

Women in Oaxaca's Popular Movement

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WOMEN HAVE NOT only acted as participants in the ongoing popular movement in Oaxaca, but have also profoundly shaped the course of its history. They have created some of the most powerful stories and moments in the past nine months, and have helped tell them.

Stories of women who have built the movement are everywhere in Oaxaca: the stories of housewives arrested and beaten by police, who in response have begun to organize for the first time in their lives; stories of elderly women from local communities who have cooked huge pots of food for people guarding barricades and soothed tear-gassed eyes with vinegar and Coke; stories of women who have been involved since the beginning, participating in the teachers' strike or organizing the movement to support it.

Their stories, of personal histories aligned with the movement since its very inception, are the ones that may best shed light on how women have helped create a widespread and lasting popular resistance in Oaxaca.

Florina Jiménez Lucas is one of those women. She is a teacher, and looks very much the part. She sits still and composed, her red suit bright against a plastic chair, as she tells her own story in an even, measured tone. Through her long career as a teacher, she has worked in many of Oaxaca's most marginalized indigenous communities, where she has witnessed the conditions of extreme poverty and injustice that exist in the state.

This intimate knowledge of poverty and struggle led Florina to participate as a longtime active member of Section 22, the teachers' union. In 2006, she joined many other teachers in setting up a camp in the central square of Oaxaca's capital city as part of an annual strike to protest poor living conditions and teachers' salaries in the state. When the movement grew following a police attack to dislodge the camp, Florina's participation grew alongside it.

She introduced her husband to the popular movement; he and their three children became her frequent companions at meetings and marches. As a family, they participated in guard duty at barricades placed throughout the city to keep police from attacking neighborhoods. Florina or her husband often spent entire nights on watch.

Her reflections on the movement continued to deepen, leading her to wonder about her own community's involvement. She refers to San Felipe, the area where she lives, as "a forgotten town where powerful men have bought up large plots of land." She says that "extreme poverty and extreme wealth live side by side" in San Felipe, and that the state's powerful figures often hold meetings in the "castles they have built" there.

On July 1, she organized the first group of neighbors to take action in San Felipe. They covered the community with posters in support of the popular movement. On that same day, governor Ulises Ruiz arrived in San Felipe to attend a meeting. The words and images of his opposition were there to greet him.

Broadcast Studios Occupied

One month later, Florina participated with 20,000 others in a women's march that was to become historic. Since the inception of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), one of its principal demands had been for adequate coverage of the popular movement on radio stations and public television. As the media continued to favor the government version of events, women decided it was time to take action and organized a march for August 1, 2006.

The March of Pots & Pans, as it became known, turned into a notorious chapter in the history of APPO; Leyla Centeno, a young activist who helped organize the march, tells the story of that day in vivid detail. As Leyla recounts the events as they unfolded and outlines the waves of repression and resistance that followed, she conveys her passion for the movement that has quite literally taken over her life.

Leyla was a student at the state university as well as a member of the Committee in Defense of the People's Rights (CODEP) when the widespread popular movement arose; as her organizing work and responsibilities within the movement grew, she was soon forced to leave her studies behind.

Her example speaks to the critical role that both students and women have played in the popular movement, and her narrative of August 1 display her continued sense of awe and pride in its accomplishments.

She tells how, as the march progressed, women started to turn to one another and spread the idea of heading towards Channel 9, the state-run television station. Leyla says, "taking over Channel 9 was something that the teachers' union and APPO had talked about, but nobody had ever gone so far as to actually do anything about it."

Her eyes widen as she recalls how the women surrounded the television station and demanded live airtime to voice their demands. When management refused their initial request for just 15 minutes, the women occupied its studios.

The entire takeover happened without any violence. The women's first broadcast aired that same night, and began, "Today, we family women, armed only with bravery, decided to take over this corrupt station once and for all."

Speaking of Channel 9 management, the women continued, "they have not wanted to broadcast the popular unity that we are living as part of this movement; so now it is time, we have had enough, and we are asking you, our good neighbors of Oaxaca, to join in the struggle of these brave women."

The women broadcast stories and films from the movement, as well as cultural programs on indigenous music, art and dance, for three consecutive weeks. Ratings for the station had never been higher.

Murdering the People

At 4:00am on August 21, unidentified assailants opened fire on the women occupying the building and destroyed the station's satellite, cutting off its signal. This violence was part of a growing, brutal repression against the popular movement and the people of Oaxaca.

On August 10, Florina Jiménez Lucas experienced that violence firsthand. While participating in another march alongside her husband, she heard shots ring out nearby. Her husband was shot nine times and killed. The autopsy report confirmed that he was shot from above, with bullets from .22 and .38 caliber weapons, which are standard police-issue.

Florina continues to participate in organizing and protesting, and has been speaking publicly about her husband's death since August. The government has challenged the findings of the autopsy report and has not proceeded with a criminal investigation.

She has been threatened and followed since his death, and has had to leave her house; she says it is the support of other women and families in APPO that has helped her survive.

Organizing COMO

Partly as a way to organize concrete means of support for women who have suffered the effects of violence, arrests, death and disappearances, and partly as a way to consolidate and defend the power that women had accumulated during months of organizing, the women of APPO organized to create a women's arm of the movement.

The new organization was officially established at an assembly held on August 31, 2006; it was named the August 1st Coordinating Body of Oaxacan Women (COMO). Leyla Centeno, one of the founders of COMO, says "there was already a women's movement, but we needed to give it organization and structure; it was time to truly include ourselves in the struggle."

She says that women from many different sectors and regions of Oaxaca took part in that first meeting, and have since begun to say not only, "I am APPO," but also, "I am COMO." While the COMO manifesto created on that day echoes APPO in demanding justice, dignity and autonomy and proposing concrete means of achieving such demands, it also includes a critical demand for gender equity and specific proposals to change social and educational conditions to improve the lives of women.

COMO continued to organize through the months of September, October and November, despite increasing levels of repression and state-sponsored violence. Its effect was clearly seen during the Constitutional Congress held by APPO on November 10-12, when members voted to establish gender equity requirements in representation. Although a proposal to establish a 50-50% gender split for representatives was not approved, the assembly passed a resolution to ensure that women comprise at least 30% of all representatives.

While the rejection of the 50-50% resolution reflects the continuing tendency to undervalue women's participation, it is nevertheless highly significant in Mexican politics that a large and powerful popular movement adopted such a binding, explicit gender equity clause.

Celebration of Struggle

On December 17, 2006, the women took to the streets of Oaxaca once again. After 21 days held incommunicado in prison, 43 of the 141 people who had been arrested during the Seventh Mega March were to be released. The atmosphere at that moment in Oaxaca was one of suppressed fear and stealthy repression. The government was preparing for Christmas and New Year's celebrations by erasing the marks of APPO on the city; the governor was claiming that everything had "returned to normal."

As the prisoners were brought to a small plaza outside the city center, women organized a reception line to greet family members and compañeros with flowers, hugs, shouts and banners. A few released prisoners spoke to local and international independent press gathered in the square. Others spoke with international journalists and activists in private the next day, accompanied by Leyla Centeno and other women from COMO as they gave their difficult testimonies.

As 2007 arrived and brought with it Three Kings Day, the traditional Mexican day for exchanging Christmas gifts, the women continued their support of prisoners — those still in prison as well as those released — and their families. COMO organized a public collection site in the center of the city where they gathered gifts for children from affected families.

Piles of colorful toys, traditional cakes, and school and art supplies rose in front of the Santo Domingo Cathedral. A children's march was organized to arrive at the city center and culminate in a family festival.

The government placed large buses across the children's path, and surrounded the women with metal barricades guarded by riot police. The children changed their route; the women waited out the police, who had broken a judicial injunction ordering them to permit free access to the area. The day was marred by illegal repression and intimidation, but ended in celebration.

Despite such acts of repression, as well as the widespread use of violence and torture, the movement in Oaxaca has endured. Women such as Florina Jiménez Lucas and Leyla Centeno have played a crucial role in ensuring that it does. Whether they are marching with pots and pans in hand, speaking publicly in newspapers or on the air, organizing behind bars in high-security prisons, or greeting loved ones returning from painful detentions, women are constantly working to hold the movement together.

As Leyla Centeno says, not only have women been participating in every stage of the movement, they have also been the ones "who come every day to the radio stations, the plazas and the barricades to take care of the people...they have sustained the movement, they have sustained the people who are resisting."

Women have also successfully organized to create their own space within the popular resistance, an accomplishment that Leyla points out, "is alone one of the biggest achievements of this movement and this historical moment." Women's actions have been crucial to building, supporting and strengthening the popular resistance; their voices have expressed both its dignity and its rage.

As Leyla recalls male teachers shouting during the takeover of Channel 9, "Now that's what I call true compañeras!"

P.S.

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