

Feminist solidarity networks have multiplied since the COVID-19 outbreak in Mexico

María José Ventura Alfaro (18th May 2020)

Abstract

Prior to COVID-19, the feminist movement in Mexico was at its strongest. On the 8th of March for international women's day, tens of thousands of women in the capital alone went out onto the streets to protest against the daily violence, harassment, and abuse that they have suffered for decades on end. Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. This essay explores how women's collectives have not only continued their struggles by use of the virtual world but they have expanded their reach within the community. Independent feminist collectives have created solidarity networks across the country to attempt to tackle the gravest socioeconomic consequences of the virus at the local level: food, medicine, and other essential product shortages, amidst the rise in domestic and family violence.

Keywords:

COVID-19; Mexico; Feminism; Social Movement; Violence Against Women

Introduction

“Women, welcome to your revolution” read one of the thousands of signs on the International Women’s Day protest in the Mexican capital. There, the women’s movement like those in Chile, Argentina, and many other Latin American countries, has been building up momentum during this past year leading up to mass demonstrations on the 8th March 2020. Tens of thousands of women went out onto the streets not only to celebrate International Women’s Day but to protest against the violence, harassment, and abuse that have become part of their reality¹. Mexican women took back the streets, reclaiming public space as their own and feeling safe for once in each other’s company. They organised workshops, seminars, reading groups, and often simply gatherings to build community amongst women. Women’s collectives grew exponentially in the last year, with the capital alone hosting over 100 feminist organisations. And just when the movement was at its strongest, the coronavirus outbreak hit. Already on International Women’s Day, the government warned against massive public gatherings, and yet this did not dissuade the activists to cancel or postpone the

¹ Mary Beth Sheridan, "Tens of thousands of Mexican women protest 'femicide,' gender-based violence", *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2020.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-international-womens-day-march-femicide-strike/2020/03/08/1ca6167c-6153-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html

march. Only two weeks later, the pandemic could no longer be ignored. Businesses closed down. Restaurants emptied out. Companies commenced implementing home office strategies. People avoided going out onto the streets. Marches and protests eventually died out. The health crisis was rampant. Coronavirus took precedent on the national agenda, and social issues were put aside. Some would assume this translated into the breakage or dissipation of the feminist movement. This was not the case. The fight continues, indoors.

In this short essay I explore both the increasing domestic and feminicide violence Mexican women face as a result of the global pandemic contingency strategies, as well as the everyday resistance embodied by feminist collectives in the shape of solidarity networks across the country. I suggest that not only women's movements have continued mobilising 'virtually' but they have in fact expanded, capitalising on the new emergencies brought about by the outbreak of Covid-19.

Coronavirus in Mexico: A quick overview

As of mid-May 2020, Mexico has almost 50,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with over 5,000 deaths. The figures are relatively low in comparison with other countries. Testing, however, continues to be scarce and there is wide contestation to the accuracy of official statistics. The government response to the coronavirus pandemic has been highly criticised as the MORENA party president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (popularly known as AMLO), continued to underestimate the fast approaching health crisis in the early days of the outbreak, dissuading people from adhering to social distancing rules suggested by health officials and, in the subsequent weeks, offering slow and disparate government action. Coronavirus lockdown measures commenced on the 23rd of March known as "Phase 2" which was originally meant to be in place until April 30th. These have now been extended until at least the end of May with schools and businesses aiming to reopen shortly before June 1.

The other growing pandemic: Femicide and domestic violence

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, gender and domestic violence as well as feminicide rates were already on the rise in Mexico. 63 percent of Mexican women over the age of 15 report having experienced violence (physical, psychological, sexual or economic) during their lifetime². Official statistics show how, in the past decade, female murder rates have almost doubled³ with 3,142

² Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). 2013. "Panorama de violencia contra las mujeres en México". Aguascalientes: INEGI. http://internet.contenidos.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/estudios/sociodemografico/mujeresrural/2011/702825048327.pdf

³ SEGOB, INMUJERES, UN Women. 2016. "La Violencia Femicida en México: Aproximaciones y Tendencias 1985-2014", México: UN Women. <https://www2.unwomen.org/>

women and girls killed in 2019 alone. As it is the case in much of the world, contingency and self-isolating measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus have resulted in a rise of domestic violence reports and femicide rates.

On a press release, feminist civil society Equis Justicia as well as Amnesty International and the National Shelter Network highlight the increasing violence Mexican women are facing as a result of the imposed quarantine and call on the government to put in place preventative and protective strategies to aid this parallel human rights crisis⁴. Since the start of quarantine, there have been a total of 163 feminicides reported⁵. The National Shelter Network reports that, from the 23rd March, when 'Phase 2' officially commenced, domestic violence helpline calls grew by 60% (40,910 calls) with their 69 shelters being between 80-110% of their capacity nationwide⁶. Femicide and domestic violence rates grow exponentially as the quarantine prevails. Contingency measures reveal to the public eye how some women are at their most vulnerable in their own houses, unable to escape their abuser. For victims of domestic violence, having to adhere to social distancing measures translates into a lack of access to their usual support network. Domestic violence has never been seen more clearly as a public health issue, calling out for a strong policy response and action from the government. However, government action to combat this growing crisis has been lacking and almost non-existent, with many Public Ministries refusing to record reports of domestic violence as services and employees stop working due to the quarantine. No clear policy guidelines has yet been published on how this rise in domestic violence will be addressed by the government, with officials merely urging women to call 911 if an incident occurs. This refusal to acknowledge the aggravating consequences lockdown measures have on gender violence makes evident a much larger problem of patriarchal violence within the very establishment. The coronavirus outbreak becomes in this instance a reflector and aggravator of the pre-existing social, economic and political gendered violence. In a country where violence against women is systemic and institutionalised, activist groups become the main safety network for many women.

[/media/field%20office%20mexico/documentos/publicaciones/2016/02/violencia%20femicid a%20en%20m%C3%A9xico%20aproximaciones%20y%20tendencias%201985_2014.pdf?la=es &vs=4527](#)

⁴ Monserrat Aguirre. "Ni la pandemia detiene los feminicidios en Mexico". Reporte Indigo, 11 April 2020. <https://www.reporteindigo.com/reportes/ni-la-pandemia-detiene-los-feminicidios-en-mexico/>

⁵ TelesurTV. "Reportan 163 feminicidios en México durante cuarentena". 24 April 2020. <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/mexico-aumento-feminicidios-durante-cuarentena-coronavirus-20200424-0003.html>

⁶ Oscar Lopez and Christine Murray. "Murders of women in Mexico rise amid fears of lockdown violence". Reuters, 27 April 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-women-violence-trfn/murders-of-women-in-mexico-rise-amid-fears-of-lockdown-violence-idUSKCN22930V>

The resilience of the feminist movement

In the face of the COVID-19 self-isolation restrictions and embodying one of the most characteristic elements of the 4th feminist wave, women's collectives and civil societies have adapted their fight to the virtual world. Online workshops, reading groups, and seminars are hosted weekly by different organisations to continue the ongoing discussions around violence, sexual harassment, job conditions, gender stereotypes, reproductive rights, and many other issues that affect women in their everyday lives. Feminist collectives, such as the hacktivist group *Luchadoras*, coordinate discussions and debates on how the measures implemented to control the pandemic simultaneously reflect and aggravate socio-economic, political, geographic and gender inequalities. Notwithstanding the social distancing experience, emotional bonds are re-created by sharing life stories, testimonies of violence, emotions, and feelings about the quarantine, building community in the shape of new collective digital memory. The collectives' work, however, does not limit itself to the virtual, academic or modern world, it also utilises the net as an organisational tool. Feminist collectives have made use of social media platforms during the pandemic to help provide basic rights to vulnerable women by tackling two main aspects of the social crisis: domestic violence and economic insecurity.

Domestic violence networks

Mexican feminist collectives have focussed on holding the government accountable for their refusal to acknowledge the deepening issue of domestic and femicide violence during quarantine⁷. This is crucial in a setting where the country's president denies and refutes the accuracy of reports and statistics brought forward by civic societies and is endemic of a much larger issue: a violent patriarchal state. As a response to the last president's assertion that domestic violence rates have not gone up during quarantine, the hashtags #nosotrastenemosotrosdatos (In Spanish, "we have other data") became viral. Feminist collectives called out for a recognition of the issue and the need for action. As a way to denounce this violence and hold the government accountable, the feminist collective *CrucesxRojas* created a video to visibilise the violence experienced by Mexican women as a result of the quarantine⁸.

The government's inactivity has shown how violence against women is reproduced by the very State responsible for protecting them. Mexican women have resolved to become their own protectors. Feminist organisations have created support networks for victims of domestic violence whose situation worsens by contingency restrictions. "From the very start of the pandemic

⁷ Infobae. "Organizaciones, activistas y legisladoras refutaron comentario de AMLO sobre "llamadas falsas" por violencia de género". 16 May 2020.

<https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/05/16/organizaciones-activistas-y-legisladoras-refutaron-comentario-de-amlo-sobre-llamadas-falsas-por-violencia-de-genero/>

⁸ Crucesxrosas. <https://www.crucesxrosas.com/>

women started creating solidarity networks. From day one" comments Monserrat Ibarra, a feminist activist who volunteers as part of the informal domestic violence helpline network. These networks are not organised by governmental bodies or NGOs, but by small feminist collectives who come together through social media. They keep close contact with victims of domestic violence, often calling them on a daily basis. For example, *Las del aquelarre feminista*, a Mexico City-based feminist collective have opened their own emotional support phone line for victims of domestic violence. Professional therapists have volunteered to be part of this network pro bono⁹. Many feminist collective have put forward "secret codes" that can be used by victims of domestic violence were they unable to contact 911 directly. In which case, one of the volunteers will make the call instead.

Food security networks

Much of Mexico's informal labour force is made out of female domestic workers, home carers, and street food vendors. In a country where most people produce just enough to feed their family on a day-to-day basis, quarantine and contingency measures have disastrous socio-economic consequences. The Government has suggested some form of economic relief may take place in the near future for banks and corporations, but the informal worker is forgotten in this scheme. As a response to growing economic insecurity, feminist collectives commenced organising soup kitchens as well as food and basic products supply networks for those most affected by the crisis. These activities are organised via social media where feminist collectives advertise the need for donating food, medicine and other basic products for vulnerable citizens in precarious work conditions. The activists are often community members who offer their own private house to operate and distribute these goods. Therefore, although these operations occur country wide, they are often at a local, small scale.

In Toluca, for example, already with the 2009 H1N1, the feminist collective *Mujeres Trans Famosas* began providing meals to trans sex workers whose income and livelihoods became most affected by contingency measures such as the closure of hotels¹⁰. The collective have now expanded their reach and, during the COVID-19 outbreak, supply over 70 meals on a daily basis to those citizens who are often forgotten and invisibilised but most affected by the pandemic: sex workers, illegal or informal workers, homeless people, drug addicts. *Crianza feminista*, another collective based in Mexico City, has also been providing over 40 daily meals to female workers either unemployed or in precarious

⁹ Las del Aquelarre. "Apoyo telefónico para mujeres en crisis" 11 April 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-1VVFODt2F/?igshid=166er7u0ipzal&fbclid=IwAR3qCE4j12IeZ6U7bgl6exmELvYXfbsFO4TUz4JD25DfpSz3fRlbpOlCoI>

¹⁰ Rodrigo Estrada. "Las Famosas y su comedor sin discriminación". 23 April 2020. <https://www.am.com.mx/hidalgo/opinion/Las-Famosas-y-su-comedor-sin-discriminacion-20200423-0044.html>

conditions, and have stocked up food cupboards for 22 families that should last them a full month. Their operation has now stopped as the government imposed quarantine is to end. Another popular activity that is taking place as a way to supply within the community was suggested by the feminist collective *Brujas Feministas* who encourage barter-trading, or as they call it “feminist trading”¹¹, in social media platforms. Through the platform, women can exchange services and products they wish to supply. For instance, therapists can provide a consult and in return receive some clothes, food or artisanal goods. The focus of this trade is on building community and sorority, helping those most vulnerable in the face of the pandemic, as opposed to making profit. The collective is based in Mexico City but the operation is taking place country-wide.

Conclusion

The feminist movement in Mexico appears not only to be resilient to the Covid-19 outbreak but also thrives through solidarity. The movement presents the two most iconic characteristics of the 4th Feminist wave: it is underlied by an inclusive, intersectional feminist epistemology and it utilises social media platforms and the web as their main organisational tool, now accentuated by the quarantine. Despite having to deal with ongoing health, economic, emotional and social adversities, the Mexican feminist collectives are continuing expanding their work. Their means have changed, but their message continues to be the same: *we are stronger together*.

About the author

María José Ventura Alfaro is an ESRC-funded PhD candidate in the field of Development Studies in the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, at the University of Bath. Her research offers a feminist and decolonial critique of violence against women and social movements’ action in contemporary Mexico.

¹¹ Mercedes Matz. "Trueque Feminista: Mujeres se organizan para generar red de apoyo ante Covid-19". 30 April 2020. <https://www.somoselmedio.com/2020/04/30/trueque-feminista-mujeres-se-organizan-para-generar-red-de-apoyo-ante-covid-19/>