

*Triple Militancy?*  
Expanding the Boundaries of Union Women's Activism in Mexico

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## I. INTRODUCTION\*

Literature on double militancy in Latin America's democratic transitions underscores the importance of women simultaneously mobilizing within civil society and taking part in formal national politics in order to promote the expansion of women's rights. Women's so-called "double militancy," and variations on it, throughout the region led to important gains for women in terms of quotas, laws against sexual violence, family law, and certain social rights (Franceschet 2004; Htun 2003; Stevenson 1999; Baldez 2002).

Although our understanding of domestic social movements and social institutions has helped us understand the ways in which many issues of gender and women's rights have gotten onto the political agenda in many Latin American countries, the protection and advancement of women's rights as workers has been difficult for women to advance, despite the growing role of women in the paid labor force. There are many reasons for this, including class tensions within the women's movement, the location of women in non-protected and difficult-to-organize industries (e.g., domestic service, export processing zones, the informal sector), and the patriarchal nature of labor unions. Another important reason exists: the shift to (neo)liberal models of economic development has meant a corresponding loss of national sovereignty with regard to economic decision-making. National governments are constrained by the "requirements" of competition in a global economy, and this means that there has been a reluctance and/or inability for many governments to protect workers rights that do exist, let alone expand workers' rights and protections or broaden the groups of workers protected by them.

And yet, the feminization of the workforce—and women's particularly dominant role in certain sectors of the global economy—makes it imperative that women demand protections as workers and the enforcement of rights and protections that already exist in law. As important as women workers' rights may be to national women's movements, the fact that women cannot expect national governments to go to bat for them given current global economic structures suggests that women must also take their activism beyond national borders and engage in activism at the international level in order to create another level of pressure on national governments. This calls for a sort of triple militancy, in which women workers are engaged in national civil society, have allies in national governments, and also become active transnationally.

In this paper I examine a loosely associated group of union women activists based in Mexico City who are dabbling in this kind of triple militancy in a broad effort to push for recognition and enforcement of women workers' rights. I ultimately argue that although this activism is essential for change, it is hampered by the weakness (absence?) of a women workers' movement at the domestic level.

The paper proceeds in three sections. In Section II I briefly discuss the theories and successes of "double militancy" but show how the global economic context makes struggle in the domestic public sphere insufficient for the advancement women workers' rights. The consequence is that women workers' activism is necessary as part of a transnational activism as well. Section III discusses the activism of union women in Mexico City in three specific areas: a training program for union women to foster their ability to attain advanced leadership positions, a feminist assembly, initiated by a federal deputy, to discuss institutional reform from a gender perspective, and union

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women's participation at the founding congress of the International Trade Union Convention in Vienna. I conclude in Section IV by suggesting that the fractured nature of working women's activism in Mexico is a major impediment to women workers making more concrete advances in this particularly difficult political and economic context.

## II. THE NEED FOR TRIPLE MILITANCY IN A GLOBAL ECONOMIC ERA

Research on the gains women have made in promoting women's rights has recently focused on the idea of "double-militancy." According to Karen Beckwith, double-militancy refers to "the location of activist women in two political venues, with participatory, collective identity, and ideological commitments to both" (quoted in Franceschet 2004, 502). As opposed to the idea that activists must remain autonomous from the spheres of political authority (e.g., political parties) or must become integrated within them and abandon their social activism, double-militancy proposes that women can use both spheres to advance their interests and need not abandon one to participate in the other. And so, studies have shown that demands for gender equality policies coming from civil society have been most successful when ushered through government channels by receptive actors within political institutions, including national women's bureaucracies and legislatures. For example, discussing second wave feminism in Chile, Susan Franceschet argues that the movement's success came from the participation of feminist activists within government bureaucracies who could respond to demands articulated from an autonomous feminist movement and who had sufficient strength within the government to compel political parties to respond to those demands (Franceschet 2004, 504).

We can see the same basic dynamic at work—in which civil society's demands are successful when they can be pushed through by sympathetic actors—in cases that might not meet the precise definition of double-militancy. In explaining the successful passage of sex crimes legislation in Mexico in 1990, Linda Stevenson underscored the importance of having a record number of women serving in the Mexican congress who united across party lines in a unanimous response to the groundswell of public support for the legislation (Stevenson 1999, 66-72). Here, although there were certainly ideological differences between women of the different political parties, with right-wing women not necessarily feminist activists, there was nonetheless a common commitment to ending violence against women that helped push the legislation through.

Mala Htun's study of women's rights legislation in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile leads offers a different perspective on the same theme. For Htun, one factor explaining the passage of legislation upholding women's rights was the existence of "issue networks," groups of civil society activists and professionals that were given the opportunity to steer legislation in a particular direction (Htun 2003). Issue networks don't fit neatly into the definition of double-militancy, but the same idea holds true as in the previous two cases: it is important for there to be actors within government, working with and/or responding to actors in civil society for legislation on women's rights to be pushed through. That said, as Htun's study shows, it is important for actors involved in drafting policy to have an ideological commitment that is shared with civil society activists if those precise demands will be met. Although the critical mass of women in the Mexican congress helped in 1990, such legislative successes have not been frequently repeated. This lends support to the idea of double-militancy.

## BRINGING IN TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM (FROM DOUBLE TO TRIPLE MILITANCY)

And yet, what of demands for the protection and enforcement of the rights of women workers? Globally, women are playing a growing role in the workforce (Evans 2008, 290). But women's experiences in the workforce are uniquely shaped by economic globalization, in ways that make it challenging for women themselves to mobilize around issues of labor rights and protections and for national governments to respond to those.

In her study of Mexico's export factories (the *maquila* industry), Leslie Salzinger suggests that a central feature of globalization is "capital's increased capacity to move in search of better—cheaper, more malleable, more highly skilled—workers" (2003, 9). Salzinger argues that the "better" workers being sought are "feminine" workers, who are assumed to be docile and dexterous, not to mention cheaper than "masculine" workers (Salzinger 2003, 14-16). This is not to say that women are docile or inherently more productive than men; rather, Salzinger argues that it is the process of management in these global factories that creates this type of worker, which becomes understood as the norm. As such, it is possible to pay low wages, not offer promotions, and penalize workers steeply for missing work. Labor organizing in export industries is notoriously difficult because of the mobility of capital and weakness of labor unions (Bandy 2004). And though Salzinger notes that labor organizers have had some success in this industry, workers often ignore the appeals of organizers because of "legitimate fear of employer blacklists and young workers' assumption that maquila work is only a brief...stop on the way to something more permanent" (2003, 167).

Whatever its drawbacks, work in the export industries has its proponents<sup>1</sup>—and it is located in the formal sector of the economy, where workers are at least supposed to be covered by worker protections. Globalization incorporates women into the economy in far more nefarious ways. As Saskia Sassen proposes, the economically vulnerable and disadvantages people in developing societies, who are most often women, "are emerging as significant sources of profit and government revenue enhancement, partly in the shadow economy" (Sassen 2000, 506). She argues that economically vulnerable third world women become incorporated into the global economy in prostitution and sex trafficking and legal and illegal labor migration. Profits and remittances from women's work in these industries becomes an important source of revenue, although the women themselves are not protected well, if at all (Sassen 2000).

If these women are to take part in the workforce in jobs that are safe, adequately remunerated, perhaps even empowering, it is important there are protections against harassment and violence, pregnancy discrimination and other forms of gender discrimination, equal pay policies, rights to organize, and enforcement of maternity leave protections. All too often, however, such rights as do exist are poorly enforced or efforts to promote such legislation fail to pass. As case in point, Blofield notes that in Chile, of the 38 bills that came before Congress on various women's rights issues, the one's that were successful did not alter gender roles and did not require any economic redistribution (Blofield).

Although not all women are directly linked to the global economy in the ways described by Salzinger and Sassen, economic globalization has had a trickle down effect on women: male migration, weakening economies, and reductions in social welfare spending has pulled more women into the workforce. On the flip side, economic globalization has also constrained national governments'

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<sup>1</sup> See the recent column by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof calling for more sweatshops.

willingness and/or ability to expand protections of women workers.<sup>2</sup> Maria Cook argues that in labor law reform processes in Latin America, the tension has been between protecting rights and engendering flexibility demanded by the global economy, with flexibilization often appealing to governments (Cook 2007). This reinforces the argument long proposed by critics of “neoliberalism” that the requirements of the global economy predispose governments to act in favor of global capital rather than labor (Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens 1997).

What can be done in the face of this situation? Peter Evans proposes that a “counter-hegemonic” globalization is possible, one that comprises “a global movement that maximizes democratic political control and makes equitable development of human capabilities and environmental stewardship its priorities (Evans 2008, 272). Evans’s project of counter-hegemonic globalization builds on Karl Polanyi’s theory of “double movement,” but instead of the reaction against self-regulated capitalism being rooted in national politics (e.g., national labor organizing), it is rooted globally. He sees such a movement as the “expansion of possibilities for trumping national constraints by organizing at the global level” (2008, 275).

Among the requirements for achieving this project, Evans argues, is for contemporary movements to “move beyond ‘organizational silos’ devoted to single issues and particular constituencies” (2008, 287). In other words, a counter-hegemonic project cannot be achieved if each organization continues to work on its own issue for its own members, albeit at a global level. Rather, the goals of organizations need to become broadened and intertwined, or “braided.” Interestingly, one example Evans gives of “braiding together” organizations and issues revolves around women workers. Because the workforce is becoming more feminized, women represent the “natural vanguard” of efforts to expand the labor movement. At the same time, the issues of women workers are naturally central to the women’s movement (2008, 290). The labor movement and the women’s movement are naturally allies, and combining their efforts could, presumably, have important results if they work together.

And yet Evans only discusses this particular braiding in the national context; he does not offer any ideas of how this movement could emerge globally, and we have seen some of the difficulties of embarking on such a project. Unlike Evans, Chandra Mohanty, echoing the ideas of Salzinger and Sassen, sees mobilizational possibilities—on a global scale—among women workers. This is because despite national differences, third world women workers are united in their role in the global division of labor. They are natural global allies (Mohanty 2003).

But how would such a project get started? How realistic is this, given the challenges women face organizing in a national context given their work in industries that are not easily organized (e.g., informal sector, domestic labor), where organizing can have negative outcomes (e.g., export oriented industries), and the decline of a unionized workforce that can still be reluctant to take up women’s interests? Sidney Tarrow offers some ideas about how women might become involved in transnational activism in ways that, while falling short of Evans’ counter-hegemonic project in scope, create links between national and international activists that could be used to advance issues of concern to women workers vis-à-vis their national governments.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Sassen notes, countries like the Philippines have extensive government programs to help women emigrate because of national debt and unemployment rates (Sassen 2000, 520). This is a far cry from enacting legislation to uphold the rights of women workers domestically.

Tarrow (2005) argues that we live in an era of emerging transnational activism. Transnational activism falls short of the counter-hegemonic project proposed by Evans insofar as it continues to highlight the importance of the national state as the central site even of global activism. That said, what we see emerging, Tarrow suggests, are more activists who are moving (at least temporarily) beyond national activism and who “mobilize domestic and international resources and opportunities to advance claims on behalf of external actors against external opponents, or in favor of goals they hold in common with transnational allies” (Tarrow 2005, 43). These are activists who neither begin nor end their activist careers engaged in global projects and who continue to see national change as central but who recognize the importance of reaching out globally to achieve particular goals. What I propose, then, is that given the difficulty of mobilizing nationally around issues central to women workers, there is a need for activist women workers to also become active transnationally in order to find greater support or leverage for their national demands (which, are really global demands).

### III. UNION WOMEN AND TRIPLE MILITANCY IN MEXICO

In Mexico, work is formally linked to citizenship through the Mexican constitution of 1917, which was drafted at the tail end of the Mexican revolution (1910-20). Although workers were not as central to revolutionary fighting as peasants, workers did participate in the fighting. More importantly, successive revolutionary factions who took control of Mexico City found it necessary to placate the growing organized labor force of the city in order to maintain order, which gave the working class political clout (Lear 2001). Workers’ growing political clout led the framers of the Mexican constitution to include some of the most progressive labor rights language of the time. Article 123 of the constitution guarantees the right to freely associate, organize and strike. It also includes important social rights for workers such as minimum wages, maternity leave, vacation provisions, and provisions for training, health, and safety (Cook 2007, 37). Additional provisions for workers were established in the Federal Labor Law (LFT) of 1931 and in reforms to both documents in the 1970s.

Both the constitution and the LFT established a number of rights for women workers specifically, including maternity leave (as noted above), regulations of the pay of domestic employees, and daycare access. Most of the rights for women workers, however, revolve around maternity. Neither document addresses important issues such as sexual harassment and violence, gender discrimination, pay equity, or affirmative action. And the language of both documents assumes that workers are men, from the establishment of a “family wage” to the use of the masculine version of the word for “worker” (*el trabajador*) (Brickner 2005, 229-64).

Although women have long been engaged in the labor movement, there has been no strong women’s labor movement calling for enforcement of existing laws for women workers (e.g., maternity leave) or an expansion of laws that would foster women’s ability to work in safe and equal conditions (e.g., laws against harassment and pregnancy discrimination, equal pay, etc.). In the last decade, however, there has been a growing activism on the part of women workers. In what follows, discuss the “triple militancy” of a loosely affiliated network of union women in Mexico City (henceforth, the Mexico City network). This network comprises women from three organizations that have been extremely active in raising awareness of the rights of women workers and generating activism around women workers’ issues: the Red de Mujeres Sindicalistas (Union Women’s Network, or Red), the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation (FES), and the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Workers’ Union, or UNT). The Red is an NGO comprised of women who

are members of a diverse set of unions in and around Mexico City. Since 1997 they have been involved in leadership training for union women with the goal of changing union culture. The FES is a German NGO with offices around the world promoting democracy. The Mexico office has long promoted union democracy and, as an off-shoot, strengthening women's role in unions. The UNT is the largest independent labor federation in Mexico, representing about 500,000 workers. Among unions, it has led the call for democratizing state-labor relations in Mexico and has an official commitment to gender equity.

Although the results of the efforts of the Mexico City network have been halting, they are an important glimpse into the efforts of a fairly powerfully positioned group in Mexican civil society to advance the rights of Mexican women workers. Their successes and failures give us important insights into the difficulty of economically based activism in the context of economic globalization.

#### FES LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Many civil society organizations have been active in Mexico in the effort to push for a broadening and enforcement of the rights of women workers, especially since the early 1980s after the debt crisis (1982) and the Mexico City earthquake (1985) led to increasing economic hardships for women and their families (Brickner 2005). Since that time, one of main activities of organizations working with women workers has been in the area of awareness-raising. What organizations found was that women lacked an awareness of how their gender influenced the experiences they have in the workforce—as individuals and as a collective of *women*. Consequently, before women could become engaged in the work of struggling to broaden women's rights, they had to become conscious of themselves as workers, of their gender, and of the rights that they had or should have.

Consciousness-raising activities became important in the work of organizations like the *Grupo de Educación Popular con Mujeres* (Women's Popular Education Group, or GEM), *Mujeres en Acción Sindical* (Women in Union Action, or MAS), and the Red). As a member of the Red from the Telephone Workers' Union noted about consciousness-raising, "we [the Red] want women workers to have a greater consciousness of their identity as women, their identity as workers, and their identity as a citizen." Otherwise, notes another Red member, retired from the electrical workers' union, "If you don't teach people...if you don't understand because you don't know, then how do you confront [the challenges women face as workers], no?" For civil society organizations engaged in the struggle for women workers' rights, consciousness-raising is a necessary precursor to broader activism.

In 2006-07 the Fredrich Ebert Foundation sponsored an innovative program for union women in leadership positions. The program was designed, not just to raise awareness of issues surrounding gender and work, but to give these women the skills—and confidence—so that they could seek elected political positions and higher leadership positions in their unions. Over 18 months, the women, selected from various unions and labor organizations, met regularly for workshops led by academics, professionals, and legislators to develop a more thorough understanding of the gendered nature of the workforce, methods for advancing gender issues in organizational structures, and leadership skills needed for professional advancement.

It is worth quoting at length Inés González, the program's coordinator, who explained its significance this way:

These women had the help of the Foundation so that they could be trained in theoretical and practical perspectives, so that they will reflect on the political and socioeconomic reality of the country, so that they gain consciousness that they need to look for positions of power in society—in this specific case, legislative power. We think that union women have to reach the spaces where laws are made because the labor movement, the world of work, both men and women constitute the working world, but the national labor laws [aren't current with regard to] women's rights or the demands of half the working population, no? Because in Mexico they say that we're 44%, the rate of women working who are above 14 years old, right? So that's almost half. And in this sense, how has the labor law been modernized? In this sense, what have been the changes? In what way have they incorporated the demands of women workers into national legislation? They haven't. And we think that it's very important that from the legislative space, real women unionists with a gender consciousness, progressive women, women committed to the union movement and the movement of women workers, arrive at this space so that they can push for reform or labor laws that recognize this reality of the workforce (personal interview, Mexico City, May ?? 2007).

In short, González and the FES saw a need for civil society to become active not only in raising awareness of the issues of gender and labor within civil society but also to prepare women coming out of civil society organizations (especially unions) for participation in positions of decision making power (within and outside the legislature). The program was an implicit acknowledgement of the argument for double militancy.

For González and Mercedes López, another coordinator with FES, there were many positive results from the program. At program's end, one union leader became a director within her university; another activist became the regional director of her organization; another participant became director of one of Mexico City's municipal women's institutes.<sup>3</sup> Two women became advisors to Mexico's *Instituto Nacional de Mujeres* (National Women's Institute, or INMUJERES). Eight women ran for congressional seats in the 2006 federal elections (for four different parties), and one of these was elected as a "back-up" deputy.

Additionally, the participants of the program developed a legislative agenda dealing with issues of concern to working women, ranging from health care, family responsibilities, and social security laws. They presented it to all the political parties except for the right-wing *Partido de Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, or PAN) in the lead-up to the 2006 federal elections (personal interview with Mercedes López, Mexico City, May 2007).

The qualitative results of the program were perhaps as important as the quantitative outcomes. Lopez noted that through the program women learned that they are capable of holding positions traditionally held by men, that they could produce written material that was to be taken seriously, and that they could be models for others (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007). This sentiment was echoed by a former union leader within the university sector, who noted that the program was important because "it was a project that allowed you to have greater knowledge, that strengthened and empowered you, [allowed you] to aspire to something that many women fear—fear of being [in leadership positions]" (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> Mexico's *Distrito Federal* (Federal District, or DF), which encompasses most of Mexico City, is divided into 16 *delegaciones* (or administrative delegations). Each delegation has a women's institute that endeavors to provide services to women in that community.

Participants in the program also began to recognize the importance not just of women as agents of political change, but of the importance of preparedness in making that change. A union leader within the garment industry stated of the program, “I learned that women workers...are important. That we shouldn’t be devalued, that we shouldn’t allow men to always profit in this man’s world, that we should be prepared to contribute, that we should be listened to attentively, but that we should present real, objective, and sincere proposals.” This same leader commented that as a result of the program “I have a much more developed idea of what it means to support women, to help them resolve things that have not been addressed, especially in the industry I represent” (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007).

The program was also important for bridging divides and networking. As a participant who works to organize domestic employees noted about her experience, “I saw that there’s a lack of understanding about many things. For example, those who were there, unless I spoke about the problems of domestic workers, unless I spoke about the importance of valuing domestic work, no one knew. Like I didn’t know about the university union or the telephone workers’ union, and all these things” (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007). For this participant, the program allowed the women to get to know each other and their problems. This is particularly significant given the diversity of women in the Mexican workforce.

And so, the FES program shows the importance of organizing within civil society to generate an agenda about women workers’ rights—and, indeed, to begin to generate a broader network of women who will be involved in making demands on the government (and vis-à-vis employers and unions) to foster and protect women’s ability to participate in the paid workforce.

#### CONSTITUYENTE FEMINISTA

Although a number of groups within Mexican civil society are engaged in raising awareness about the lives and rights of women workers, the demands raised by civil society have not found enough allies in Mexican government to push through many legislative and policy changes that facilitate women’s ability to take part in the workforce in conditions of equality, free from harassment and violence. Interestingly, there *have* been women workers in the Mexican congress. Unions have long been a springboard for labor leaders into congressional seats and other positions of political power, and women are no exception to this trend. Perhaps the most notorious union leader in contemporary Mexico, Elba Esther Gordillo of the National Education Workers’ Union, was a longtime leader of the PRI. Rosario Robles, from the union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, became a successful mayor of Mexico City and then president of the left-leaning PRD.

Despite the presence of some union women over the years, the Mexican congress has not been a great seat of support for the rights of women workers. In the main, the proposals that have been brought forward in the Chamber of Deputies specifically addressing the needs of women workers have tended to concern maternity leave provisions (Espinosa Torres 2002). In part this reflects the ideological divisions between women of different political parties, especially the PAN and the PRD. Rosario Ortiz, a member of the Telephone Workers’ union who was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 2006, noted that “the PANistas come with their idea from the perspective of the family and we come with a feminist perspective of human rights that doesn’t, obviously, go through the family” (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007).

Over time, however, there have been efforts to introduce reforms of the LFT that thoroughly address women workers' rights—beyond maternity. In 2002-03, a serious initiative to reform the LFT took place. At the time, lobbying on the part of a small working group, comprised of Ortiz, González, and other members of the Mexico City network, helped influence the PRD to include fairly substantial proposals addressing gender equality (Brickner 2006). Although reform of the LFT stalled in 2003, the working group's proposal influenced another proposal calling for a comprehensive reform of the LFT from a gender perspective, this one written by PRD deputy Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, and presented to the Chamber of Deputies in July 2004. As Lagarde writes in the introduction of the proposal, "national labor norms must reflect [Mexico's commitment to upholding international labor agreements] and integrate the principles of equity and gender equality, in order to implement labor justice" (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2004, 2). As in 2003, this proposal did not lead to any changes in labor law. The will to tackle labor law reform, which is necessary to addressing the rights of women workers in a meaningful way, is simply not present in Mexico (Cook 2007).

Despite the failures of labor law reform, the *sexenio* of Felipe Calderón<sup>4</sup> has been one of major initiatives to reform key legal institutions of the state, including the social security law and, recently, energy law.<sup>5</sup> This process of institutional reform has created an opportunity for women to become engaged in demanding reforms that take women's lives and rights into account. PRD deputy Rosario Ortiz has been doing her part to get issues central to women workers onto the legislative agenda in the three areas in which her work has focused: social welfare, social security, and constitutional reform. Ortiz notes that there is "a whole series of proposals for reforming the constitution, but the theme of women is never in these proposals," so she has been working to push forward a gendered perspective in the various reforms.

To this end, in 2006 Ortiz created a forum for women of left-leaning political parties and civil society organizations called the *Constituyente Feminista* (Feminist Assembly, or CF). The CF has served three important functions. First, through the CF there have been a series of informational workshops on issues of concern to women in the process of institutional reform, such as occupational health, violence and impunity, and NAFTA (see [constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com](http://constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com)). Second, the CF has created a space where women can discuss proposals for reform.<sup>6</sup> Third, it encourages the women involved to have an official position on institutional reform. Indeed, the unofficial blog of the CF lists six general demands of institutional reform: a gender perspective running throughout the reforms; legal mechanisms to eradicate inequality; constitutionally guaranteed women's rights; a secular state; and models of governing that are democratic and economically just ([constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com](http://constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com), October 4, 2007).

Like other efforts, the CF has not had concrete successes in generating reforms with a gender perspective. Even the unofficial blog postings have slowed to a halt. Nevertheless, its importance should not be undervalued insofar as it represents a direct link between feminists in civil society and at least one committed ally in the Chamber of Deputies—double militancy at work!

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<sup>4</sup> Mexican presidents serve a single six-year term, known as a *sexenio*.

<sup>5</sup> Mexicans refer to these attempts at institutional reform as *reforma del estado*, or state reform. Social Security reform changed the benefit structure to public employees and was widely condemned by public sector unions. The recent changes to energy law allows for some private investment in the national petroleum company, Pemex. This reform has also been widely condemned by labor unions.

<sup>6</sup> The actual forums have been supplemented by a blog, where activities of the CF are published, along with other information of interest to the feminist community taking part in the CF. See [constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com](http://constituyentefeminista.blogspot.com).

And yet, the obstacles Ortiz faces in pressuring for institutional change that takes women's rights are enormous: a global economic context that "demands" more flexibility and fewer protections, a right-wing government that favors such "demands," a relatively small number of women from left-leaning parties.... And these obstacles are compounded by the fact that Ortiz, like Largarde y de los Ríos before her, is limited by law to serving a single 3-year legislative term. When her term expires in 2009, it is not certain that another deputy will take up her work with civil society on behalf of women workers. This makes the FES leadership program all the more important in encouraging union women to become involved in public office. But in the face of a government implementing institutional reforms perceived as neoliberal, it also means that women such as the Mexico City network must also turn their attention to international activism as well.

#### NUEVA CENTRAL SINDICAL

Although union women have long been active within civil society, and have some allies in the national government advocating for a reconceptualization of laws and institutions that will have an effect on the lives of women workers, there have been few concrete changes in national policy. Although it is possible to argue that the lack of legal and institutional change is a result of the weakness (absence?) of a women workers' movement within civil society, combined with the small number of allies in Mexican congress and government, it's important to take into account the difficulty of pressuring for *workers'* rights in the (neo)liberal era. It is worth considering how successful a domestic mobilization will be when the Mexican government is constrained by (and/or ideologically predisposed to cater to) the requirements of the global economy. This means working women in Mexico may feel the need to become part of global movements, such as the of counter-hegemonic globalization process that Evans discusses.

In Mexico, the government began cutting its strong ties to organized labor in response to the debt crisis of 1982. Under the PRI regimes of De la Madrid (1982-88) and Carlos Salinas (1988-94), the Mexican government moved from having a strong corporatist regime, in which organized labor benefited handsomely from its relationship with the state, to a neoliberal regime, in which the PRI government began a process of restructuring state-society relations that alienated organized labor (Collier 1991). Since 2000, the two democratically elected presidents—Vicente Fox (2000-06) and Felipe Calderon (2006-present)—have represented the PAN. In this politico-economic context, women workers have an even tougher task.

In 2006 the Mexico City network of union women became involved on the international level to protest the economic (and political) changes that have had a negative impact on women workers in Mexico. In early November 2006 a merger took place between two international trade union federations—the International Congress of Free Trade Unions and the World Confederation of Labor. The new organization—the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)—seeks to internationalize the trade union movement to "confront unbridled capitalist globalization" and improve the working lives of men and women around the world (ITUC, <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique2>).

In preparation for the ITUC's founding congress, 29 women from the Mexico City network, representing 15 unions and three NGOs, drafted a proposal to present at the congress that offered a gendered perspective on the effect of globalization and made a series of proposals for integrating

women workers' rights and concerns into the international labor movement as well as national movements and laws (FES 2006). Five women traveled to Vienna to present the document. The proposal underscores the importance of an international labor movement in achieving gains for women at the domestic level. According to the proposal, the economic and social undervaluation of women's work

...requires policies of affirmative action that comprise all fields of labor relations linked to female labor and that are incorporated in collective negotiations, in public politics and in all representative and decision-making union entities of which female workers should be part.

In order to face the challenges of a world of neo-liberal policies that tend to foster the concentration of economic and political power, it is necessary to create an international countervailing power of trade unions. To achieve this it is essential to connect with other social movements and to rearticulate demands in a social agenda that strengthens mobilization and reconstructs solidarity between workers and society. This is the only way to reverse the current logic of globalization.

Not only did the proposal echo Evans's call for a counter-hegemonic movement, it specifically called for this movement to act with gender equality in mind, stating that "we want to take part in this challenge to make sure that the principles and the practice of the new organization guarantees the progress of women and the equality of gender" (FES 2006).

The women involved in the ITUC proposal cited several reasons why their involvement and proposal was important. Inés González noted that they were the only group of women representing *women*. And this was important considering that historically women have had a hard time being present at these international conference because of their domestic responsibilities (personal interview, Mexico City, May... 2007). Another important aspect of their participation was taking the reality to women's work experiences to the level of international dialogue. As one union leader from the garment industry noted, to make it known that women have the same rights and obligations as men women need to take their demands beyond the national sphere and act in solidarity with other organizations (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007).

Perhaps the most frequently cited point of significance was that in bringing their gendered proposal forward to the international stage, women were able to bridge the tensions that have long-existed between different unions and union federations and come to a consensus about the important challenges and goals for women workers. As a representative of the Street Car Workers' union noted, the proposal was important "because it was the work of various organizations. By this I want to say that many women agreed on the problem that we have and agreed on how to look for a solution....I think that beyond the acronyms, beyond the ideologies there, before everything else there's a unity to enable us to advance as women. This is what we took from the experience, the most important thing from this work" (personal interview, Mexico City, May...2007). Consequently, women's participation at the international level simultaneously allowed them to advance a gender agenda internationally and strengthen their domestic activism. Although their proposal speaks to the final goal of an Evans-esque counter-hegemonic project, the participants' focus on domestic activism reflects Tarrow's idea of transnational activists and suggests that there are national organizational barriers that prevent a deeper engagement in transnational activism.

Still, none of the specific proposals discussed in Vienna have made it into Mexican law. The garment industry leader suggests that while they are confident that ultimately this *will* happen, the problem is

that there are so many proposals before congress, which makes it unlikely that a proposal that is important for women will be pursued (personal interview, Mexico City, May..2007). Much more is needed before the Mexican government will start responding to women workers' demands, but in what spheres?

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS, OR STRETCHING CIVIL SOCIETY TOO THIN**

Considering their relatively small number, the Mexico City network has been extremely active on a number of different levels in trying to raise awareness of women workers' rights. Various members have been involved in training programs within civil society aimed at raising women's consciousness of how gender shapes their experiences as workers and, in the program organized through the FES, giving them skills to run for leadership positions in their unions and in elected office. Members such as Rosario Ortiz have made the jump to the legislature to push for legislative reforms that respond to the needs of women workers and to open up direct links between government and civil society. Members of the network have also recognized that because women's economic position is situated within global economic structures, they must also become involved as transnational activists pursuing an Evans-esque counter-hegemonic project. As Ortiz noted, "we still have a small presence, but this small presence has put up a big fight for women."

Despite this fight, and its importance in advancing the rights of women workers, there is a certain futility too it. Svenja Blanke, the director of the FES in Mexico City, notes that after the 2000 presidential election, which signaled the transition to democracy, there was a great deal of excitement about possibilities for change, but that after six years, "it's all the same, more or less" (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007).

In large part, this is because women workers in Mexico have failed to build a coherent movement around economic issues. Although Evans might be right in suggesting that women's economic issues are a logical point of unity for both the feminist and labor movements, that unity has not taken place in Mexico. The unionized workforce has been declining in numerical and political strength since the 1980s, which means that the number of women like those of the Mexico City network are declining as well. On top of that, there is still a schism between the feminist movement and organizations that represent women workers. On top of that, organizations of women workers tend to do their own projects and lack a unified effort. Says González, "yes, I consider [making alliances] an important thing; however, we're so busy that we haven't done it." She goes on to suggest that while it would be a net positive for different women's groups to work together, it's also important that all parties are on board with the same overarching goals, not, for example, the goal of perpetuating their work just to make money. She continues, "There are a lot of reasons to join together. Many. We haven't done it, and I can't tell you that we're going to do it in the short term, in the medium term because it also means having an internal discussion that could set the guidelines for going forward in a broader debate" (personal interview, Mexico City, May 2007). And yet, arguably until that broader mobilization happens, the advocates for women workers will be these small, scattered groups. Stretching themselves too thin, they are unlikely to tackle the great obstacles to securing better working conditions and protections for women.

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