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Emerge for the Dark: A Grass Roots Program Teaches the First Step Toward Fighting Violence Toward Women

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I finished talking to the workers at the rape crisis center in downtown Mexico City around 9:00 one 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 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 that violence that brought me to Mexico in the summer of 1987.

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 victims 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

Stacy Brustin is a third-year student at Harvard Law School. She spent the summer of 1987 in Mexico City as part of Harvard’s Human Rights internship program. This article is reprinted with permission from the Harvard Human Rights Yearbook, © 1988 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.
The women did not want to abandon the fight for decent living conditions but they did want to place women's issues on the agenda as well.

The legal project, the Women's Program, was composed 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, apoyo a 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 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 project.

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, they are not adequately enforced. Saucedo and Bedregal explained that often a woman cannot find a lawyer who is willing to help her with family problems. Lawyers often 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, said Saucedo and Bedregal, widespread corruption among lawyers and judges often prevents women from receiving the relief to which they are entitled. Saucedo and Bedregal believe that women would be more successful advocating their legal rights in groups rather than as individuals. In groups, women could more effectively pressure the government for improved housing, sanitary drinking water, and adequate food supplies. However, according to Saucedo and Bedregal, these political associations rarely addressed concerns unique to women in the barrios. The two 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, 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 two-fold. 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) that 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 be-

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, these people 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 Constitution or prohibitions against rape as detailed in Mexican criminal law, 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 affecting grass-roots 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 broad-based change.

The first thing I noticed when I walked into the Women's Program office at SEDEPAC (the Mexico City branch of SEDEPAC is composed 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 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 project.

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This popular education project be-
gan in June 1987, a month before I arrived in Mexico. Seventeen women, ranging in age from 24 to 60, 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 truly question 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, 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 the legal services center in Boston where I worked. There, advocates attempted to teach clients how to fill out various documents and occasionally worked with women seeking divorces in legal 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 for, as a group, the legal rights of women and to 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 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 already seating themselves. 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 for 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 the ways in which the lawyer presented the case, the goal would be to supplement the local government to provide more police protection and 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. Often, 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 neighbors about the need to confront problems such as rape and domestic violence.

When I finally left the SEDEPAC seminar, it was after 8:00 and 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.
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