

**Union Democracy and the Struggle for Women's Labor Rights:  
Reflections from Mexico**

Rachel K. Brickner, McGill University  
Prepared for the 2006 Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association  
Toronto, Ontario, June 1-3, 2006

## Introduction

It is commonly noted that Vicente Fox's victory in Mexico's 2000 presidential election ended 71 consecutive years of one-party rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI) and ushered in Mexico's democratic transition. There is no denying that the political shift from one-party rule to a competitive multiparty electoral system is crucial to the consolidation of democracy in Mexico. However, as Graciela Bensusán and Maria Lorena Cook (2003) warn, the political shift is insufficient given the authoritarian nature of many of the country's important political institutions. Without significant institutional reform, they suggest, authoritarian legacies will prevent a successful democratic transition. Bensusán and Cook identify the labor sphere as one of those areas in need of institutional reform. Only significant reforms of Mexico's labor laws and corporatist state-labor framework will allow for the development of transparent and democratic labor institutions that foster balanced representation of labor, state, and employer interests (2003: 1-2).

Bensusán and Cook are correct in underscoring the importance of reforming Mexico's labor institutions as part of the democratic transition and a means of creating a more vibrant labor movement. In this paper, I build on their argument by showing that institutional reform of labor institutions in Mexico, specifically, the *democratization* of labor unions, also has an important effect on promoting and protecting the rights of women workers. Given the importance of women's rights to democracy, as well as the important links between work and citizenship, the democratization of unions and the importance of women's rights within them becomes an important aspect of Mexican democratization.

As I argue, independent, democratic unions in Mexico are more likely to address the rights women workers in union statutes and collective contracts than are Mexico's "official," non-democratic unions. However, I further demonstrate that because of the historically patriarchal nature of unions in Mexico, it is not sufficient for unions to be democratic for them to promote the rights of women workers. It is also important for unions to have strong feminist activists leaders who will promote the rights of women workers within their unions. The importance of feminist union activists and leaders to securing women's rights within unions is highlighted by the fact that although corporatist unions are less likely than democratic ones to promote women's rights, feminist leaders in corporatist unions have had some successes in drawing attention to the rights of women workers.

This paper will proceed in three sections. First, I examine the theoretical relationship between unions, women's citizenship, and democracy. Second, I discuss the Mexican union context, demonstrating why corporatist union structures in Mexico serve as obstacles to the promotion of the rights of women workers whereas democratic unions offer women greater freedom to promote the rights of women workers. Finally, using evidence from union statutes and collective contracts as well as interviews with women unionists, I show how democratic unions in Mexico have been more likely than their corporatist counterparts to promote women's rights, but how the presence of feminist leadership is a necessary condition for women's rights to be established in either type of union.

## **Citizenship, Unions, and the Rights of Women Workers**

Contemporary theorists of citizenship in Latin America have begun to focus more explicitly on the development of citizenship as a process of social struggle that takes place “from below.” This process involves social groups identifying the rights they believe they should have and challenging the social and political structures and institutions at all levels of society that are barriers to their ideas of citizenship (Dagnino 2003; Jelin 1996; OXHORN 2003). Understanding citizenship as a social process shifts our focus from the state and the rights granted by the state to the actors within society who interact with the state, with organizations, and with each other in redefining and promoting what citizenship.

Although the theoretical attention to citizenship as a process from below is fairly recent, there are many examples of actors within civil society that have been involved historically in defining citizenship needs and demanding them in political discourse. In Latin America, organized labor has been one such actor. A survey of literature on labor in Latin America reveals three ways in which unions and workers have helped to define and demand citizenship rights in the region. First, unions have often been at the forefront of popular mobilizations in support of democratic transitions from authoritarian rule (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Collier 1999; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). Second, unions have been strong supporters of social welfare rights, even in corporatist regimes (Collier 1992). Third, the strength of unions has ensured the presence of a left-leaning voice within the public sphere that can represent the interests of marginalized sectors of the population, as well as the working class (Collier 1999; Roberts 1998).

It is widely accepted that the shift to (neo)liberal models of economic development has dealt a major blow to the strength of organized labor in Latin America. Privatization and flexible labor practices have significantly reduced employment in unionized sectors of Latin American economies. Moreover, (neo)liberal economic policies have also shifted the political balance of power away from a numerically weakened labor force toward representatives of international capital, on whom states increasingly rely for economic investment (Weeks 1999; Roberts 1998: 65-66; Cook 1999: 240; Tilly 1995: 19; Bensúsán and Cook 2003; Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens 1997). A numerically and politically weakened labor movement no longer has the same power to define and promote the citizenship rights of workers. However, the dramatic decline in organized labor's strength in Latin America has not completely eliminated labor's influence as a political actor. In Mexico, for example, mobilization on the part of independent unions and other actors within civil society helped to prevent a major labor law reform proposal, widely criticized by these labor organizations, from being introduced as legislation (Zapata 2006; MLNA 2005).

The ability for unions to continue to influence political and economic policy is important in the ongoing struggle to define and demand the rights of women workers as well as for workers and citizens more generally. This holds for two reasons. First, it follows from the conception of citizenship as a process from below that unions can be a sphere of action within which women workers can become active in conceiving of the kinds of rights that will facilitate their ability to take part in the paid work force on equal terms as men and to demanding the implementation of these rights as well as enforcement of rights that have

already been granted by the state.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Henry Frundt discusses how women organizing unions in the Central American maquila industries raised issues of particular concern to women workers—day care, health care, and children’s education—as well as traditional issues like wages (2002: 17-18).

Second, because unions continue to interact with the state and with employers over questions of rights, they have the ability to actively promote the rights of women workers in those discussions. For example, if unions are committed to providing an environment for their workers that is free from sexual harassment, it is more likely that they will promote sexual harassment prohibitions in negotiations with the state over labor law. If women’s rights are completely off the union radar, it can hardly be expected that those rights will be a point of negotiation between unions and the state or businesses. In short, as long as unions continue to play a role in discourse over workers’ rights, it is important that they represent women’s rights. It could be argued, in fact, that the continued political relevance of unions may be contingent on unions actively advocating the demands and rights of women workers, since they make up a significant and growing percentage of the labor force in Latin America.

### Patriarchy, Corporatism, and Union Support for the Rights of Women Workers

As organizations dedicated to the defense of workers’ rights and well-being, unions should represent the rights of all workers. Historically, in Latin America as elsewhere, unions have been patriarchal organizations that have tended to ignore or even act against women’s rights as workers. The patriarchal nature of unions is often manifested in overt sexism and discrimination against women workers. Women have long confronted sexual harassment within unions (Jelin 1996; Cook 1996: 77-80; Cortina 1990). Women also confront explicitly sexist language and attitudes. For example, one woman from the Telephone Workers’ Union of the Mexican Republic (Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana—STRM) noted that in a union negotiation one male colleague told her that “we should by you [women] a stove so that you can cook while we negotiate” (Personal interview with author, February 28, 2003, Mexico City).

Beyond overt sexism, unions also exhibit their patriarchal character in their failure to adequately take into consideration the specific needs and interests of women workers. Writing on Brazil’s Single Workers’ Central (Central Unica dos Trabalhadores—CUT), Liesl Haas notes that

...the demands of female workers are rarely incorporated into CUT collective negotiations, and there is little research undertaken by unions on the actual number of female workers or on the conditions under which they

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<sup>1</sup> Of concern here are the rights of women workers that allow women to take part in the workforce on equal terms as men. These include equal remuneration and access to training/employment opportunities, freedom from harassment and discrimination (including pregnancy discrimination), affirmative action, maternity (and paternity) leave, and child care. This list of rights is based on a proposal made by the Working Group on Labor Norms with a Gendered Perspective (Grupo de Trabajo sobre la Normatividad Laboral con Perspectivo de Género—GTNLPG)(GTNLPG 2002). The GTNLPG was a coalition of seven women in Mexico City who drafted a 2002 proposal for reforming the country’s Federal Labor Law with special attention to the rights of women workers.

labor. Efforts to analyze the impact of gender on the relationship between the worker and capital are rarely made. And there is no attempt to educate and sensitize the majority male membership to gender issues outside the efforts of women themselves (2001: 261).

It is important to emphasize, as Haas does, that union women have been making efforts since the 1970s to promote the rights and issues of women workers within unions throughout Latin America. One of the common strategies of union women in Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and even Uruguay has been to create women's commissions within unions in order to raise awareness of the needs and rights of women workers (Jelin 1990; Garcia Castro 1999; Churchryk 1994; Lovera 1995). However, the patriarchal nature of unions makes substantive attention to the concerns and rights of women workers an uphill battle.

The patriarchal nature of unions is compounded by corporatist union structures, which make union leaders unaccountable to the demands of the rank-and-file. Thus, even in unions where women have united in support of particular policies leaders have no need or incentive to implement them. Unfortunately for women unionists, corporatist union structures are common throughout Latin America and continue to be the status quo in Mexico. Latin American corporatism represents a state-labor relationship in which unions give up aspects of their organizational autonomy for greater material benefits from and political representation within the state (Collier 1992; Schmitter 1974). As Enrique de la Garza Toledo argues with regard to the Mexican corporatist system, the representation of workers is understood as the ability of union leaders to use their political status to deliver material benefits to rank-and-file workers. Union elections may take place, but representation really refers to the relationship between union leaders and the state rather than union leaders and the rank-and-file (Garza Toledo 2001: 9-14). As a result, union leaders are far from beholden to the will of the rank-and-file, and in this context it is difficult for rank-and-file workers to influence the decision-making of union leaders.

In Mexico, the weakness of the rank-and-file vis-à-vis union leadership is facilitated by elements of the Federal Labor Law (*Ley Federal de Trabajo—LFT*) known as “exclusion clauses.” These exclusion clauses effectively create a closed-shop, stipulating that anyone employed by a unionized company must be a member of the union. This gives union leaders control who is hired and fired, for if a union refuses to grant an individual membership, or revokes that membership, the individual loses her job. According to Jennifer Cooper, the exclusion clauses guarantee union membership, thereby relieving union leaders of having to court new members by appealing to their interests as workers. This ensures that union leaders do not need to heed the interests of the rank-and-file (2002: 103-04).

Jennifer Cooper (2002) argues that for women in unions, state-labor corporatism is a major challenge to the implementation and enforcement of policies that would protect the rights of women workers. Even if support for women's rights exists among rank-and-file workers, the unique nature of corporatist union “representation” means there is no way for union leaders to be held accountable through rank-and-file pressure or democratic union elections. According to Cooper, the absence of union democracy makes it critical that union leaders, specifically the secretary-general, are supportive of women-friendly union policies if they are to be implemented. The logical extension of this argument is that when unions are democratic, leaders have a greater obligation to respond to the interests of rank-and-file,

including women workers. As a case in point, Cooper and Flérida Guzmán have noted that in Canada, where unions are more democratic than in Mexico, union leaders have been forced to play closer attention to the needs of women workers as means of recruiting them and maintaining their support. They argue that this explains why the collective contracts of Canadian unions include clauses pertaining to discrimination and other women's demands (2000: 230). Accordingly, women should be more successful in promoting union statutes and contract clauses in unions that are independent of state-labor corporatist structures and more democratic.

The changing nature of state-labor corporatism in Mexico means that there are more independent, internally democratic unions in the country that may help Mexican union women successfully promote their rights as workers. While there have always been independent unions in Mexico that have challenged the corporatist model and supported greater union democracy (Collier 1992), the power of the independent union movement grew considerably in 1997. This is the year that several unions left Mexico's official umbrella labor federation, the Labor Congress (Congreso de Trabajo—CT), to form an independent labor federation, the National Workers' Union (Unión Nacional de Trabajo—UNT). The UNT is now the second largest labor federation in Mexico, representing 25 unions and over 325,000 workers (Bensusán and Cook 2003). As Bensusán and Cook note, the UNT has been "the most important organization in Mexico calling for democratic reform of labor institutions" (2003: 251). The UNT's affiliated unions also have much greater degrees of internal union democracy (that is to say, greater accountability of union leadership to rank-and-file workers) than corporatist unions in Mexico. The greater degree of internal union democracy in UNT affiliated unions allows us to question whether UNT-affiliated unions are likely to give some recognition to the rights of women workers in their union statutes or promote women's rights in collective contract negotiations.

However, union democracy does not negate the historically patriarchal nature of unions in Mexico. Even if democratic unions are more responsive to rank-and-file concerns, men in the unions can still hold sexist views and resist changes that would facilitate women's equality in unions or work places. Moreover, even if union leaders are sympathetic to the rights of women workers, they may not feel compelled to act in support of women's rights issues unless they are pushed themselves by women in the union. Feminist activism and leadership is therefore essential in promoting union statutes and contract clauses that promote the rights of women workers.<sup>2</sup>

### Strategies for Promoting Women's Labor Rights in Unions

Even in more democratic unions, the patriarchal character of unions can make it difficult for women to promote women's rights. Not all women, even those in leadership positions, will have an awareness of women's rights issues or be interested in becoming in promoting them.

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<sup>2</sup> Two points are worth noting here. First, many women in Mexico and other developing countries eschew the word "feminist" because of its association with a movement of white, Western, middle-class women. While I understand these concerns, I use the term here to refer to those women who will advocate for the advancement of women's rights within their unions. Second, it is important to emphasize that not all women unionists will be feminist unionists. There are many union women who are not aware of or interested in women's rights. There are also women who, while supportive of promoting women's rights in unions, are not active in doing so.

But even those who want to may find it politically difficult to take on the “boy’s club” of union leadership in order to promote issues that may be viewed as unimportant, or even threatening, to men in the union. As Svenja Blanke, the former union liaison with the Mexican office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation, noted,

It seems that women in powerful positions within their unions have to also walk carefully and diplomatically in order to push issues....Sometimes women opt for a low profile, sometimes they just become [functionaries]. In general, they lack support and power within their institution...to promote an issue like women’s rights (personal communication with Svenja Blanke, 1/15/2003).

Given this situation, it takes a particularly strong feminist activist or leader to aggressively promote women’s labor rights when she will most likely be working without much support, against the status quo, and at risk to her political future within the union.

When there are such activists and leaders willing to take on issues of women’s labor rights within their unions, there are two primary strategies that these women follow in order to generate support for incorporating women’s rights into union policies and statutes and collective contracts. First, they have demanded official spaces within unions, such as offices for gender equity, and used these official offices to promote change. Official responsibilities for these offices are widely varied: some are charged mainly with the task of coordinating social events, while others have the responsibility of developing measures to eliminate gender discrimination in the union and workplace. In all cases, however, they are an important space for women to participate and assume leadership positions on gender issues (Lovera 1995: 40-41). These offices are also spaces where women can discuss the issues and challenges specific to their experience and plan strategies for eliminating gender discrimination. As official spaces for women’s agency within unions, these offices are an important tool in promoting the rights of women workers.

Second, whether organized in official gender equity offices or not, union women have made efforts to educate other women (and men) in the union about gender issues and the rights of women workers. The importance of educational efforts in the pursuit of gender equity and the advocacy of women workers’ rights *within unions* cannot be underestimated. A study by the ILO found that “...those unions which undertook to *foster a high degree of awareness of women’s issues among the general membership* found that women’s participation at higher levels has become regarded as unexceptional (ILO 2000: 21, emphasis in original). In a country such as Mexico, where women’s low levels of participation in union leadership positions are both a result of gender discrimination and an obstacle to gender equity, increasing women’s participation in union leadership and activities is crucial to the social construction of women’s labor rights at the union level. Education is an integral part of fostering such participation.

Creating official women’s offices and education campaigns are two of the strategies that feminist activists and leaders have used to articulate the demands of women workers and push unions to recognize these rights in union policies, statutes, and collective contracts. Officially recognizing women’s rights in these areas is important for two reasons. First, such

policies and statutes institutionalize women's equality in the union, and when in collective contract clauses, they do so in a way that is legally binding not just within the union, but vis-à-vis an employer. Second, because collective contracts reflect negotiations between employers and unions over the rights and responsibilities of workers, the presence of contract clauses promoting gender equity suggests that the union played a role in supporting the clause. The absence of support for such clauses on the part of the union's negotiating team can effectively eliminate the possibility of a clause making it into the contract.<sup>3</sup>

### **Women's Rights in Mexico's Democratic Unions**

An examination of two Mexican unions belonging to the UNT reveals that attention to women's rights in union policies, statutes, and collective contracts tends to be quite explicit. Given the minimal attention given to women's rights in Mexican unions generally, these two unions—the Workers' Union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México—STUNAM) and the Telephone Workers' Union of the Mexican Republic (Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana—STRM)—have impressive records. An examination of STUNAM and the STRM shows that while the institutional commitment to democracy has played a role in advancing gender rights within the unions, feminist leadership and activism has been absolutely necessary to this project.

#### The Workers' Union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico

STUNAM represents about 30,000 administrative and academic staff of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Women constitute a significant and growing percentage of the union's membership. Currently, approximately 40% of union members are women, up from nearly 30% in 1987. Despite the large presence of women in the union and the university, they both have remained very masculine spaces. Women rarely hold high positions in the union or university leadership. There is also a degree of occupational segregation, with men holding higher numbers of academic positions and women more concentrated in support positions. And women have faced forms of discrimination, such as pregnancy exams, dismissal because of pregnancy or for taking maternity leave, and sexual harassment (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003; (Gamboa Ortiz 2003: 5-7).

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<sup>3</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that promoting gender equality and women's labor rights is becoming a more important focus of Latin American unions. A recent study by the International Labour Office (OIT) for Latin America and the Caribbean indicates that in six Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela), collective contracts increasingly reflect gender equity issues, particularly through clauses in the areas of maternity/paternity, family responsibilities, work conditions, and in the promotion of equal opportunities (OIT 2002: 70-79). In Mexico, however, collective contracts have not been very progressive in promoting women's rights in the labor sphere. A study of collective contracts done for the OIT in Mexico by Ancelmo García Pineda indicates that gender issues, particularly gender equity issues, are not a high priority in collective bargaining. In the 60 collective contracts he analyzed, the vast majority of the clauses explicitly addressing women's labor rights concerned maternity leave, which is guaranteed by the constitution and the LFT. Very few clauses addressed gender equity or non-discrimination. In fact, the analysis revealed six collective contracts that indirectly *punished* women for using their maternity leave benefits by offering pay incentives to women who never use them (García Pineda 2002: Chapter 5).



In terms of occupational segregation and discrimination, this is a rather typical environment for women workers in Mexico. However, by Mexican standards STUNAM has been a strong supporter of women's labor rights. For example, during the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1970s, STUNAM was involved in organizations that supported women's right to work, the elimination of discrimination of women in the workplace, and equal pay for equal work (Gamboa Ortiz 2003: 3; Rodríguez Bautista 2002: 3). STUNAM is one of only a small number of Mexican unions that have had a woman, Rosario Robles, serve as secretary general. Robles was a strong advocate for women's rights within the union.

Most of the union's advances in promoting women's labor rights have resulted from work done by the union's official women's office, the Secretary for Women's Action (Secretaría de Acción Feminil—SAF). Over the years women have used this office as a space for leadership on women's issues, helping women identify and promote protections and benefits for women workers that go beyond those required by law (Gamboa Ortiz 2003). Thanks in large part to the work of the women who have held the position of SAF, the union's statutes show a clear commitment to women workers. According to its 2000 statutes, the union must promote activities that increase women's participation in the union and in the labor movement, promote activities in defense of women's rights, raise gender awareness in the union, and represent the union in local, national, and international organizations that defend women's rights (STUNAM 2000).

The office of the SAF was established in 1976 after a group of women spent several years lobbying for an official space within the union where women workers could organize in support of social benefits and respect from members of the union.<sup>4</sup> After the creation of the SAF, women were successful in securing a number of changes to the collective contract that enhanced their rights and benefits. These included eliminating pregnancy testing for female job applicants, triple overtime pay for women, a decrease in the number of years necessary for women to qualify for a pension and retirement, and financial assistance for day care costs (Ravelo Blancas and Sánchez Díaz 2001: 93; Gamboa Ortiz 2003: 7-8). These clauses remain in the collective contract, and over the years other clauses have been added to the contract that also protect women's labor rights. For example, in the 2000-2002 collective contract, clause 20.11 specifies that an employee can be fired for committing sexual assault on the University campus or worksite, and clause 58 guarantees equal remuneration for the same job, regardless of sex (UNAM and STUNAM 2000).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In 1997, the title of the office was changed to the Secretaría de Acción para la Mujer, which also translates (a bit more literally) to Secretary for Women's Action.

<sup>5</sup> STUNAM is truly unique in Mexico in terms of the extent to which its collective contract addresses women's labor rights, and the union's success in promoting women's labor rights in contract negotiations cannot be undervalued. However, it is interesting to note certain cases where clauses in the contract reinforce gender roles that prevent women from achieving true equality in the workplace. For example, collective contract clauses 38 and 39 allow women to take paid leave when their children (under 12) are sick. This benefit is also extended to men who are widowed, divorced, or have legal custody of their children, or in the case when their spouse also works for UNAM (UNAM and STUNAM 2000: 34-36). This benefit is a double-edged sword. It is good for women workers in that it allows them to better balance work and family needs, but it also underscores women's primary role in the domestic sphere by restricting *men's* right to take child-care leave to cases where they are a single parent or their wife works for the University. The assumption is that a married man will usually have a wife (or other family member) who will be primarily responsible for child care.

Columba Quintero, who served as the SAF from 1998 to 2003, used her term to focus on two important issues for women workers. The first was to successfully push for a union statute clause prohibiting sexual harassment. According to Quintero, over the years some women in the union had been fighting for a statute or collective contract clause penalizing sexual harassment. As SAF, Quintero decided to renew efforts to secure such a clause.

In order to build support for the clause, Quintero began a campaign to raise awareness about sexual harassment by conducting workshops and training sessions for union members and to collect information on cases of sexual harassment of union women. She noted that it was a difficult process for several reasons. First, there was a lot of confusion among men and women about the exact definition of harassment. As she stated, “The theme of sexual harassment is really difficult. It isn’t even clear to women, who don’t understand that harassment is when you say ‘no.’ If you want [the attention] and then later want to make an accusation, that’s not it” (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003). Education and awareness raising about the issue was thus crucial to gaining support for the clause.

Proving that harassment was really a problem for union women was critical in order for Quintero to gain support for such a clause, so a second challenge in promoting the clause was women’s reluctance to discuss their experiences of harassment, especially because of the social stigma or the possible consequences if a husband or relative found out. Although Quintero was not able to conduct a full study of the extent of harassment of union women, she did collect information on individual cases of harassment. Still, despite promises of confidentiality to the women with whom she spoke, there were women who were afraid to talk because of who might find out. Some women “didn’t want to open their mouth because their husband was working there, because there was a son, because there was a brother, because they would tell other people” (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003).

Perhaps a bigger obstacle Quintero faced was the fear men had of being accused of harassment. Because men held decision making power within the union, it was crucial to get male leadership on board, but Quintero noted that “there is a lot of resistance, especially on the part of the union officials because they seemed to feel that ‘if we put in the statute, after a while we’ll be accused of harassment and our careers will be over...’” (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003).

Despite the challenges, Quintero did receive support within the union from women who asked for workshops on sexual harassment for their units, and even from some male union delegates who asked for Quintero’s help investigating cases of harassment that came to their attention. In 2002, after three years of work on the project, the union passed a statute clause penalizing sexual harassment, making STUNAM among the first unions in Mexico to have such a clause in its statutes (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003).

The second advancement Quintero made in promoting women’s labor rights was to secure University support for the establishment of the Casa de la Mujer Universitaria (University Women’s House), a center providing legal, educational, and physical and mental health services to the University’s women workers. In doing so, it provides a space for women to get important forms of support and to become better educated about how gender affects

their lives as workers and citizens. In the proposal for creating the center, Quintero and her co-author, Magdalena Guerrero Martínez, justified the need for such a space, saying that

...Mexican society has not been inclined to distinguish the needs of women. To highlight and address women's distinct needs is to adopt a gendered perspective. Taking this point of view, we suggest that there is a need for a space for the women of STUNAM...that addresses problems rooted in gender. The Workers' Union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, a progressive organization within Mexican unionism, can once again be at the cutting edge by establishing that attention to the conditions of women workers is unavoidable. With this understanding, STUNAM's Secretary of Women's Action promotes the creation of the University Women's House, an initiative that will provide women workers with a space for the dissemination of information, collective reflection, and activities for men and women who are interested in social transformation (Quintero Martínez and Guerrero Martínez 2000: 2).

The University Women's House has five different sections providing information and professional services: a media center, a center for legal consultation, a health center, a mental health center, and a documents center where information on women's issues is collected and disseminated within the university community (Quintero Martínez and Guerrero Martínez 2000).

Like the sexual harassment clause, the University Women's House was a project that women in the union had wanted to develop for many years, and it goes far in providing women workers at the university with support and information to help them gain equal footing in the workplace (and in society). Although Quintero did not experience the same obstacles in promoting the House as in the sexual harassment clause, it still required a great deal of effort to secure support for the resources and the space (personal interview with Columba Quintero, 2/20/2003).

Clearly, women have had a great deal of success in pushing for women's labor rights within STUNAM, and the case tells us a great deal about the importance of union democracy and feminist activism within unions. Columba Quintero's work on the sexual harassment clause and the University Women's House points to the importance of both. It is a result of union democracy that a woman could be elected who would have the freedom and support to take on large and sensitive projects that responded to the needs of women in the union without being shutdown by the secretary general. However, it also took the tremendous efforts of a feminist leader as motivated as Quintero to tackle the obstacles in order to see them through.

### The Telephone Workers' Union of the Mexican Republic

The case of the STRM shows that the legacies of patriarchy can be major obstacles in the struggle to recognize the rights of women workers even in a union committed to internal democracy with a history of feminist activism. The difficulties women in the STRM have had

in promoting women's labor rights in the union is well illustrated in by the difficulty that women have had in promoting changes to the union's policies and collective contracts.

The STRM primarily represents Telmex, Mexico's major telecommunications company, and women make up about 50% of the union's membership. Although historically there has been nothing overtly discriminatory in the union's collective contract with Telmex or in the union statutes, gender inequality persists. There are charges that women (especially telephone operators) have difficulty getting access to job training and taking the exams that are necessary for promotion and advancement up the salary scale, thus reinforcing occupational segregation. Sexual harassment of women workers has also been a problem (although it may be on the decline as women learn more about it and start reporting it more often). The union leadership is overwhelmingly male, and women generally feel that the union remains a very masculine space (personal interviews with Rosario Ortiz, 12/5/2002; Martha Heredia, 1/14/2003; Gloria Olvera, 2/2/2003; and Emma Rodríguez, 2/19/2003).<sup>6</sup> Until 2004, the STRM did not have an official women's office, so feminist activism on women's rights issues was often informal.

In 1997, Rosario Ortiz and Gloria Olvera held positions on the union's National Executive Committee (NEC). Their perceptions of gender inequality in the STRM led them to establish an informal women's commission within the NEC, and they began to lobby for an official women's office in the union, to organize workshops and conferences on women's issues, and even to organize gender awareness training for other members of the NEC. Although they had support from some women within the union, there was also resistance to their efforts, including from women in national leadership positions who were not convinced about the importance of gender issues (personal interviews with Rosario Ortiz, 12/5/2002 and Gloria Olvera, 2/3/2003).

One of the specific objectives of this informal women's commission was to lobby for a collective contract clause that would prohibit and penalize sexual harassment. The negotiation that followed proved to be an important example of the kind of sexist resistance they faced in promoting the rights of women workers. Gloria Olvera, who was part of the union's negotiating committee, said that the informal women's group worked hard to get the issue of harassment onto the bargaining agenda. During the negotiations, the company's negotiating team denied the problem and even said the women were crazy to bring it up. Moreover, members of the STRM's negotiating team also resisted the clause.<sup>7</sup> Olvera says that some of the other women on the committee who had previously supported her efforts to organize gender-focused workshops and conferences withdrew their support for the clause. But the biggest source of resistance came from the male leadership of the union's negotiating committee. Olvera commented that "there were compañeros who said 'what's happening is that the women want to be harassed!'" She also noted that the secretary general, Francisco Hernández Juárez, never advocated for the clause, even though he had always claimed to agree with it (personal interview with Gloria Olvera, 2/6/2003). Rosario

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<sup>6</sup> Currently, women hold two of 17 positions on the CEN and only eight of 46 other positions on national committees (STRM: "Organización" page).

<sup>7</sup> Around this time, Jennifer Cooper offered to conduct a study of sexual harassment to resolve the issue of the extent to which it did or did not exist within Telmex and the STRM, but her offer was never accepted (personal communication with Jennifer Cooper, 2/28/2003).

Ortiz also felt that there was strong resistance to the sexual harassment clause on the part of men from both the union and the company, suggesting that “none of the compañeros of the executive committee wanted to negotiate this clause.” Moreover, she said, “there was a gendered alliance between the men from the company and the men from the union that wouldn’t allow this clause to be passed” (personal interview with Rosario Ortiz, 12/5/2002). Ultimately, resistance on the part of the negotiating teams meant the clause never made it into the contract.

Attention to women’s rights in the STRM has not abated, however. The informal women’s committee continued, although its leadership changed, and the STRM has been undoubtedly influenced by official UNT support for gender equity. In fact, the UNT’s Vice President for Equity and Gender, Martha Heredia, comes from the STRM. Pressure to formally address the rights of women workers that had been building since 1997 finally yielded results in the 2004 union statutes. In a major reversal from the attitudes displayed in the in the prior negotiations over sexual harassment, the 2004 statutes identify sexual harassment as a form of discrimination. Moreover, the statutes created an official Equity and Gender office, the secretary of which has the responsibility of taking steps to eradicate sexual harassment in the union (Telmex and STRM 2004: 27; STRM 2004). The 2004 statutes take other important steps in addressing the rights of women workers in the union. For example, the Secretary of Equity and Gender is responsible for evaluating the application of anti-discrimination policies, promoting women’s participation at all levels of the union, executing leadership training programs for union women, executing gender awareness programs for union members, working to eliminate all types of workplace violence, and working to establish mechanisms in the union and in the companies to handle complaints about discrimination and harassment (STRM 2004: 27). These are among the most progressive union statutes in Mexico.

Establishing an official Secretary for Equity and Gender is an incredibly important advancement in women’s struggle to have their labor rights realized within the STRM and a fairly clear indication that the leadership of the STRM is responding to the demands that have been made by women since the late 1990s. This is a sign of leadership’s responsiveness to demands from union members that can really only be associated with internal union democracy. Corporatist unions would have no incentive to respond so progressively to the demands of women workers. However, as in the case of STUNAM, it was the pressure from feminist activists within the union that got the ball rolling on women’s rights in the late 1990s. Moreover, it will take committed feminist leadership to ensure that the mandate of the Secretary for Equity and Gender will be carried out. Assuming that the mandate is carried out, the STRM will be a leader in unions’ support for women’s labor rights in Mexico.

## **Conclusion**

Because unions continue to be important political players, even in the neoliberal era, it is important that the rights of women workers are protected within them. In Latin America, the advancement of the rights of women workers within unions has been slow, largely because of the patriarchal nature of unions. It has also been hampered by the corporatist, non-democratic nature of unions, which is prevalent in places like Mexico.

I have argued that in Mexico, unions that are democratic in nature are more likely to have more extensive recognition of the rights of women workers in their statutes and collective contracts than non-democratic unions. However, union democracy is not a sufficient condition. It is also important for there to be women within the union who are willing to push union leaders to recognize the rights of women workers.

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