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Direct Action and Unionization: How the September 19th Garment Workers Union Created a
Women's Movement

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Women's organized labor movements in Mexico were an essential aspect of the fight for women's rights. Mexican women took part in the fight for equality that went beyond region or industry throughout the twentieth century, beginning at the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. While all industries in which women were employed were represented in the fight for workplace rights, the garment and textile industries were at the center of the women's labor movement, as the industry employed the most women and was one of the first industries in which women were the primary labor force. Despite decades of abuses and calls for reform, advancements in the garment industry did not come about until the 1980s, sparked by a natural disaster that empowered women to engage in collective action on a scale that was not possible before due to the informal and unorganized nature of the industry.

Under President Lazaro Cardenas (1934-1940) the Mexican government made many promises regarding workplace safety for women and children and made progressive social and domestic assurances that planted a seed of hope that life for women could be better under the right leadership.¹ However, faced with a post-colonial society that remained deeply patriarchal as well as pushback from Mexico's powerful right wing, the agenda that promised to improve the lives of women did not come to fruition.² Many women took it upon themselves to organize and advocate for equal citizenship rights under the law when their government failed to provide it to them. Beginning in the 1930s, the women's labor movement began to organize formally and reached its climax in the mid-1980s. This turning point was sparked by a major earthquake that occurred in Mexico City on September 19th, 1985 that brought to the forefront many of the structural inequalities that existed at the time. In the aftermath of the disaster, a labor movement was initiated by the women of the garment industry with the goal to liberate garment workers

¹ Jocelyn Olcott, "Miracle Workers: Gender and State Mediation among Textile and Garment Workers in Mexico's Transition to Industrial Development." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 63 (2003), 56

² *Ibid.*, 56

from their deeply oppressive industry and generate ties of solidarity from working-class women around the world. This paper will focus on the conditions that led to the September 19th labor movement, the formation of the National Garment Workers Union (NGWU), and the women who were instrumental in advocating for the rights of women on the world stage. By analyzing an international bulletin published by the National Garment Workers Union, photos taken in the aftermath of the union's formation, and details of the union's international speaking tours, I argue that the NGWU operated as both a labor union and a women's rights organization.

Women as Political Actors

Much of the existing scholarship in this field has overlooked the political agency of women in broader discussions of labor movements in Latin America.³ Instead, research of this nature tends to focus mostly on the effects of governmental reforms rather than the groups or individuals that fought for said reforms. Especially in the case of women's labor movements, researchers tend to overlook the women who actively made change in their communities in line with their ideologies.⁴ Change, especially economic change, is not something that occurs spontaneously. Rather, meaningful societal progress typically has a grassroots foundation that should be analyzed in discussions of this nature.

Sociologist T. H. Marshall's essay entitled, "Citizenship and Social Class" explores the ever changing concept of citizenship and its place in twentieth-century society. He states that the three main elements of citizenship are "civil, political, and social" equality which are given to groups of people that the state deems worthy of such rewards.⁵ Marshall argues that the concept of citizenship took its root as capitalism gained dominance in Europe and states that creating

³ Rachel Brickner, "Mexican Union Women and the Social Construction of Women's Labor Rights," *Latin American Perspectives* 33, no. 6 (2006): 56

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56

⁵ T.H. Marshall, "Citizenship and Social Class" *Inequality and Society*, edited by Jeff Manza and Michael Sauder W.W Norton and Co, New York, 2009, 148

citizenship around a class system is "necessary to the maintenance of capitalism."⁶ The societal category of "citizen" carries with it rights and privileges not afforded to the people a state decides falls outside of that group. Further, the category of "second class citizen" is created when groups or individuals do not receive all of the rights and protections promised to citizens despite holding the title of citizen.

Dr. Rachel Brickner expands on these principles in her article, "Mexican Union Women and the Social Construction of Women's Labor Rights" as she takes the fight for citizenship rights into consideration while analyzing many of the labor movements organized by women throughout Mexico's history. Brickner examines how women use their political agency to affect change. In the case of Mexico, gendered labor movements were situated in an "overwhelmingly patriarchal and corporatist" society wherein any hope for the advancement of women's rights needed to come from the mobilization of women acting in opposition to this structure.⁷ Based on the principles of citizenship laid out by T.H. Marshall, Brickner argues that in a situation where a group does not receive full citizenship rights, it is necessary for them to advocate on behalf of themselves as members of other groups are not incentivised, and are sometimes actively de-incentivised, from participating in those causes.

As women were largely excluded from government, there was no simple or clearly defined way of achieving their goal of equality through any existing political or social avenues. The abuses of the garment industry in Mexico were predicated on the patriarchal system that overworked and undervalued women in every aspect of Mexican society. Therefore, in the case of The National Garment Workers Union, workplace equality was tied directly to the ultimate goal of emancipating all women from that system.

⁶ Ibid., 148

⁷ Brickner, "Mexican Union Women," 56

Maxine Molyneaux's theory of gendered interests draws a distinction between strategic and practical interests. Strategic gender interests refer to the needs that arise due to the power of one gender over another such as ending the unequal sexual division of labor. Practical interests, however, concern themselves with the mitigation of many of the day to day realities of oppression such as low wages or food insecurity.⁸ The National Garment Workers Union considered both of these categories when outlining the goals and principles of their movement. The immediate practical interests at the time of the creation of the NGWU were relief from the devastation of the earthquake and the ability to hold their employers accountable for the years of abuses waged against them. Strategic interests considered by the union included dismantling the broad structures that allowed for the oppression of women such as the prevalence of sexual violence, unequal pay, and other systemic inequalities. When asked what issues the NGWU should focus their resources on, one of the top responses given by the rank and file members of the organization was that the union should promote policies that "alleviate the burden of unpaid domestic labor."⁹ The union was founded on short term guarantees of relief from natural disaster and longterm goals of systemic reform.

The desire to create an international solidarity among women, specifically working-class women, indicates a radical ideology guiding the leaders of the garment workers movement. While many women were mainly concerned with their own families and livelihoods, the women that were in a position to do so called on people from around the world to pay attention to the abuses and inequalities in Mexico and help in any way they could. This speaks to the level of frustration that many women felt at having few allies in the fight against their oppressors within

⁸ Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua." *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985), 232-233

⁹ Teresa Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico: The Case of the "Nineteenth of September" Garment Workers Union." (Stanford University, 1991), 21

their own country. The fight for equality in the workplace was just one element in Mexican women's fight for equality in all aspects of their life.

The Construction of the Women's Labor Movement

Conversations surrounding women's labor in Mexico began as early as the 1910s during the Mexican Revolution. Despite the feelings of hope for change that the revolution brought for many people, the dominant cultural realities of that time were reflective of something much different. Popular media idealized *machismo*, or exaggerated masculinity that can manifest in harmful ways. The image of the "charro," or cowboy, became the archetype of the ideal Mexican man.¹⁰ In later years, the term "charro" was used by workers to refer to their corrupt or abusive bosses and union representatives.¹¹ Charro unions were one of the main limiting factors in the ability of garment workers to unionize prior to 1985. Unions in name only, this system was used by employers to appear outwardly as though there was some kind of consideration for the conditions of the workers in their factories or workshops. Typically, owners or supervisors would appoint their own men to the position of union representative. The majority of garment workshops, between 50-80%, were not officially recognized by the Secretary of Labor, meaning their unions were not either.¹² They operated in the informal sector of the economy with many workshops operating entirely through the black market. When asked about their knowledge of charro unions, many women who worked under them said they did not know a union existed in their workplace or what it was supposed to do. Some who knew of the existence of a union stated that they did not know whether they were members, whereas, others informed researchers that

¹⁰ Olga, Nájera-Ramírez, "Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican Charro." *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (1994), 5

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10

¹² Teresa Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico: The Case of the "Nineteenth of September" Garment Workers Union." (Stanford University, 1991), 43

they attended union meetings as a member but it was made clear by their employers that they were not allowed to talk or participate in said meetings.¹³

In 1936, an investigation was done into the workplace conditions and salaries of women and children in Mexico City, with the study focusing mainly on the garment industry. The textile and garment industries were the ones that employed women most frequently and were the main source of women's wage labor outside of the home for many decades. This study found extensive evidence of human rights and labor law abuses in garment making workshops. The study concluded that when experiencing an injustice in the workplace, many women did not have the education or "economic security" to challenge their employers.¹⁴ Historian Jocelyn Olcott's analysis of this study states that the report was saturated with the idea of "paternalism"—the underlying message of the report's conclusions being that the post-revolutionary government should take care of women, rather than framing women as equal participants in the new system.¹⁵

While calls for independent unionization were frequent, because the industry was not centralized and was split between the formal and informal sectors of the economy, few of those calls led to any form of progress. The ability to track the success of women who demanded better workplace conditions remains difficult because of the industry's lack of coherent organization, but any victories would have been achieved on a very small scale as there was little disruption to the structure as a whole.¹⁶ Unionization was also discouraged by the high rates of unemployment or underemployment among garment workers. Women who were discovered discussing unionization with their coworkers could be fired and quickly replaced. In addition to this, underground workshops that operated in Mexico's black market often popped in and out of

¹³ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 71

¹⁴ Jocelyn Olcott, "Miracle Workers," 45

¹⁵ Ibid, 46

¹⁶ Ibid., 75

existence quickly, with sweatshop owners moving their enterprises constantly in an attempt to remain above the law. The average length of time a woman worked at a workshop, both in the informal and formal sectors of the garment industry, was just 7 months.¹⁷ Beyond the limitations of achieving independent unionization, there was also a large portion of garment workers who worked outside of the realm of the existing union structure. Women who worked from home or as subcontractors for small workshops were frequently left out of the conversation surrounding labor reform and, therefore, reaped very few of the advancements made by advocates for working people in the early to mid twentieth century. Despite the fact that Mexico's central government was aware of the poor workplace conditions faced by garment workers, few changes were made on the policy front to improve said conditions or give women agency to advocate for themselves within the legal system. In fact, many arguments were put forth by lawmakers in an attempt to undermine the very need for such reforms, citing low employment rates of Mexican men and the compromised safety of women who chose to work outside of the home.¹⁸

In the decades following the Mexican Revolution, the country transitioned into the period known as the Mexican Miracle, which marked "rapid industrialization... and political stability" from the 1940s through the 1960s.¹⁹ Throughout this period, the Mexican government's policy agenda supported the conservative business lobby and spent its resources on supporting "professional women" rather than poor wage earning women.²⁰ The country cycled through various austerity programs and policy decisions that were generally unfavorable to working women.²¹

¹⁷ Jocelyn Olcott, "Miracle Workers," 73

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 46

²¹ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 43

Feminist movements began to take root throughout the mid-twentieth century in response to poor workplace conditions and the denial of other citizenship rights. Throughout the 1970s, small groups of radical students formed and linked themselves to leftist political parties or found community through independent news publications and radio broadcasts.²² With pushback from both the right and left wings of the Mexican political landscape, as well as from neo-liberal feminists, the rise of feminism in Mexico was prevented from following the “smooth, upward process” that took place in many other countries.²³ Burdened by the dominance of patriarchy as a relic of colonialism, many aspects of Mexican culture upheld the structures that oppressed women. Women who were interested in workplace organization were often discouraged by members of their own family that believed the dominant cultural narrative that women held a responsibility to perform certain jobs inside the home.²⁴ It was difficult for many garment workers to fight against the structures that oppressed them because opposing their boss’s authority would be to oppose the same authority that empowered their husbands and fathers to treat them poorly at home.

In 1982, economic conditions in Mexico fell into crisis as oil exports crashed. Total bankruptcy was avoided due to President Lopez-Portillo (1976-1982) nationalizing the banks, however, economic conditions were tenuous from that point on.²⁵ By the mid-1980s there was a somewhat disjointed understanding of what a labor centered feminist identity should look like in Mexico, however, the unsolved structural inequalities that plagued poor women created an opening for a movement.

September 19th, 1985

²² Gisela Damián, “The Fruitful and Conflictive Relationship between Feminist Movements and the Mexican Left.” *Social Justice* 42, no. 3/4 (2015), 75

²³ *Ibid.*, 83

²⁴ Carrillo, “Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico,” 176

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37-38

On this day, an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.1 struck Mexico City. Scientists conclude that it was the “worst earthquake disaster in the history of Mexico” and resulted in up to 20,000 deaths.²⁶ The geographical characteristics of Mexico City such as the deep layers of mud leftover from the lake the city was built on top of, resulted in increased levels of destruction. Many of the high rise structures that were compliant with building codes of the time were devastated in the impact, meaning that the countless buildings that were not up to code such as many public buildings and government housing projects were totally demolished. It is estimated that around 300,000 people were left without housing.²⁷ An estimated 400 garment workshops were destroyed resulting in 40,000 garment workers losing their jobs. There were an estimated 800 garment workers who lost their lives.²⁸ Soon after the earthquake and the powerful aftershocks that followed it, one of which was measured at 7.5 on the Richter scale, police and military were deployed to the area. Survivors were prevented from approaching ruined buildings to look for survivors who may have been trapped under rubble or to uncover the bodies of deceased loved ones. The government made no immediate plans to excavate the ruins and offered very little in the way of economic assistance to the hundreds of thousands of people left destitute.²⁹ An alarming number of Mexico City’s residents lost their homes and livelihoods with the earthquake and the government’s response did not offer sufficient aid to mitigate the effects of the devastation.

Expectedly, many garment workshop owners deserted their employees after the disaster. As women began to report their friends and coworkers as missing, some owners claimed that none of the missing or injured women were in their workshops at the time of the earthquake and

²⁶ James Beck and John Hall, "Factors Contributing to the Catastrophe in Mexico City During the Earthquake of September 19, 1985," *Geophysical Research Letters* 13, no. 6 (1986), 593

²⁷ Beck and Hall, "Factors Contributing to the Catastrophe in Mexico City During the Earthquake of September 19, 1985," 593

²⁸ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 63

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78

were therefore not entitled to any compensation. Many also refused to pay back wages for time lost due to the disaster. In some extreme cases, owners even acquired their own excavation equipment to salvage their expensive machinery from the rubble but spared no resources to help trapped survivors or uncover the bodies of the many hundreds of dead people buried beneath the rubble in the garment district, some of whom were the employees of these owners at the time of the tragedy.³⁰ Abandoned by both the government and their employers and left with no other options, garment workers came together to support one another in this time of unprecedented loss and devastation.

An encampment was formed in the garment district that provided a space for garment workers and their families to create makeshift shelters. Many feminist organizations came to the aid of these workers and created a massive food donation and distribution infrastructure as well as around the clock security to prevent theft or vandalism.³¹ This heartwarming display of solidarity is contrasted with the bleak reality of the encampment, which is demonstrated in Figure 1. The photo depicts a woman working on a sewing project while sitting in her makeshift tent made from the debris that littered the street. Some level of privacy was achieved through hanging sheets and canvas to act as walls and roofs. The pointed roof of another hand made shelter can be seen in the background of the left side of the photograph, behind a mass of debris. The caged bird sitting just outside of the shelter to the right of the woman, possibly a pet, echoes the tremendous amount of loss that the people of Mexico City faced.³² Salvaging what possessions they could, thousands were forced to uproot their lives and could rely only on the mutual aid of their fellow citizens for assistance.

³⁰ Ibid., 78

³¹ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 108

³² *Señora en Campamento del Sindicato de Costureras 19 de Septiembre*. 1985. Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, Centro de Documentación M68. Mexico City.

The psychological effects of a tragedy on this scale are difficult to measure, however, analysis of data collected by medical professionals in the days, months, and years following the earthquake reveals some interesting patterns. Rates of mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, and general anxiety were heightened across the board in people directly affected by the disaster, however, the rates were much higher in women. When compared to the percentages of men who were diagnosed with cases of PTSD, depression, and general anxiety following the earthquake, women were twice as likely to suffer with moderate to severe cases of the same disorders.³³ This could be due to women's role as the primary caregivers of children and the distress that came along with not being able to adequately provide for those children or other family members due to reasons outside of their control. The report also found that people who were housed in encampments or shelters with strong social bonds with their fellow refugees were less likely to be responsive to outsiders' attempts to intervene, in this case, medical professionals attempting to offer mental health services.³⁴ This demonstrates the distrust people felt towards the government and all existing structures following the disastrous and incompetent response to the earthquake. That lack of trust led many people to find comfort among friends, neighbors, and comrades and operate their own autonomous relief efforts rather than rely on some of the attempts the government made to provide relief.

With thousands left destitute and most garment workers left with no certainty as to the status of their employment or the future of their industry, the situation reached its breaking point. In the days following the earthquake, as the dust settled and people began to think about the long term effects of the disaster rather than the immediate needs of survivors, discussions about how to leverage this moment to achieve long awaited change began to develop. The National

³³ Ramón De La Fuente, "The Mental Health Consequences of the 1985 Earthquakes in Mexico." *International Journal of Mental Health* 19, no. 2 (1990), 26

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27

Garment Workers Union was formed in the wake of the September 19th earthquake with the goal of rebuilding the garment industry in a way that prioritized the wellbeing of its female workforce as well as dismantling the existing structures that contributed to the domestic and societal exploitation of women. The women that made up the ranks of the NGWU chose to concentrate their collective political energy into building a movement on a scale that had never been attempted by garment workers, or workers in any industry in which women were the primary workforce.

The National Garment Workers Union

On October 20th, 1985, just one month after the devastating earthquake hit Mexico city, the National Garment Workers union was officially recognized by the Secretary of Labor. Workers from around 100 small factories were represented, and the organization boasted around 8,000 members at its inception. It was the first independent union recognized by Mexico's Secretary of Labor since 1976 and the first labor union run entirely by women to be officially recognized in Mexico.³⁵ The National Garment Workers Union, which is sometimes referred to as the Nineteenth of September Garment Workers Union (NSGWU), acted to provide a voice to the historically underprotected women that comprised upwards of 95% of the workforce in the garment manufacturing industry.³⁶ They organized marches and protests, provided resources and amplified women's voices in conflicts with their employers, and worked extensively to expand the public's knowledge of the struggles faced by garment workers through media and news outlets. The NGWU also formed an international commission with the goal of taking their movement to the international stage, hoping to raise awareness for their cause among potential allies abroad, namely in America. The NGWU worked to spread the message of the union and

³⁵ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 83

³⁶ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 72

inform the public about the injustices faced by Mexican garment workers in order to form ties of solidarity with allies around the world. The organization also embarked on speaking tours throughout Europe and North America.

Figure 2 demonstrates one of the many demonstrations organized by the NGWU. The protestors in attendance are largely young women who can be seen carrying banners and holding hands in solidarity with one another.³⁷ As their work continued, members of the NGWU laid bare the abuses they suffered in the garment industry to the media. Many outlets finally began highlighting the illegal and immoral violations faced by wage earning women in the garment industry. However, this media notoriety eventually worked against the union's interests as some media outlets reported sweeping reforms and major concessions to labor activists despite the challenges the NGWU faced in achieving lasting policy reforms.³⁸

Faced with the challenge of how to operate as both a labor union and a social movement, long term viability became a major consideration for the union. An international commission was created in 1986 and it engaged in the production of various projects until it dissolved three years later in 1989. During these years, the commission produced an international bulletin that was printed in English and disseminated to an international audience. It is unclear through my research whether the NGWU printed this bulletin in languages other than English, however, as the union's speaking tour included destinations in Eastern Europe it is not outside the realm of possibility that other languages were printed as well.³⁹ In September 1988, a special edition of the bulletin was printed in order to commemorate the third anniversary of the September 19th tragedy. This edition of the bulletin compiled background information on the conditions that led

³⁷ *Marcha del Sindicato de Costureras 19 de Septiembre* 1985. 1985. Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, Centro de Documentación M68. Mexico City.

³⁸ Carrillo, "Women, Trade Unions, and New Social Movements in Mexico," 84

³⁹ National Garment Workers Union. "International Bulletin: 19th of September." September 1988, 11

to the formation of the NGWU, interviews and testimonials with working women, victories achieved by members of the union, and lists of current workplace conflicts.⁴⁰ The message that connects the various topics discussed in this publication is clear. The bulletin projects the idea that the work of the NGWU was far from over even as some of its members were able to rebuild their lives following the devastation of the initial event that sparked the union's formation..

The choice to look outward and form an international base of support strengthened the resolve of many members of the NGWU. It even made members privy to problems occurring in other parts of the world and gave them a first look at how other garment workers combatted them. For example, after speaking to unionists in West Germany, NGWU members Alma Rosa Vera and Leticia Olveira were shown advanced textile making technology and determined that if such machinery made its way to Mexico it could cause an unemployment crisis by eliminating the need for workers through automation.⁴¹ This is something the union may not have learned in a timely manner without being shown by their allies abroad. Knowing ahead of time about potential challenges such as automation allowed the NGWU to prepare for an abundance of scenarios and advocate for themselves in adaptive and opportune ways. Octavia Lara, who served as the Secretary of International Relations for the NGWU said that the “vision broadened” when the union made the decision to make ties with feminist labor activists abroad.⁴² Before looking outward, many women who were members of the union had a hard time conceptualizing the extent of the structural issues plaguing women. Lara states that when framed in an international context “the enemy was no longer the individual boss, but companies that moved all over the world.”⁴³ In solidarity with all of the women who lived under oppressive structures,

⁴⁰ Ibid. 3, 5, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid. 11

⁴² Octavia Lara, (Secretary of International Relations, NSGWU), Interviewed by Teresa Carillo, Mexico D.F., June 16, 1987.

⁴³ Octavia Lara, Interviewed by Teresa Carillo, 1987

the National Garment Workers Union aligned itself with an effort to emancipate all women from their station.

Speaking tours were also a means for the NGWU to spread their message and meet face to face with people who were sympathetic to their cause. An announcement of a visit from the NGWU in Cambridge, Massachusetts includes the mention of a film produced by the union entitled *We Are Not Asking for the Moon*, which details the origins of the union and the devastation of the September 19th earthquake.⁴⁴ Outside of this instance, there is no other mention of this film in any of the sources I have come across or any of the secondary literature on this topic. However, its English title as well as the fact that it was shown in the United States suggest it was yet another project taken on by the International Commission in order to spread the word about the existence and sweeping international goals of the National Garment Workers Union.

Conclusion

The nature of the unorganized and informal garment industry in Mexico made the prospect of achieving meaningful reform seem impossible for decades. It was not until the perfect storm of events occurred, including the crisis of 1982 that left the economy in a shaky state and the September 19th earthquake, that the door opened to the possibility of change. Formed as a relief organization to help one another through an unprecedented tragedy, the NGWU drew on the solidarity of its members to call for broad, comprehensive reform that they hoped would deliver better working conditions for long suffering garment workers. Through their focus on creating an international network of support, the union created a functional, strong labor union and a social movement that continues to inspire women and working people all around the world to this day. In a country that had never seen collective action initiated by

⁴⁴ "Mexican Garment Workers' Union on Tour," *Sojourner* (Cambridge, MA), April 1988.

women on this scale, the NGWU remains to be a unique reminder that oppressed peoples have the power to stand up to even the most intimidating obstacles.

Appendix:



Figure 1. Photo of a seamstress in the encampment made by The National Garment workers Union, 1985



Figure 2. Image from a National Garment Workers Union march, 1985.

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