

Some Reflections on the Mexican Suffragist Movement: a Case Study of Senior Women's Leadership

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Abstract

One of the main achievements of the Mexican suffragist movement was the official recognition of women's citizenship. This is a qualitative study of eight women in the State of Morelos, Mexico, who belong to the first generations of women that were allowed to officially exercise their political rights. As seniors, these women continue to develop their leadership skills. Although most literature on senior women considers them as a vulnerable group, this paper is focused on senior women who do not consider themselves as vulnerable people. The present analysis of in-depth interviews found that in spite of cultural and gender stereotypes, these senior women actively participate to improve the living conditions in their communities. Moreover, they use the same type of arguments that the suffragists used to enter the public arena in an earlier era: that as women, they need to clean up the public sphere.

Keywords: Senior women, gender, leadership, suffragist movement, Mexico

1. Introduction

As a result of the Mexican suffragist movement, in 1953 the Mexican government officially acknowledged that women had equal rights to citizenship as men. In the State of Morelos, the suffragist movement was led mainly by Paulina Ana María Zapata Portillo, daughter of Emiliano Zapata, one of the most important generals of the Mexican Revolution. Ana Zapata was subsequently the first female federal representative for the State of Morelos, from 1958 to 1961. Twenty years passed until another Morelos woman, Emma Victoria Campos, occupied a seat in the Federal House of Representatives, from 1982 to 1985.

The suffragist movement had significant effects on society. Ana Zapata and others led Morelos women to continue their civic and political participation. During the 1950s and the following decades, the women of Morelos became more empowered. Those who belonged to the first generations of women that were allowed to exercise their right to vote have either passed away or are now elderly. Those that are the subject of the present research are senior women who continue to participate in political and civic activities.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Leadership

While most literature on leadership has an organizational approach, the present study uses non-organizational ideas on leadership from Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly and Yurén (2010). These authors, who ascribe to the theories espoused by Habermas (1989), point out that one of the strongest kinds of leadership is one in which people use communicative action in order to agree on their goals and the means for their achievement.

According to the authors, communicative action requires speech acts that should be focused on mutual understanding, so people can coordinate their actions pursuing aims related to justice. It is suggested that justice be based on the moral point of view, which, Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly and Yurén argue, includes judgment processes in which the main objective is universal validity. The authors add that universal validity is related to the "categorical imperative" proposed by Kant (1977), the "practical discourse" suggested by Habermas (1991), and the "originary position" presented by Rawls (2002).

According to Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly and Yurén (2010), leaders whose main goal is the moral point of view are not extraordinary individuals, but responsible people who make an effort to be better persons, and who strive to fulfill promises that they have made to others. These authors claim that those qualities are remarkable in an uncertain world, and that leadership has no relation to hierarchies in an organization, but is related instead to ethics and values.

2.2 Aging and Gender

A search of recent literature on senior women in Mexico reveals that most of it is focused on issues related to retirement, healthcare, family, and poverty (Garay and Montes de Oca, 2011; Pelcastre, Treviño, González, and Márquez, 2011; Ramírez, Mendoza, González, López, Mendoza, and Velasco, 2011). No recent research conducted in Mexico was found on the subject of senior women and leadership. Moreover, discrepancies were found regarding what is meant when discussing aging and seniors.

The majority of international and Mexican public entities consider that a person becomes a "senior" when she or he turns either 60 or 65 years old. In Mexico, the National Institute for Senior People (Instituto Nacional de las Personas Adultas Mayores /INAPAM, 2013) and the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía / INEGI, 2011b; INEGI, 2012) define seniors as the population that is 60 years old or older. In Mexico, as in other countries, there are more women than men among the senior population. According to data provided by INEGI (2011a), women of 60 years or older represent 4.78 % of Mexico's total population.

Aging is not a universal phenomenon; the way people age is heterogeneous. Aging can be influenced by the culture, the values, and the meaning that different social groups give to this process. In the case of women, the sex-gender system has an influence on how they feel when they age. Estes argues that "gender is a crucial organizing principle in society that profoundly shapes the experience of old age and aging [...] [of] older women" (Estes, 2004: 9). According to the author, most senior women become vulnerable and dependent throughout their life course.

3. Method

To select the participants of the present study, "reputational-case sampling" (Goetz and LeCompte, 1988: 101-102) was used, based on references provided by experts in the field. Four persons who know the public sphere very well in the state of Morelos were asked for the names of senior women whom they considered to be ethical leaders, and instructed on the way that Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly and Yurén define leadership. The selection criteria were as follows: senior women who live in the State of Morelos who were known for their ethical leadership either in a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a political party, regardless of the hierarchical position they occupy in such organization. In selection of these ethical leaders, the present study looked for diversity in socioeconomic status, age, and types of organizations to which that they belong. Only 12 women out of 17 who were selected agreed to participate in the study. Of those, eight were chosen as participants: four who are members of a political party, and four who work with a NGO. In-depth interviews were used to collect information regarding their motivations and their activities. The interview guide also included questions about their views on the Mexican suffragist movement, as well as on leadership and gender in the public sphere.

All participants are Mexican, of ages ranging from 61 to 77 years. Four of them have teacher diplomas; one claimed that she holds a college degree; and three of them only have a junior high school education. The majority were widows or otherwise single; only one was currently married at the time of the interviews. Four of them were born in the State of Morelos. The rest were born either in Mexico City, the State of Puebla or the State of Guerrero. One of the participants has been a member of a peasant NGO for 45 years and is currently its Secretary. Another woman interviewed was the founder of an influential leftist political party in the city of Cuautla (Morelos) decades ago.

4. Results

All participants¹ are conscious of the importance of the suffragist movement, and they mention the challenges that women of their generation have faced. All of them personally knew Morelos suffragist Ana Zapata. Two of them mention that they had a friendly relationship with prominent Mexican suffragists such as Margarita García Flores and Ana Zapata, as well as with some women pioneers who occupied several important public positions outside Morelos decades ago, such as Hilda Anderson, María Lavalle Urbina, and Griselda Álvarez Ponce de León².

4.1 Entering the public sphere

All of the participants began involvement in public activities either at a young age or in middle age; none began during recent years. At the time when they entered the public sphere, some of them were influenced by other people who surrounded them (mostly family members). They all became aware of the opportunities that such participation could bring to improve their living conditions. Some of them participated in women's organizations when they were young, such as the Female National Revolutionary Association (Asociación Nacional Femenina Revolucionaria/ ANFER). The four participants who are currently members of NGOs had once been members of political parties, but had since withdrawn.

4.2 Formal Education as a Key Factor for Leadership

In the majority of the participants, it is clear that educational level is related to their public accomplishments. For example, Leticia, a teacher, reported:

Some important men in my village used to ask me to write their speeches for them and for the candidates. Thus, I used to write the speeches and they read them in front of the people. That's why they gave me the opportunity to be there, at municipal politics. I was 15 years old at that time.

4.3 Motivation

All participants are involved in volunteer work. Their narratives show that they have a real interest in achieving better living conditions for themselves and for people in need, as well as for their communities. These women raise their voices on behalf other people who either are illiterate or poor, or who have a problem and they do not know how the legal system works. Some of them even have risked their lives pursuing justice for others. Emilia, for example, explains: "Look at me, at my age I'm still active in the struggle [...] If I see an injustice... [I] speak out and do not remain silent." Another participant, Rosa, provided an example of these women's actions to help others:

People come to us and they ask us for work, or they ask us to help an ailing relative... And we start looking for ways to help them. Some of our acquaintances are very well known and they help us. We have some friends who are doctors, lawyers and so on. We have cases like the one of a little boy who suffered severe burns; we went to the State's House of Representatives, and no one gave us even a cent to transport the kid by air to a hospital in Mexico City. So we went to a fancy restaurant where we knew we would find [mentions a politician's name], and he had no option but to give us the money for the kid.

In general terms, the participants who are active members of political parties believe that those are favorable spaces for social transformation. One of the activities that these senior women do as party members is to convince other people to listen to candidates in massive events and to go to vote during elections. They have strong ideals, and firmly believe their actions can make a difference in their communities. They believe that expressing their will on a ballot is essential to strengthen Mexican democracy.

Thus, they are committed to convince others to vote. Isabel says: "We don't want rich politicians and poor people. We struggle for better conditions [...] We don't receive any payment for this. On the contrary, we chip in and give our time freely."

¹ We changed the actual names of participants to pseudonyms.

² Ana Zapata, Margarita García Flores, Hilda Anderson, María Lavalle Urbina, and Griselda Álvarez Ponce de León have passed away.

On the other hand, participants who work with NGOs suggest disappointment with political parties, having experienced the perlocutionary language and strategic interaction of some politicians; they decided to align themselves with NGOs. Sofia says:

I am not interested in a bone³. I'm interested in everything that has to do with improving the conditions of my country, but I am not interested in politics at all. That's why I quit from [mentions a political party]. All parties have sunk so low, and this is because they only want the bone and they don't help people. That's why I became sick of that and quit the party.

4.4 Participants Claim that Men are Still the Major Decision-makers in the Morelos Public Sphere

Androcentrism in the public sphere is evident in the participants' statements. Some of them have a certain level of feminist consciousness, even though they do not call themselves feminists. These senior women believe that even though women's suffrage was a great achievement, the gender gap still remains. This study's in-depth interviews show that similar conflicts that were experienced by the first suffragists are currently experienced by women inside political and civil organizations in the state of Morelos. Such conflicts are related to the sex-gender system and power relationships that are hard to change. The participants complain about the "machismo" that still remains within both their NGOs and political parties. Some also comment that political parties do not fulfill their promises on gender equity regarding public appointments.

4.5 Participants Claim Women's Moral Superiority to Clean up the Male Public Sphere

One argument that U.S. suffragists (Baker, 1984) and Mexican suffragists (Castro, 1947) used to get the official recognition of women's right to vote in the twentieth century was women's moral superiority: the entrance of women into the public sphere could result in a cleaner political environment. The present study shows that the same discourse is present in the women interviewed herein. Most of them believe that, as women, they should be the ones who clean up the filth of the public sphere. For example, Josefina argues that "women are and should be the initiators of a radical change in the country because we are the ones who take charge at home. Therefore, we have to lead men in order to change this way of thinking and to change our filthy political system."

5. Conclusions

The Mexican suffragist movement had a significant impact on society. It changed how women perceived themselves. The participants of our study initiated their public activities when they were either young or middle-aged. Now that they are seniors, they continue to exercise leadership in NGOs and political parties.

As can be seen, aging is influenced by the values that social groups give to it. The present study finds that these senior women do not have a perception of themselves as vulnerable people, and they do not follow gender stereotypes. On the contrary, they see themselves as agents of social change. The symbolic—as well as the social—capital that these women have acquired along their trajectories have been key factors in their exercise of leadership. By helping others, they have increased their social capital as well.

The participants' narratives show a kind of leadership that has nothing to do with hierarchical ideas of leadership. From a scholarly perspective, their leadership is related to ideas of interactive communication, as well as commitment to justice and the moral point of view, as discussed by Montes-de-Oca-O'Reilly and Yurén (2010), who follow Habermas (1989), Kant (1979), and Rawls (1979). The participants have deep-rooted belief that their actions can make a difference in their communities.

Participants who support political parties actively lead other people to vote for their party's candidates. Their narratives show the extent of their belief in their parties' ideals. On the contrary, senior women who belong to NGOs show disappointment with political parties.

³ The phrase "ellos sólo quieren el hueso" ("they only want the bone") is popular in Mexico. It refers to dogs that look for bones so they can eat the meat on them. "Looking for the bone," therefore, means looking for public positions in which one can earn a lot of money.

The arguments used by the senior women of this study to convince other women to participate in the public sphere are similar to that used during the suffrage movement. Mexican suffragists of the twentieth century, who strove to convince male politicians, argued that women's moral superiority made them more suitable to clean the filthy public sphere. The participants of this study also believe in women's moral superiority, and think that as women, they can do better than men.

All participants consider that even though female suffrage was a great achievement, the gender gap still remains. In addition, similar conflicts related to the sex-gender system that were experienced by the first suffragists are currently experienced by women inside political parties and NGOs in the State of Morelos. Most participants complained that men are still the major decision-makers in Morelos, and they are aware of the difficulties that women face to participate in public life. Regardless, they continue exercising their leadership based on their ethics and values.

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