

Inside Mexico's feminist occupation

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Protesters seized Mexico's National Human Rights Commission building in an effort to end femicide.

Mexico City, Mexico - From an office on the second floor of Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), 42-year-old Erika Martinez recounts how the colonial-style building in downtown Mexico City became her home.

The petite woman, whose close-cropped hair and fierce expression have become somewhat iconic in Mexico over the past two months, no longer refers to the building on Republica de Cuba Street as the Human Rights Commission. She calls it by the name printed on a banner on the front of the building: the Okupa Cuba Casa Refugio (Cuba Occupation-Shelter House) - or the Okupa for short.

The takeover of the building happened spontaneously. On September 2, after a routine meeting with CNDH, two women refused to leave the offices in protest over the institution's lack of progress on their cases. One, Silvia Castillo, had met with the CNDH about the case of her 22-year-old son who was murdered last year. The other, Marcela Aleman, sought answers about the sexual assault of her four-year-old daughter. Both women had come to the city from the state of San Luis Potosi for the meeting with CNDH President Rosario Piedra Ibarra.

At the end of their meeting, Marcela tied herself to a chair. The two women refused to leave.

They contacted local activists to ask for support, and the following day, a few dozen members of feminist collectives arrived to protest outside the CNDH. Erika was among them. She had participated in feminist protests in the past, and after hearing about this one from other relatives of victims, she came to show her solidarity.

Erika Martinez and a group of young women in black balaclavas who call themselves the Bloque Negro, or Black Block, have found themselves at the forefront of the ongoing protest, which has become a powerful symbol for women in Mexico. Over 66 percent of Mexican women report having experienced some type of sexual violence. Up to 10 women are killed in the country every day. Most of their killers go unpunished.

Erika encountered this impunity three years ago, when a family member sexually abused her then-seven-year-old daughter. After Erika reported the incident to the police, she found herself caught in endless bureaucracy. "We went to all these institutions that were supposed to help us, but they just sent us running in circles," she says. The working-class mother of three - including two grown children - speaks about her case in an emphatic rush, fumbling over the legal terms. When discussing the bureaucracy she faced, she pauses and searches her mind to remember the series of offices she visited.

As her own frustration grew, Erika began to see other women like her, including the mothers of femicide victims, grow more vocal. "I thought, if these women are fighting like this for their daughters who are gone, why shouldn't I fight, why shouldn't I scream, for my daughter who is still

here?" she says.

Her daughter's alleged abuser remained free, and Erika says he forced her and her daughter out of the house where they lived, leaving them homeless. They stayed with a series of family members until Erika found work as a live-in housekeeper this year. Despite what she describes as incessant meetings with a series of government officials, the investigation into her daughter's alleged abuse took years to begin. When she arrived at the Okupa, the first hearing still hadn't taken place. (It was eventually held on October 22 of this year - three years after Erika made the initial report.)

"The abuser has more rights than a seven-year-old girl," she says. When she talks about her daughter, her eyes fill with angry tears. "That's what made me go out to the street and scream, because I'd already knocked on a lot of doors, and none of them opened to me."

The takeover

The evening Erika arrived at the CNDH, Marcela Aleman left the building after resolving her issues with the authorities. But Erika decided she couldn't abandon the protest. "I got really angry," she says. "I said, I already came here to waste my time. I'm going to make this protest mine. I want [the authorities] to listen to me, too."

The women spent the night sleeping outside on the pavement. They lay on tarps in the cold; they listened to insults from passers-by. Erika recounts how they began to reconsider their methods: "One of the girls said, 'Why are we here in the cold, when we can be inside?'" The women decided to write up a list of demands, with support from the feminist organisation Ni Una Menos (Not One Less). The next day, Friday, September 4, eight of them took over the building.

They entered peacefully, after a brief dialogue with the security guards and CNDH officials. "The authorities came down to reception," Erika explains. "We pushed ourselves against the gate, and we read the list of demands."

The women then moved into the rest of the building, where they forced open an upstairs gate and asked the remaining workers to leave.

Erika had left her youngest daughter, now 10, in the care of her niece. But after she called begging to be picked up, Erika decided to have her come to the Okupa. A few of the other women also brought their young children, though, at that time, they had no idea how long they would stay.

"We thought maybe the police would come to get us that same day," Erika says. So the women began asking for backup on social media. "We asked for support, so that all the collectives would come put their bodies on the line with us and get behind this movement."

As word spread about the occupation, supporters began bringing bags of donated clothes, food, diapers and toiletries, which the women passed out to local families in need. Within days, piles of donations filled the front hall.

In the building's front office, the women painted a mural that declared: "Ni perdonamos, ni olvidamos (we neither forgive nor forget)." They wrote feminist slogans on the walls. Erika's daughter painted lipstick on a portrait of former President Francisco I Madero. Photos of the protest quickly went viral.

Bright murals covered the formerly white walls. The offices became bedrooms, the staff kitchen a communal cafeteria for several dozen women. Outside on the pavement, women from all over the city showed up to read poetry, perform music and write the names of their abusers on the walls.

The demands

Within days of the takeover, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador accused the women of being “conservatives” – a common accusation that the centre-left president levels against social movements that he suggests are motivated primarily by undermining his government, rather than by valid social concerns. He declared that he was “not in favour of the [women’s] vandalism.”

The president has repeatedly insisted that the country no longer has a serious problem with gender-based violence. But femicide rates have increased in Mexico each year for over a decade, their characteristics consistent and gruesome – with many cases where perpetrators have mutilated and abused their victims’ bodies, then disposed of them on roadsides or in fields.

Between 2007 and 2017, the annual number of killings of young women – aged 20 to 35 – tripled. The Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio reported more than 3,000 femicides during 2019 – nearly 10 a day. In Mexico, over 90 percent of all reported crimes go unresolved, and the coronavirus pandemic has only made it more difficult for women to seek justice through the legal system. This year in Mexico, the pandemic lockdown brought a 71 percent increase in reports of domestic violence.

The Okupa’s current demands are outlined in a [14-point](#) document. They include demands for the women not to be prosecuted for the protest; for police officers to receive gender sensitivity training; for the president to present a report on actions to decrease gender-based violence; and for the state to guarantee a quick resolution of femicide and disappearance cases.

The Black Block

The occupation is the culmination of a year of mounting mobilisations against gender violence in Mexico City.

In the last year, the encapuchadas – the “hooded women”, feminists protesting in black hoods – have become a powerful symbol of Mexico’s feminist movement. Black Block protestors – usually anarchists, who dress all in black, cover their faces and generally protest through direct-action techniques like breaking windows and throwing Molotov cocktails – have long been a ubiquitous presence at political demonstrations in Mexico City. Only recently, though, did large groups of women adopt the strategy.

Last August, after reports surfaced of police officers sexually assaulting young women, activists took to the streets in a series of increasingly confrontational direct actions. They broke bus station windows and set a police station on fire, and they graffitied feminist slogans on the iconic Angel of Independence monument. To this day, the angel – which looms over Mexico City’s central avenue, Paseo de la Reforma – displays, on a marble slab, a phrase in black spray paint: Mexico Femicida (femicidal Mexico).

The encapuchadas’ appearance also evokes that of the Zapatistas, who wore black balaclavas to declare a war on the Mexican state in 1994 and take over not a building but a territory. In the canon of Mexican political imagery, they evoke, quite intentionally, revolution.

The encapuchadas in the Okupa identify themselves as the Bloque Negro, or Black Block. They arrived at the Okupa one by one, each having adopted the identity of the encapuchadas at different times. Erika has become a maternal figure to the younger women, mostly in their 20s, some of whom are estranged from their own mothers because of their activism.

Fer, identified only by her first name for security purposes, has lived at the Okupa since early

September. She first donned her black balaclava during last August's protests. "You enter in anonymity because you know you live in a femicidal country, a country that has lots of political prisoners, where they go after you if you stand up against the state," says the 22-year-old, who studies economics at Mexico's National Polytechnic Institute.

She narrates her experience while seated on the first floor of the Okupa, as a friend braids her hair. All clad in black, the group's uniformity, Fer explains, is key. "That's why we have the phrase *fuimos todas* (it was all of us)," she says, referring to a common refrain in feminist marches. "The window we broke, the fire, wasn't done by one person."

Rifts and internal disputes

As of late October, only about 15 women continue to live in the Okupa. Behind the black hoods, they are largely young, idealistic and politically inexperienced. A series of internal disputes – about political ideology, strategy and the use of donations – has caused one woman after another to leave.

Despite the early participation of transgender women in the occupation, the Bloque Negro declared in late October that they no longer welcome transgender women into the space. As a result, local LGBTQ [groups that once supported the occupation](#) have publicly withdrawn their support.

Though more veteran activists, including mothers of femicide victims, initiated the takeover, most have since abandoned the space due to internal disagreements with the Bloque Negro. As a result, the occupation's political demands have also changed since early September. [The initial document of demands](#), developed in collaboration with Ni Una Menos, reflects the previous years of work by those veteran activists, many of whom brought a deep familiarity with the obstacles at every level of the justice system. It included a list of 36 measures to be instituted across a variety of government bodies, from prosecutors, to courts, to the ministry in charge of child services. Among the points were demands for prosecutors' offices to provide Indigenous women with translators who speak their languages; for court sentences for gender-based violence to be made public; and for the state to guarantee measures to protect child victims of sexual abuse.

Among those early arrivals was activist Yesenia Zamudio, whose then-19-year-old daughter Maria de Jesus Jaime Zamudio was killed in 2016. Zamudio later founded Ni Una Menos, and now dedicates herself full-time to activism on behalf of other victims.

At the beginning of the occupation, Zamudio invited organisations around the country to support the space. The women had declared the Okupa a shelter for survivors of gender-based violence. A broad coalition of groups arrived, including relatives of victims of forced disappearance, Indigenous women forcibly displaced from their homes by organised crime and survivors of domestic violence. But after a series of disagreements around political strategy, finances and leadership structure, Zamudio and the Ni Una Menos coalition left the occupation in mid-September.

Zamudio criticised the Bloque Negro for seeking to be the protagonists of the broader movement. "They don't represent me," she declared in a public statement as she left the Okupa on September 18. She accused the young women of turning the space into a "commune" rather than a shelter for victims, and stated, "we don't want groceries or houses, we want justice."

Making Molotov cocktails - and history

Now, in addition to those staying at the Okupa, women and girls drop in for aerial yoga workshops, ceramics classes and weekly bazaars where women can sell handmade goods. On a Monday afternoon, a visitor leads a handful of girls – mostly in their late teens, along with a few children – in a papier-mache craft project: decorative skulls for the Day of the Dead. They sit on the ground

surrounded by bits of ripped-up newspaper and a saucepan filled with paste. One young girl pauses every so often to jump onto the sky-blue aerial dance silks that hang from a roof beam; she hooks her feet around them and swings back and forth over the atrium. In the second-floor kitchen, the kitchen crew serves a lunch of chilaquiles verdes. A committee is in charge of cooking each meal, but, as a series of hand-written signs around the dining area admonish, everyone is responsible for washing their own dishes.

Meanwhile, the women take turns keeping guard at the doors, where they have arranged a line of Molotov cocktails for emergency use. The blocks around the Okupa have a near-constant police presence. The occupiers have planned security protocols in case police attempt to violently evict them from the space.

Many of the remaining women are university students, and between activities, they tune into online classes and turn in assignments. Sometimes their activism collides with their homework: Fer had her first day of university on September 28, the same day she joined several hundred women to march for International Safe Abortion Day in downtown Mexico City. After less than a kilometre, hundreds of police closed in on the marchers, using tear gas and keeping them kettled for five hours. Fer, clad in her balaclava and with her eyes tearing up, pulled out her phone and logged into her Zoom class.

Despite their commitments and internal fights, police intimidation and disputes with other activists, the remaining occupiers plan to continue the takeover for as long as they can.

Erika is adamant that the group will not give up the building until all violence against women is eradicated in Mexico. She doesn't know how that will happen. She is convinced, though, that impunity and officials' ineptitude is at the root of the problem. "They have the laws, but every judge, secretary, public official, takes your case however they think is right," she says. "Everyone applies their own criteria. When you go to denounce, they ask you why you were out late, why you were there. Why do they study so many laws if they're just going to do what they think they should?"

In her talks with the government, authorities from Mexico's housing ministry have reached out to Erika in order to assist her in finding a new home. But she says the Okupa now far transcends her own needs. For Erika and her daughter, the space has become a haven. "If I had known what this would give me, I'd have come here the very first day that my daughter was abused," Erika says. "She, in her own voice, says that she feels safe here, and she's going to be here her whole life."

The Okupa has given Erika a sense of purpose: "How am I going to exchange this place for a house, when more children can enjoy this same place? When we can keep receiving other women? The day they kicked me out of my house I would have wanted to arrive at a place like this."

Even if the state meets the women's demands, they plan to maintain control of the building. "This building is just a tiny bit, less than one percent, of everything the state owes us," says Fer, shaking her head in indignation. "It's never happened before, that a group of women take over a government building like this. I hope they talk about us in history classes."

An awakening

Since September, the Okupa has inspired similar protests across the country. When feminists took over the Human Rights Commission in neighbouring Mexico State, one of the states with the highest femicide rates in the country, police arrived to violently evict them. The next day, the Bloque Negro returned. "If it's not ours, it's no one's," they shouted. They broke the locks, smashed the windows and set fire to the building before marching away.

Such dramatic actions have made the encapuchadas mysterious figures for Mexicans outside the

movement: what could possess these women to not only chant about burning it all down, but to throw Molotov cocktails into a government building?

A 22-year-old Bloque Negro member who goes by La China, a nickname in Spanish referring to her mane of curly hair, puts it like this: “The Human Rights Commission is what supposedly should protect us when the government is failing. [It]’s one of the last institutions where we can demand justice,” she says, seated cross-legged in a back office of the CNDH. “When the CNDH doesn’t pay attention to you, what do you appeal to? Who do you look for? You don’t have anything left. They aren’t going to help us. Only we can help ourselves.”

The young women of the Bloque Negro come to the movement from their own experiences of violence. Every day, they wake up to alerts in group chats, on social media, on the news: another girl missing, another body found; their friends, their sisters, their classmates. Some have been radicalised by the femicides close to them, others by their own experiences of sexual assault, others by the police aggressions they have experienced during protests. While some have faced violence more directly than others, the women argue that all of their experiences result from the same violent system.

For La China, her feminist awakening came when she began to notice that she and her friends shared experiences of sexual violence. As a young teen, she remembers, “I thought what happened to me had only happened to me.” In her family, discussing sexual abuse was taboo. But once she began discussing her experience with her friends, she realised how common it was. “A lot of my friends had experienced horrible situations of harassment, abuse. So thanks to that I said, this is a problem,” she says. “I started with the typical ideas of nonviolence, [violent protest] isn’t the right way, the institutional way, there are laws.”

As she began to speak with women from less privileged backgrounds, though, she began to grow sympathetic to more radical tactics. “Maybe [the institutions] work in Spain, maybe in France, maybe in the US [United States] where there’s less impunity, more gender rights,” she says. “Here ... 90 percent of rape cases are impune. Here, there is no justice.”

The stakes remain high. The women know that police could show up to remove them any day. Some, like La China, have lost relationships with family members because of their participation. Her family kicked her out of the house, and now the Okupa is her only place to go. They fear potential legal retaliation. The women are motivated, still, by rage and indignation; by the ubiquity of sexual violence; by the daily messages about missing girls and uncovered bodies; by the injustice of living in a country where, after leaving work, they may not arrive home. They are also driven, at times, by boredom and a thirst for adrenaline. They are passionate, and they are frequently reckless, even to the point of alienating their allies.

Homework and hope

On a Wednesday afternoon in October, Fer and another woman lug a bag of individually boxed light bulbs out of a side room and set themselves up on a heavy wooden table in the atrium. They begin to saw at the bulbs’ metal bases with box cutters. The bulbs, once emptied, will become paint bombs, or maybe, they consider as they go along, mini Molotov cocktails. To dismantle them is a delicate craft: take care with the aluminium strips, or they could cut you; don’t squeeze too hard, or the bulb could burst; when extracting the glass that holds the filaments, be sure it doesn’t fragment into shards. They talk about going to paint the Palacio De Bellas Artes, the iconic opera house just a few blocks away. They didn’t get to graffiti it during the September 28 march. They joke about being bored and rearing for action.

The two women talk about their mothers. “My mom says she doesn’t have money to get me out of jail or bury me,” one jokes. “She says there’s no use trying to change the system, because the system’s already made.”

“My mom says it’s because of her generation that things are so bad for us,” Fer replies.

“Your mom’s so cool. Can she adopt me?” the other responds.

Others join them, and as they poke at the light bulbs, they muse about the attention they have received. They still can’t quite believe what is happening. “We could be protesting about climate change instead of protesting so that we don’t get killed,” one says. “In the first world women still get killed, but at least they get justice. Minimum, at least when you disappear they look for you.”

They continue dismantling their light bulbs. “What would 21-year-old girls usually be doing right now? Homework?” They laugh. “Actually,” one responds, “I need to do my homework.”

Later that night, they fill the light bulbs with paint and lob them at a nearby government building. In the morning, police cars line the street outside the Okupa. Inside, its occupants wake up, cook, paint the walls, work on their papier-mache, dance, braid each other’s hair, play with the children. After a series of schisms, a little over a dozen women remain, including Erika, the only one who routinely reveals her face when they go out. Visitors come to see the now-iconic building and take photos with the murals. Again and again, the women say to each other, “I can’t believe we’re here.”

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