which exist still today.

The economic problems continued to worsen in Mexico. The debt crisis that surfaced in 1982 forced Mexico to adopt structural adjustment policies in order to get International Monetary Fund (IMF) and US government loans. The Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) devalued the Mexican currency, forced drastic cuts in government spending on social programs, such as services and education, forced Mexico into restructuring production and to lower labor costs (Friedman et al. 13). The real results of the SAPs were that people worked harder for lower wages and the cost of living increased.

The SAPs resulted in the need for more women to get jobs outside the home. The high rate of male unemployment, coupled with the reduction of jobs in industry, and the growth of service-oriented jobs, forced women into the workplace. Employers often sought to hire women because they could pay them lower wages (Lamas, 119). Male unemployment made the majority of women responsible for family survival. The number of female-headed households, in which women alone carried out the economic tasks, also increased (Lamas, 119). The implementation of SAPs caused the feminization of poverty in Mexico. According to Maria Lamas, the situation described above led to serious social and family problems (119). The feminization of poverty decreased the number of women who were able to participate in the women's movement. The nature of the movement shifted to a focus on immediate gains and sharply declined in its activity.

The earthquake of 1985 proved yet another turning point in the journey of Mexican women. Years of feminist retreat came to an end with the mobilization of the women's movement following the devastating earthquake. In the wake of destruction, the elitist feminist groups, grass roots organizations and NGOs realized the immediate needs of Mexican women, and sprung into action (Lamas 120). Numerous civic and social organizations formed and focused on bettering the lives of women through substantive action. The groups maintained independence from official political organizations (Lamas 120). The new configuration of social movements, popular demonstrations, and mobilization symbolized a new relationship between citizens and the state (Lamas 120). The earthquake crisis led to a strengthening of civil society and the problems of the people became public and political.
In the years that followed the earthquake, women’s organizations, including unions, became increasingly active. Women of all social classes became involved, from middle-class feminists to rural women to female industrial workers (Lamas 120). By the end of the 1980s, women had again gained the advantage of strength and organization.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Mexican women learned to organize successfully in the wake of destruction and loss. After the 1968 massacre at the Plaza de los Tres Culturas, women came together and peacefully demanded justice. The mother’s movements proved that poor women could prevail even in situations of hopelessness. The feminists succeeded in winning small battles, although they lost support during the 1980s. The debt crisis and the 1985 earthquake, though destructive, only served to increase the mobilization and involvement of women. By the end of the era, women looked back with pride at their many accomplishments, and looked toward the future with hope and optimism.
Mexico in the 1990s and Beyond

Today, the women of Mexico are optimistic about their future in politics and economics. Women are assuming an emergent role in these areas and hope to become more active in the future. In the past decade, women have gained notable ground. Progress and change characterize the 1990s. By the end of the 1980s, Mexican women were organizing for social goals and material gains. While during the 1970s and 1980s women’s groups actively opposed the state, by 1990 the Mexican government was becoming more open and supportive. A fundamental change in the 1990s is the increased readiness of a number of women’s organizations to negotiate with the state.

Women were instrumental actors in one of the first major events of the 1990s, the January 1, 1994 Chiapas uprising. Most of the fighting ended when the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Mexican Army, called a truce on January 12, but troops continued to occupy most of the state, surrounding and cutting off many villages and farms (La Botz, 157). The peasants of Chiapas were afraid to leave their homes, in fear that the army would accuse them of supporting the Zapatistas. Because of the military occupation, many of these villages were cut off from food and medical service. Most Mexicans were sympathetic to the plight of the Indians of Chiapas, but were hesitant to become involved, due to the nature of the crisis.

But a group of women in Mexico City decided that they must act and attempt to break the military blockade. The women, who came from all walks of life, including housewives, professionals, union and working women, even the urban poor, collected food, medicine, and money from their neighbors (La Botz, 158). They then put together a small caravan of cars and made the long journey to Chiapas. The Mexican Army stopped the women at blockaded checkpoints, but the women argued and insisted that they be let through. Finally, after days of travel and negotiation, the women made it to Chiapas and distributed the much needed food and medicine (La Botz, 158).

According to author Dan La Botz, “Mexican feminism and the mobilization of women in the 1990s shaped and been shaped by the Chiapas Rebellion and by civil society’s struggle for political reform (158). This can be verified by the high level of organizing before, during, and after the rebellion. In 1994, the Chiapas Women’s Convention convened with women from more than 25 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which included peasant and Indian women. The women discussed the need to end violence against women, especially rape, and they
demanded demilitarization of the state of Chiapas (La Botz 159). At this same time, women’s
groups all over Mexico refocused their work to support the women of Chiapas, and many new
NGOs also formed as a result. The Rosario Castellanos Group was formed with a goal to fight
for peace and democracy, in response to the armed uprising in Chiapas. All of these groups
continue to support communities, mostly by helping women and children with food and medical
needs.

Non-governmental organizations have become the most popular method of participation
in the 1990s. Due to their exclusion from other political arenas, and the perceived inadequacy of
government, women are forming NGOs all over Mexico. Maria Luisa Tarres comments that:

“In Mexico, women’s participation in public life has traditionally taken place in social spaces that
are very similar in form and function to those carried out by NGOs. This pattern is so common
that one could argue that women are pioneers in this type of organizations, if their experience is
compared to that of males, whose participation has overwhelmingly been in the institutionalized
political systems” (Rodriguez 131).

The NGOs generally take a social role, an alternative to the popular perception of the state as the
depository of social welfare.

NGOs dedicated to women began developing in the 1990s as well. These women’s
NGOs focus on proposing solutions to concrete social problems, such as the Mexico City
earthquake of 1985 (Rodriguez 133). Other women’s NGOs are organized around a variety of
issues affecting women, such as violence, rape, health and work. At the national level, the most
popular area of activity for women’s NGOs is health, including reproductive health, family
planning and mental health (Rodriguez 136). Few women’s NGOs focus on women in the areas
of production, education and politics, but the numbers are slowly rising.

While professionals attend most NGOs, the public they serve is broader in character. The
majority of NGOs channel their efforts to the poor, followed by women, including indigenous
and peasant women. Some NGOs serve a clearly defined group, such as victims of violence, or
they try to influence a particular part of public policy such as health (Rodriguez 139). The most
important function of NGOs is offering an alternative to the public (government-controlled)
services.

Class differences are notable and apparent within the NGOs as well as Mexican society.
The professionals who lead the NGOs are generally upper-middle class educated women. The
lower class and poor women who need the help of NGOs generally are not active politically or
socially, although they may work
During the 1990s, women have become a greater part of political institutions; as they are more often being elected to office. One reason for this is the historic July 1997 election, through which the governing elite became genuinely plural after over seventy years of one-party rule (Rodriguez 10). The Mexican Congress is now led by the combined opposition forced of the Partido Accion Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) a right winged party and the Partido de la Revolucion Democratrica, (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) a left wing party. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Party of the Institutionalized Revolution, PRI) remains dominant and governs nationally, at the state and local levels; other parties have made significant gains. At the state and local level, the opposition now governs over 50 percent of the population (Rodriguez 10). Parties other than the PRI govern the three largest metropolitan areas. Monterrey and Guadalajara are under the control of the PAN, and the Federal District (Mexico City) has been under the rule of the PRD since July of 1997 (Rodriguez 10).

The 1997 elections also proved promising for women. Seventeen percent of the 1997-2000 Congress consists of women, (85 of 500 seats). In comparison, women occupy only 11.5 percent of United States Congressional seats. Looking beyond the numbers is also important, because women tend to be involved in areas of politics that are not always measured. Women are more likely to be political actors in their own realm, often places where men are the minority.

Women who are involved in political institutions are usually educated, upper middle class or elite. Elite women have the greatest chance of winning elected offices due to resources and family name. Women at other economic levels are not excluded from the political process. Women work within political parties, labor unions, and interest groups. Interest groups offer women an alternative to political parties. Women's interest groups are active in protesting and supporting candidates and informing people about elections.

The involvement of women in economics inclined since the 1980s, as the economy climbed out of the recession. From 1970 to 1993, the rate of women's economic participation increased from 17.6% to 33% (Muller & Rowell 424). As women become more educated, they work more outside the home. Fifty percent of highly educated women work, but only 24% of women with an incomplete primary education hold jobs outside the home (Muller & Rowell 424).

Mexican women who work generally hold jobs considered traditional. Jobs that fit this description include housekeeping, caring for children, teaching, and all types of secretarial work.
Much of the work done by women is still unrecognized, unvalued, underpaid or unpaid (Nauman & Hutchinson 950). The largest numbers of women are engaged in domestic work, which is not easily measured. Housekeeping is the most popular job, and easily completed by women without education. Almost every middle to upper class family employs a maid to clean, cook and even care for children, even if the wife does not work outside the home.

Since the 1980s, women have been working in manufacturing as maquiladoras. The manufacturing industry often prefers to hire women rather than men. Women have greater manual dexterity, docility, and accept lower wages than men (Nauman & Hutchinson 951). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed in 1993, has had a profound affect on Mexican women. It has provided full time work for unskilled and semi-skilled women, with fair wages.

In the last twenty years, women have gained significantly in the area of management. In 1995, women held 9% of top-level government posts (Muller & Rowell 424). By 1993, women made up 20% of all administrative and managerial workers (Mueller & Rowell 424). Women are also obtaining higher level jobs than ever before. In 1990, 51% of workers entering the fields of business and administration were women (Mueller & Rowell 424). As the decade nears the end, the numbers are still increasing.

As seen above, the numbers are promising, as well as the immeasurable gains. The events of the 1990s will shape women's involvement over the next 20 years. The opportunities for women in the workforce will increase and continue to rise. The accomplishments of Mexican women in politics today, pave the way for the next generation of female politicians. The ever-expanding numbers of NGOs educate and strengthen women as well as offering a place of involvement. For women in Mexico, the future holds the promise of an improved, equal society.
The Participation and Mobilization of Mexican Women in Politics and Economics: 
An On-Site Analysis

Women in the city of Cuernavaca, Mexico participate actively in several areas of economics and politics. The appearance of women in the workforce is evident, and can easily be observed visiting the city. The engagement of women in politics is not quite so apparent, as the involvement is not so widespread. What truly characterizes the women of Mexico is the incredible optimism about the future of women in the country. Despite the problems that may be present, the women always solve what they can today and hope for a better tomorrow.

Cuernavaca, located in the state of Morelos is an atypical city because of the high number of residents that are in the upper economic class. Cuernavaca, nicknamed the city of eternal spring, attracts visitors from all over the world. The city of over 500,000 inhabitants supports a wide range of businesses. The strong tourist economy enables many women to enter the workforce.

Women who choose to work outside the home most often do so in traditional female roles, such as cleaning, cooking, and handicrafts. Many women in Cuernavaca who work outside the home work as maids in the houses of middle and upper class families. This is a popular job for young women. The large number of wealthy citizens, and retired Americans living in Cuernavaca, offer household employment opportunities for Mexican women. In the words of American woman I met on the bus from the airport: “Why should I do housework, when, for only a few dollars a week I can hire someone to clean for me?” This is the attitude of most foreigners living in Mexico. But Mexican families too, will almost surely hire a maid if they can afford one. It has become a kind of “status symbol” to employ household help.

Other professions where the influence of women can be observed include the marketplace. The markets are an excellent place to learn just why women seek work outside the home. At the Cuernavaca crafts market, located in El Centro on top of the Palacio de Cortes, women make and sell handicrafts to tourists. The crafts range from silver jewelry, to blankets, to bead necklaces. Many of the women work here to supplement the income of their husbands, one woman I spoke with said that she works so her children can attend a better school. A few women reluctantly alluded that they have no husband, and the market is their only means of income.

The market setting is a myriad of camaraderie between the women. For most, it is their only social contact with other women. They constantly help one another, watching the
neighboring booth so a friend can get lunch, lending change for a large bill, or just visiting while waiting for customers. The women also organize in the market setting, and discuss everything from their family and how to get their children into better schools, to what would be the best way to clean up their neighborhoods.

The market is also a place where mothers and children work together. The children that are too young to attend school play at their mother’s feet. Babies sleep in hammocks hung underneath tables full of crafts. After school, young girls help their mothers make necklaces, and other simple crafts. They are preparing for their own futures as their mothers teach them the tools of the trade.

The women, who cannot afford a space in the craft market, sell their crafts on the street. The sidewalk outside the Cathedral of Cuernavaca is always lined with women who display their crafts on blankets on the ground. Other women will carry their handiwork and approach tourists in the square of El Centro. These are some of the poorest women, often times one of their children will help, as it is more difficult for a tourist to turn away a hungry, dirty child.

While the craft markets employ a large number of women, the open markets in Cuernavaca are much more male dominated. Cuernavaca, being a modern city, relies less on the markets as the sole merchants of food do, as do smaller cities. Large grocery stores are drawing more and more of the public, due to the ease of purchasing all good in one location. Still, numerous outdoor markets still exist. The major outdoor food and produce market is male dominated due to the fact the goods come from outlying farms. This market sells primarily to merchants who own small shops.

If a woman can put together enough capital, she might open a small café, and cook mid-day meals as a way to earn money. Several cafes and tiny stores near the university I attended were female owned and run. One woman confessed that her husband bought her the building, but she continued to add that she paid him back. In the clothing district downtown in El Centro, several shops are managed and run by women. None of the women I spoke with owned the shop they were working in, although I am told that women do own some of the clothing stores. Many of the women were only managers whom the owner had left complete control of the store.

Women who are employed in salaried positions generally have some education and come from middle to upper class families. Secretarial work is generally considered a women-only job. Getting hired as a secretary is based as much on appearance as on skill level. For this reason, most secretaries tend to be young women. Women with higher education may become managers
of some sort. Many of the students at the university I attended had mothers who held high managerial positions at local companies and banks.

Teaching is another area where women can easily obtain jobs. The teachers of primary and secondary, (the equivalents of elementary and middle school in the US) are overwhelmingly female. Prep and college teachers are more often male, but at the university I attended, the Technological Institute of Monterrey, almost half of the teaching staff is female.

The involvement of women in politics is not as easy to observe. Women are much more likely to work than to become active politically. For this reason, I conducted a survey of women in Cuernavaca. Many of my conclusions in this area are based this survey, which asked questions about the political involvement and interests of women. The survey was given to women of varying economic levels, the poorest being household maids, and janitors. All of the women who took the survey were literate and none were impoverished.

The mobilization of women in politics is clear in the city of Cuernavaca. Again, this may in large part be due to the high economic status of the residents, but nevertheless, the involvement and interest is clear. Among the upper class citizens, a good number of women are affiliated in some way with an interest group or a non-governmental organization. Among working class citizens, the numbers are very few. When asked why, every woman I talked to responded that she lacked the time to become involved.

Conversely, women in all economic classes claim to maintain a high level of interest in politics. Every woman I talked with said that she voted in the majority of elections. Also, most women seemed interested in working towards increasing the number of women in politics.

The relatively low numbers of women in elected offices stems mainly from the effect of machismo and the dominance of males in Mexican society. The few men that I was able to talk to seemed to believe women have no place in politics. One young man, who considered himself very liberal, said he thinks that most men believe that women should not work in jobs outside the home. If they do, they should only work in traditional roles, such as maids, teachers, and secretaries. He said that women do not know enough to make big decisions, such as are involved in politics.

While in Cuernavaca, I visited the city's Partido Accion Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) headquarters. The secretary told me that women play an active role in the party. Women have been elected by the PAN for city offices, as well as for offices at the state and national level. The PAN is a conservative party, and opposes quotas to ensure that women have equal
representation. The Partido Revolucionario Democrata (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) is a more liberal party. The PRD instituted quotas in candidate lists and in the internal party structure, as did the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI). Mexico’s Federal Election Code does not include roles about quotas, but states that “women will be considered” for offices.

Within Cuernavaca, exist several women’s organizations, mainly due to the large population of elite and wealthy. A few of the people I attended school with have mothers who attend feminist organization meetings. Many elite women choose to focus their efforts on problems within the city or the country. They may serve within a group that earns money to feed homeless children, or a committee at their church. Within the university setting, exist many women’s clubs. The Institute Technological de Monterrey offered clubs for women who were planning careers in science and math.

There are also a large number of Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), confronting issues such as women’s health, poverty, domestic violence and abortion. I visited the office of Salud Integral para la Mujer (Integral Health for Women). The Salud integral is a non-profit service NGO that provides medical assistance to poor women at little or no charge. The Salud promotes birth control and sexually transmitted diseases prevention. There are many other health related NGOs in Cuernavaca, some provide care and some merely distribute information and give counseling.

While studying in Mexico, I was able to observe high levels of involvement among women. But more important than numbers is the attitude and enthusiasm of every woman I encountered. It made no difference what economic class, age group or background of the woman; the confidence presented was astounding. Women are willing to voice their opinions, and it is time for their voices to be heard. Although women may not have what they want now, the answer is manana, we will get it tomorrow. This means that the future holds the prize, and the future will come as soon as tomorrow.
Photographs

Woman selling her artwork in El Centro of Cuernavaca

Partido Acción Nacional city offices: Cuernavaca
Young children help their mothers at a Cuernavacan Market
Poor women and children, resting near the Cathedral of Cuernavaca
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