

1988

La Integridad De La Mujer, Women and Human Rights in Mexico City, Internship Report

Stacy Brustin

The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.edu/scholar>

 Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Gender Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stacy L. Brustin, *La Integridad De La Mujer, Women and Human Rights in Mexico City, Internship Report*, 1 HARV. HUM. RTS. Y.B. 310 (1988).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CUA Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles and Other Contributions by an authorized administrator of CUA Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact edinger@law.edu.

LA INTEGRIDAD DE LA MUJER: *Women and Human Rights in Mexico City*

I finished talking to the workers at the rape crisis center in downtown Mexico City around nine o'clock at night and caught a bus going south on Insurgentes, a major thoroughfare in the city. I got off the bus about ten minutes later, crossed Insurgentes and turned off onto the side street leading to my apartment. As the street became darker and the noise settled down, I started getting nervous; I could see the shadows of the park located on the next block and began to arrange my keys in my hand as a weapon. I quickened my pace and moved toward the middle of the street to avoid the more obscured sidewalk. I heard voices in the park, but could not see any faces in the darkness. Finally, I reached the end of the block and saw figures emerging from the church next to my apartment building. I loosened the grip on my keys as I realized that tonight it would not be my turn.

The fear I experienced walking at night in Mexico City was a familiar one. It is the same lingering fear I feel every night when I turn off Massachusetts Avenue to get to my apartment in Cambridge. It is the fear of violation and vulnerability, the fear of admitting to myself that almost every woman has "her turn" at some point during her life, whether she lives in Boston or Mexico City. It is this same fear, however, that fuels the resolve of women around the world to end violence against women. It was my desire to explore some of the strategies that women in other countries were using to combat violence against women that brought me to Mexico last summer.

I planned to investigate the legal services available to survivors of rape and domestic violence in Mexico City. I focused on legal services because it was an area familiar to me. I had worked in a community legal services center in Boston in which the majority of the clients were women, many of them victims of rape and domestic violence. I quickly learned, however, that there are no "legal services centers" in Mexico. In fact, only two attorneys in Mexico City identify themselves as women's rights advocates who litigate rape and domestic violence cases. I found it necessary to broaden my focus and search for individuals and groups providing services to survivors of rape and domestic violence.

During the course of five weeks, I interviewed the two attorneys who work primarily on women's issues, psychologists who provide crisis counseling, academics who focus on rape and domestic violence in their law courses and journalists who write on the issue. I spoke with representatives from the Seamstresses Union and from the Center for Domestic Workers about sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. I visited two rape crisis centers (there are only three in the

entire country), various women's centers, two university women's studies programs, a university mental health clinic, several human rights organizations and a government agency which deals with abused minors.

Although I interviewed a diverse group of people in a wide variety of fields, I was struck by a common theme that permeated the conversations. In response to my questions about the Mexican legal system and legal assistance for women, I was told over and over again that legal remedies would not eliminate the rampant violence perpetrated against women in Mexico. Instead, the people I spoke with reiterated a slogan that soon became etched into my mind—rape is not a sexual crime, but *un delito contra la integridad de la mujer*, a crime against the integrity of Woman. In order to stop this violation of integrity, they suggested that community organizing, improved physical and mental health care, and particularly education were needed in addition to legal reform and service.

These activists, both women and men, discussed the need for what some called "changes in the private sphere" and others expressed as "cultural revolution." Both terms referred to the need for widespread education in the home and in the community. Women and men in Mexico, they argued, must learn and believe that women are not subordinate, but equal and entitled to bodily integrity. Without individual recognition of gender equality, legal recognition, such as that expressed in the Mexican Constitution¹ or prohibitions against rape as detailed in Mexican criminal law,² would not effectively eliminate violence against women.

It was easier for those I interviewed to discuss the theoretical changes necessary to confront the problem of violence than to suggest concrete ways for effecting grassroots change. Nevertheless, I discovered a human rights organization, Servicio Desarrollo y Paz ("SEDEPAC"), Service Development and Peace, where a group of women were making a remarkable attempt to effect such broadbased change.

The first thing I noticed when I walked into the Women's Program office at SEDEPAC (the Mexico City branch of SEDEPAC is comprised of five programs, one of which addresses the needs of women) was a large banner draped along an entire wall of the office. It read: *apoyar y impulsar la incorporación de las mujeres a la esfera pública*—support and encourage the incorporation of women into the public sphere (distinguishing the private sphere of the home and child rearing from the public sphere of economic and political power). This powerful slogan

1 CONST. Title I, ch. 1, art. 1 § 3. (C.) (Mex.).

2 See, e.g. CODIGO PENAL PARA EL DISTRITO FEDERAL Title XV (Sexual Crimes), ch. 1 (Mex.).

is the philosophy behind the Women's Program, and it is this philosophy that propelled the most recent and ambitious undertaking of the Program, a legal project for women. Irma Saucedo Gonzalez, director of the Women's Program, and Ximena Bedregal, a staff member of the Program, created the legal project. During the course of four or five hours, Saucedo and Bedregal explained its history and evolution.

According to Saucedo and Bedregal, women in Mexico City have unique concerns and problems. Foremost among these concerns are rape, domestic violence, abandonment and lack of adequate child support. Although Mexican laws address these various issues, these laws are not adequately enforced. Saucedo and Bedregal explained that oftentimes a woman cannot find a lawyer who is willing to help her with "family problems." Lawyers neglect to file appropriate documents on time in criminal and civil cases or leave women to fill out technical and complicated legal documents themselves. In addition, according to Saucedo and Bedregal, widespread corruption among lawyers and judges often prevents women from receiving the relief to which they are entitled. Saucedo and Bedregal believed that women would be more successful in advocating for their legal rights in groups rather than as individuals. In groups, women could more effectively pressure lawyers to carry out their duties as well as publicize and protest against corruption and neglect. Bedregal and Saucedo were particularly interested in organizing women from the *sectores populares*, popular or low income sectors, the majority of women in Mexico City. However, they needed a base from which to begin such grassroots coordination. They turned to neighborhood political associations.

Saucedo and Bedregal briefly explained the role of political associations in Mexico City. These associations are not political parties, but community organizations advocating economic and social change. Many of these groups arose in the poverty stricken communities, or *barrios*, that lay along the periphery of Mexico City. When squalid conditions in these areas were exacerbated by the earthquakes that devastated much of Mexico City in 1985, the demands of the political associations intensified and their role as representatives of the popular sectors solidified.³

Since the mid-1970s, unprecedented numbers of women entered the public sphere through participation in these grassroots political associations. Many of these women have assumed leadership positions, learning how to organize their own communities and pressure the government for improved housing, sanitary drinking water and ade-

3. *After the Earthquakes. Reconstruction and Community Participation.* OTHER SIDE OF MEXICO, Apr.-June 1987 at 4

quate food supplies. However, according to Saucedo and Bedregal, these political associations rarely addressed concerns unique to women in the *barrios*. Saucedo and Bedregal believed that if these women leaders were brought together to consider the problems of women in their communities, they might be encouraged to advocate as a group for the legal rights of women. Further, these women might begin to educate their own families and those in their communities that economic and physical exploitation of women is intolerable.

Saucedo and Bedregal explained that the legal project's objectives were twofold. First, they wanted to motivate a group of women leaders to explore the proposition that women have distinct problems (in addition to those facing their communities) which connect them to women in other *barrios*. Second, they wanted to provide these leaders with a working knowledge of the Mexican legal system. Through lectures by lawyers and other activists in the community, and daily visits to courts and government offices, the coordinators hoped that these women would develop an understanding of the current state of the law regarding women and the legal procedures adopted by courts in Mexico City. Ultimately, Saucedo and Bedregal hoped to create a band of "popular defenders," women able to enforce their legal rights, pressure the government to expand those rights and—most importantly—educate their families and communities about the importance of such rights.

This popular education project began in June 1987, a month before I arrived in Mexico. Seventeen women, ranging in age from twenty-four to sixty, began participating in the pilot project. The women included leaders from thirteen political associations around Mexico City as well as a member of an association from Cuernavaca in the nearby state of Morelos. During the course of the six month project, the women would meet two nights a week for four hours. Bedregal explained that during the initial few sessions, she and other staff members of the Women's Program concentrated on the first objective, trying to identify and analyze the unique concerns of women in the *barrios*. Although the SEDEPAC coordinators clearly believed that women have unique concerns and were interested in encouraging other women to adopt this view, they felt that simply imposing their ideas on the group would not lead these women to question fundamentally their circumstances. Instead, Bedregal posed questions that would enable these women to think about and identify for themselves the problems faced by women in their particular communities.

Bedregal told me that the course of change that took place during the initial four-week period had been remarkable. At first, the women did not feel that there were "women's problems" in their community, but only "community problems" such as unemployment, unsanitary

living conditions and high crime rates. They attributed these problems to a corrupt government and a wildly unstable economy. Then Bedregal asked them whether there were women in their associations whose husbands had abandoned them and left them to support large families, or whether they knew women who had been raped. She asked them how many women they knew whose husbands beat them, or whose husbands or fathers did not want them to participate in the neighborhood associations. In reflecting on these questions, the women began to share the experiences of women in their neighborhoods and question whether all of the problems in their communities were solely attributable to an unequal distribution of economic and political power. They began to get angry and started to question why, for example, their associations did not address issues of abandonment and why rapists are released upon payment of minimal fines. They started to realize that many women in their communities were continually subjected to physical abuse or unable to meet the basic needs of their families.

As Bedregal spoke, I became more and more intrigued with the project. It seemed to me that the Women's Program was trying to engender a "consciousness raising" of the sort prevalent in the Women's Movement in the United States during the 1970s. Yet, unlike many of the efforts in the United States, the SEDEPAC project focused on the concerns of working-class and low-income women. In addition, the coordinators of the project were committed to the powerful idea that women in their own *barrios* are best suited to educate others and bring about change in their particular community.

I began to envision how this type of community organization might spark broad-based change in cities like Boston, where rape, domestic violence, abandonment and inadequate child support are equally serious problems. The SEDEPAC project reminded me of how advocates at the legal services center in Boston where I worked attempted to teach clients how to fill out various documents and occasionally worked with women seeking divorces in "clinics" so that clients could meet one another and provide group support. However, these projects, unlike SEDEPAC's legal project, did not focus on motivating large numbers of women in the community to advocate, as a group, for the legal rights of women or educate others in their community that "women's problems" must be addressed. SEDEPAC's project seemed altogether new, and at the end of our interview I eagerly accepted an invitation to attend one of the seminars.

I was nervous about attending the SEDEPAC seminar. Until this time, I had spoken mostly with middle-class activists in human rights organizations and universities, individuals who were used to dealing

with foreigners. Although I wanted to travel out to the *barrios* and speak with members of local political associations, I was unable to arrange for one of the activists I met to accompany me. I was warned that nobody from one of the powerful neighborhood associations would speak to an unknown *gringa* unless I was accompanied by a Mexican known to members of the association. Ironically, I had also been warned that it was very unsafe for a woman unfamiliar with the *barrios* to wander alone. Consequently, I never went to these outlying areas and could not predict how the women from these communities who were participating in the seminar would react to me.

When I walked into the classroom set up in the basement of the SEDEPAC office, several women were seating themselves around a U-shaped arrangement of tables. Although they continued talking, I could see the women registering my presence out of the corners of their eyes. I strained to catch bits of their conversation, but I could barely understand the rapidly spoken, colloquial Spanish. More women trickled in as I pulled my chair into a corner, away from the tables. This group of seventeen women had been working closely together for five weeks. They were gathered for the express purpose of learning about each other and how to advocate on behalf of the women in their communities, and I did not want to interrupt the process. Nevertheless, I did not feel unwelcome. Once Bedregal introduced me as a lawyer (mistakenly) who was studying issues of violence against women, several of the women looked over and smiled. Their smiles seemed to say that although I was a *gringa*, they acknowledged me as a *compañera* working on problems that affect women in Mexico as well as the United States.

The seminar was the first in which the group began to focus on the project's second objective, developing a working knowledge of the Mexican legal system. An attorney from the Women's Program led the discussion. She taped large pieces of blank, white paper to the blackboard facing the women and began explaining the various levels of courts in the Mexican legal system. While she filled these blank pages with charts describing the tribunals and delegations (local courts), the seventeen women, all of whom were able to read and write, were furiously taking notes and copying the charts that the attorney drew.

The lawyer discussed the way in which someone brings a criminal action, drafting a sample *demanda* (complaint) on one of the pieces of paper. She raised the issue of violence against women in order to make the procedures less abstract. She defined the formal elements of *delitos*, or crimes, such as rape, assault and incest. A few of the women then began to share experiences of members of their family or community.

It was hard for me to understand exactly what these women were saying, but their expressions, gestures and tone of voice relayed a sense of anger and frustration.

As I sat in the corner, I marveled at what was occurring before me. A group of women from some of the poorest sectors of Mexican society were learning about the rights guaranteed to them in the Mexican Constitution and questioning how they could make these rights a reality. I was struck with the power that this sharing of knowledge generated. These women were learning that they could use their intelligence and experience to teach others in their communities how to advocate for the rights of women. The goal was not to abandon the community fight for decent living conditions and higher wages, but to find ways to place the issue of "women's problems" on the agenda as well.

I started to imagine leaders of local tenants' organizations or activists in minority affairs gathering at the legal services center back in Boston to discuss the unique problems of women in their neighborhoods. I envisioned seminars in which these women would learn about the laws and legal procedures regarding issues such as domestic violence. It seemed possible that such a group could band together to pressure the local government to provide more police protection and to publicize those judges who were not enforcing the laws. More importantly, a group of women of various ages, like those in the SEDEPAC legal project, could educate their children and others in the community that women and men are equal and that attempts to subordinate women through violence must be stamped out. As in the SEDEPAC project, the goal would be to supplement rather than supplant the community's agenda for economic and political change.

My enthusiasm, however, was checked by the realization that the change the coordinators of the SEDEPAC project were seeking would come about very slowly. During the seminar the group struggled to understand the technical language and complicated legal procedures presented to them. Several of the women looked perplexed, often asking neighbors for additional explanation. Another woman was distracted by familial duties and continually left the room to care for her young child. Oftentimes, the way in which the lawyer presented the material was confusing. It was clear that it would take time and experience for the coordinators of the project to devise effective ways to structure the seminars. In addition to internal problems, it seemed that these women were sure to face external resistance from their families, their communities and their government. As the lawyer conducting the seminar put it, *las leyes sobre la mujer son mínimos porque estamos viviendo en un sistema patriarcal*—the laws concerning women are minimal because we are living in a patriarchal system.

Nevertheless, I found SEDEPAC's legal project extremely inspiring. Although this group of seventeen women would clearly not change the Mexican legal system overnight, they were beginning a process that many of those I interviewed had suggested was integral to eliminating violence against women. These women were learning how to enforce their legal rights and push for legal reform, yet they were also providing counseling and support for one another and developing a consciousness of "women's problems" that would enable them to educate their sons, daughters and next-door neighbors about the need to confront problems such as rape and domestic violence.

When I finally left the SEDEPAC seminar, it was after eight and it was beginning to get dark. Once again, there was the familiar awareness in the back of my mind that by the time I caught a bus and made my way down Insurgentes, it would be completely dark. I would have to walk down the middle of the street with my keys in my hand trying to look confident and familiar with the neighborhood until I could breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of the local church. This time, however, the powerful exchange I had just witnessed among the women at SEDEPAC reinforced my hope that the fear of rape that began to wind its way into my consciousness would not haunt me or other women forever. The model of popular education and community advocacy used in the SEDEPAC legal project seemed to offer one means for preserving *la integridad de la mujer*.

Stacy Brustin