

# **Women in Uprising**

**The Oaxaca Commune, the State, and Reproductive Labor**

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In 2006, a popular uprising in Oaxaca, Mexico shook the southern state to its core, demobilizing the capital city for 7 months, and effectively removing state power from the smallest villages to the largest municipalities throughout the region. As arguably the first major insurrection of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the uprising gained international attention for its innovative tactics of revolt, and for the mass and popular character of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

The uprising was striking not only because of the incredible duration of the revolt and its sudden, violent end, but because the content of the revolt, as well as the proliferation of barricades in the state capitol, was reminiscent of the Paris Commune. And so it was that the walls of Oaxaca city were spray painted with the phrase “viva la Communa de Oaxaca.” Yet it was the immediate and mass attempt by the participants to re-organize social relations outside of the logic of capitalist systems and state power during the Oaxaca Commune that makes its tenure one of the most important episodes of social upheaval in recent times; this attempt being exemplified by the central participation of women and their means and discourse of revolt.

Although the central demand of the Oaxaca movement was the removal of the active governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, a broader political motive was articulated in the rejection of Ruiz — a need to do away with the neo-liberal policies he embodied. The privatization of land and the public sector, violent repression of dissent, and a racist, neo-colonial hegemony prevailed throughout the 70-year reign of the PRI, Ruiz’s political party, and these were among the conditions that the popular movement felt had to be transformed. But even so, the demand of the removal of Ruiz as governor can be said to have been merely a point of unity for the diverse sectors participating in the movement; because many did not ask for a mere replacement or a more just management of capital in the region. The social movement refused to be absorbed into electoral campaigns, and had an unwaveringly antagonistic attitude towards political parties. In the Oaxaca uprising, the majority of the movement sought to overcome capitalist exploitation.

A resistance that had been fermenting for years against state authority was triggered by the violent attempt to evict an annual encampment of thousands of striking teachers from the Section 22 union by state police on June 14, 2006 in the center of Oaxaca City. The dawn raid on the teacher’s plantón (encampment) by hundreds of armed state police and tear gas launching helicopters was countered not only by the teachers themselves, but thousands of Oaxaca city residents, who poured onto the streets and fought back the police, ultimately regaining control of the center of the capital and the teacher’s encampment. What followed was a diverse movement characterized by strategies of occupying, thus de-privatizing, and regaining popular ownership over public spaces such as plazas and streets, media outlets, and government buildings themselves. State authorities were physically removed from offices across the state, and the political class was rapidly undermined and delegitimized by the resistance. In the shell of the government the movement created an alternative: a large meeting of participants called the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO in its Spanish initials.)

APPO both described the resistance space, and the actual organizational body composed of various civil and social organizations with distinct ideologies that organized under the same need for the total removal of state power, and at many times, contradictory desires for deep political transformations. Neighborhoods organized autonomously and set up, at one point, three thousand barricades around the city in acts of self-defense from paramilitary attacks. Oaxaca

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations and details are from the author’s experience and interviews during time spent in Oaxaca during the 2006 uprising.

was said to be in a state of “ungovernability” and the popular assembly and the movement in the streets had control of the state capital and hundreds of other municipalities in the state. For months on end there were no police in the region.

The entrance of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) on October 27<sup>th</sup> 2006 into the state capital marked a beginning to the end of the uprising. The shocking violence that ensued on November 25<sup>th</sup> forced many of the movements’ participants into hiding. By December more than twenty people had been assassinated, between 75 to 100 had disappeared, and hundreds were injured and incarcerated.

The Oaxaca resistance brought to the surface the desperate social conditions resulting from a particular phase of capital accumulation; in this case, participants in the resistance, calling themselves anti-capitalists, referred to the effects of restructured capitalism in terms of neo-liberal policies and globalization. The specific conditions imposed through neo-liberal strategies and their structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that had long provoked discontent were those such as enclosures (privatization) of the commons, the extraction of resources, both natural and human, for private profits, and the withdrawal of social spending. Although a critique of “neoliberalism” subtended the movement, indeed specifically informing women’s participation, a refusal of capitalism and its logic as a system was a central tenet of the revolt.

## **Women as Rebel-Subjects Against Capital: The Mis-Historicization of Uprising**

Each phase of capitalist development and its accompanying primitive accumulation has as its precondition the exploitation of women. With the global expansion of the labor market in the recent decades the gendered aspect of the wage relation has acquired a new significance – feminized poverty increases alongside new demands on women to produce and reproduce labor power as capital’s most essential commodity. Thus, it is not surprising to find that women emerged as central rebel-subjects of the Oaxaca uprising, and that their revolt was articulated from the contradictions in social relations that they experienced. Through revolt, the women de-mystified the dimensions of their penury, specifically the housewives’ sector of the Oaxaca Commune, who in their own terms defined their rebellion against capitalism and the state as directly correlated with their rebellion against their husbands and families in the domestic sphere.

Generally, the historicizing of the Oaxaca Uprising has made women and the meaning of their resistance invisible. Women are simply articulated as asocial subjects who took actions, without exploring how this subjectivity defined and motivated the revolt, or why women’s resistance to patriarchy and capitalism in Oaxaca led them towards the rupture of gender as a specified class relation. In many cases, women’s resistance is a mere side note, and women are listed as “supporters” of the movement, or as coming in after the movement was spawned, despite the fact that women make up one third of the section 22 teachers union.

The failure in recognizing the centrality of women’s actions or the character of their motivations in the Oaxaca uprising is basically reflective of the failure to recognize the gendered aspects of class struggle. Thus, women’s experience in the uprising is never contextualized within a class framework, and they are described as joining the uprising under the burden of extreme “personal” sacrifice, identified merely in their relationship to the family or to reproduction, saying that they are “mothers, wives, and daughters.” When women’s participation in the uprising is dis-

cussed, it is often in a way that flattens differences and globalizes women's identity — shielding class conflicts that arose between women, ignoring intersection of gender and ethnic identities, and essentializing the participation of women organizing and taking action together without investigating the political strategy and impetus behind the phenomenon.

Women's militancy in the Oaxaca uprising has been minimized and diminished according to gendered stereotypes, in ways that are at times blatant lies. The majority of accounts about women in the Oaxaca uprising praise women's actions as "peaceful and non-violent," despite the fact that it was commonplace to find a group of women making molotovs around the barricades, or as "democratic," as though the women merely wanted to be better represented in the political economy and movement.

Women's struggles against patriarchal elements of the social movement that were fundamental to the uprising have never been discussed in the many existing accounts, nor the detrimental effects that the patriarchal reality had on the success of the uprising itself. And without noting these dimensions, we cannot ask the crucial question: *What happens when, after a rupture with state and capital, the framework of capitalist social relations, such as the sexual division of labor and the relations between men and women, are reproduced in the very attempt to overcome capitalism?*

The Oaxaca movement was one of the most dynamic examples in recent history of popular resistance rapidly undermining a state- and capital-based framework of social relations, yet this had contradictory meanings for women in the movement, whose initiatives for revolt stemmed from the overwhelmingly gendered aspects of exploitation, but who found that this struggle is continuous within the movement and the formation of alternative structures to capitalism.

## **Gendered, Neoliberal Capitalist Restructuring in Oaxaca**

The southern state of Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico and also has one of the highest populations of indigenous people. The effects of neoliberal capitalism and the political economy carved out from its economic restructuring, particularly the 1990s, created a social crisis in the country which was substantially felt in places like Oaxaca that are considered to be rich in "human" and "natural" resources. Both the political and economic dimensions of capital restructuring unequally affect women in Oaxaca, where the state and the market encroach on both the private and public spheres of daily life. The inefficiency of single wage homes with a male primary breadwinner has also led to an increase in women working outside the home and thus a feminization of productive labor. Women's participation in the global market has expanded, but within both the informal sector and formal sector women are paid lower wages than men and are still expected to perform unpaid domestic work. In the fragmented and segregated labor force, gender stratification has become part of the global economic process.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed in Mexico set conditions for re-paying loans meant to lift the country out of debt. As a result, in SAPs, women are the first to lose jobs during waves of unemployment, they are more affected by cuts in wages since their wages are already lower than men's. Also, since men tend to control cash crops, women suffer when subsistence agriculture decreases.

Women's labor in the globalized dynamic is rife with precarity, not only due to the aspects of exploitation within the workforce, but because of violence that has resulted from socio-political changes and changes in the market. Increase in domestic violence due to lack of attention given

to household labor, and male gender role insecurity stemming from reliance on women's wages, along with general anxiety because of rapid shifts in society (heightened political corruption, gang and narco trafficking violence) all threaten women. Femicide in Mexico has been directly linked to aspects of globalization.

Such processes of capital accumulation on a globalized scale have resulted in sharp increases in migration, as land becomes privatized and agricultural labor decreases, wages drop, and resources and public services are commodified. The economically-motivated mass migration of men from Oaxaca to the United States has resulted in a heightened burden for women left behind, who become solely responsible for their families and communities and must mediate a precarious economic situation where, as the local economy deteriorates around them, they rely on remittances that may or may not be sent back from men who risk not making the journey into the States or unemployment or deportation once there. Precarity thus stretches across both sides of the border.

Migration has changed the gendered structures of local communities, and yet women are not given decision-making power in the men's absence, and old land reforms still prevent women's ownership over properties that they upkeep. Poverty levels have also led to a heightened trend of female migration to the north. SAPs have entailed cuts in funding public services — such as education, healthcare, and basic community infrastructure. These are particularly “feminized” issues, since such services are mystified and socially perceived as “women's work.” The modernization model meant to fast-track development in underdeveloped countries has contradictory implications for women. While the entrance of women into the productive sphere is termed by the espousers of neoliberalism as “empowerment,” it is in truth merely another site of exploitation.

## **The Women's Takeover and Occupation of Canal 9**

The breakdown of political legitimacy and the psychological internalization of authority did not only materialize between the people of Oaxaca and the state, but within other relations and the ways that systematic repressive paradigms, such as patriarchy, structured places from work to the home and the popular assemblies. This breakdown began to be articulated in a truly revolutionary setting — during the occupation of Canal Nueve, the Oaxaca state television network and state radio.

The August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006, takeover of Canal Nueve has been deemed as significant not only because of the political and logistic power it held for the movement — the possession of a radio and TV networks transmitting far and wide — but also because it was an action carried forth spontaneously by thousands of women who were not acting with the permission or advice of male leaders. The initial takeover occurred during a march of more than 10,000 women in Oaxaca City, where the women decided to go to Canal 9 and ask for airtime in order to “give a more truthful representation” of the movement. When the station managers refused to give the women fifteen minutes of airtime, 350 women simply took over the station. The march was named March of the Cacerolas, or pots and pans, and subsequently the TV and radio station was named the same. The name subverted gender identity paradigms and ideas of women, particularly housewives, as passive and disempowered.

What has been significantly overlooked in the analysis and reporting of this aspect of the Oaxaca struggle is what the women did during the occupation of Canal 9. Besides transmitting,

producing daily programming, and holding workshops, long hours were spent during nightly patrols of the transmitter and defensive barricades in which the women of Canal 9 spoke to each other while huddled around small fires drinking coffee to stay awake. The dialogue and solidarity that emerged between the women was perhaps one of the most potent results of the takeover. What was before “private” and “personal” became a site for resistance. It was during these conversations that women for the first time experienced a space not dominated by men, in the absence of the market, in which they could organize freely and relate experiences, and talk to other women. This is where the idea of women’s autonomy emerged in Oaxaca, and it was to this formation of women, where there was no exploitation of their labor, no dominance of the market or the family, that the women would refer throughout the struggle.

Having the largest state television and its two radios at their disposal, women were able to transmit their opposition to the state collectively, and the image on the screen showed a break in the social factory where women are disciplined upholders of family and the private sphere, caring for the male waged laborer. Before, the television station had produced endless programs supporting state discourse, in a country where the President Vicente Fox had proclaimed on television that women were washing machines with two legs. After the takeover, women from all backgrounds were denouncing state authority and capitalism, and housewives with radical discourses brought the occupied station to its highest viewer rating in history as a state network. The women also critiqued their own movement, publically challenging male comrades in televised broadcasts to equalize cooking and cleaning at the plantónes.

It was within the first experience of a space in which women could speak freely together that they realized the true extent of the exploitation they experienced, and the nature of the political struggle at hand. “We found we had the same story, of being abused by husbands, brothers, raped by bosses,” said Eva, a 56-year-old housewife and member of Colectiva Nueva Mujer. “What we had in common was wanting to take down the system in order to change society into one where women are empowered. And we cried together realizing the oppression rooted in the home.”

During the Oaxaca uprising, in which at one point there were nearly 3,000 barricades constructed throughout the city as a means to protect the neighborhoods, and two different plantónes occupying central plazas, women met and talked and organized. The rebellion of the women truly gave the name of “ungovernable” to the conditions in Oaxaca at that time.

Many women of the movement contend that while the popular assemblies were dominated by male voices, the participants of the marches were mostly female, and that the barricades were maintained and defended from paramilitary attacks by mostly women.

There were several barricades in Oaxaca that were all women barricades. The barricades were yet another space where such important dialogues between women continued, and masculinity associated with political militancy was undermined as women defended police and paramilitary attacks with molotov cocktails, stones, and sticks.

Most women had never in their lives experienced space that was not only a place to talk to other women, but also autonomous, not controlled by the market, the state, or their husbands and fathers. Many realized that their life experiences of abuse in the home through economic hardships and structural oppression were echoed in the voices of other women and they found a common understanding of the meaning of gender and identity from the public to the private sphere. Late into the night at the barricades and in the Canal 9 occupation, women shared stories, many previously untold, of state and interpersonal sexual violence, domestic violence, of subordination from the workplace to the home. Here women realized that they were not alone,

that collectively their motivations for participating in the movement did not only stem from their economic struggles and that of their communities, but of the same gender stratification they experienced structurally in capitalist society their entire lives inside their homes, and furthermore, in the present moment within the APPO itself.

This analysis, where the exploitation within the private and public lives of women, within their productive and reproductive labor, intersect in their mutually exploitative categories, provided a new theoretical framework within which these women saw their actions: not as actions strictly within the context of the popular struggle but actions within the popular struggle of women against their exploitation and oppression. The discourse of the women's movement did not suggest that they saw themselves as a Marxist type "add-on" to the broader movement, or that their task was only to organize around "women's issues." Rather, the collective discourse that emerged from the late conversations in the "liberated" spaces of the barricades, media takeovers, and plantones was that a movement that challenges capitalism and seeks alternatives cannot survive without a transformation of capitalist social relations, wherein gender itself is a class relation. From the home to a public sphere dominated by wage labor, to the male hegemony within the movement, capitalism itself cannot survive without the same tiers of oppression of women. A rupture with capitalist production must be accompanied by a rupture with reproductive labor. The women of Oaxaca found the two spheres irrevocably interlinked, and it was for them the remaining question of reproduction that they faced during the Oaxaca Commune, where the ugly face of capitalist patriarchy was re-established within the Oaxaca movement. The revanchist force of patriarchal capitalist social relations ultimately had grave strategic consequences for the success of the uprising.

## **Patriarchy in the Movement — The Home vs. the Barricades**

*"Then we were fighting two different fronts — the system, and the men inside our own movement."*

—Eva, housewife

The two different fronts in the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism were not mutually exclusive. The reasons why patriarchy persists within the context of popular struggles are similar to and reflective of the perpetuation of gender exploitation in the capitalist world. Patriarchy in this sense cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon or a question of individual morality, but a systematic dynamic upon which capital accumulation and its social relations are dependent, and which are constantly deepened by state policies.

In the same ways that globalization has provided a way for Oaxacan women to participate in labor that does not involve the reproduction of male labor power (albeit to their further exploitation) one could say that in the Oaxaca movement the women also acted autonomously and directly in the movement — organizing occupations, resisting police, building barricades and staging media takeovers — rather than acting as support roles for male participants. "We told them we weren't here just to cook their food at the plantones and wash the dishes," said Luz, a 40 year-old housewife. "We demonstrated that we can take actions as part of the movement ourselves."

The women of the movement did not passively accept the roles that some men attempted to impose on them, but used the transformative moment to challenge traditional gender roles. Many



women refused to simply cook or wash dishes at the plantón, but challenged the men to do the same. Women were the most vocal about challenging authoritarian tendencies from some men within the movement, and called out men for acting as the protagonist of the uprising.

Yet sexism and men's insistence on women's role in reproduction not only limited women's participation in the movement, but also strategically undermined the effectiveness of the Oaxaca movement as a whole. Men's lack of support for women on a practical level — not only their unwillingness to equalize household duties but also the pressure they put on women to return to domestic work — greatly affected women's ability to participate to their full strategic capacity within the movement, critically weakening the barricades and the occupations.

The first night (of the Canal Nueve occupation) we were hundreds but little by little the numbers went down because there were women who had children to take care of, husbands, and that limited us," said Ita, a 55-year-old teacher from Colectiva Nueva Mujer. "There were some men who didn't agree in backing and supporting the station that had been taken over by women. Women's husbands didn't help in the sense of doing the housework, such as taking care of kids or washing clothes, so that the women could continue being at the station. But for many women it was enough that the men allowed them to go at all.

Paramilitaries took advantage of the low number of women defending the station and on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2006, shot at the television antenna, rendering it useless. In the case of the Canal Nueve occupation as well as at the barricades, women were limited in maximizing the strategic effects of these tactics because of the pressure to continue to fulfill domestic duties required by their gender roles. Male family members, even those participating in the social movement in the streets, refused to do housework, even under these special circumstances.

Much like daily life in the global labor force, women participating in Oaxaca's popular struggle were challenged by questions of time, and felt they had two jobs. What once was time taken up by waged work became time spent participating in assemblies, occupations, or at barricades, their "second" job being domestic labor. Whereas before they were threatened by economic violence resulting from an insecure and marginalized work sector, they now found themselves threatened by sexual and gendered violence from police and paramilitary. And, during the uprising as before the uprising, women suffer from domestic violence and are punished by an increase in this, whether their housework is neglected because of time spent participating in the waged productive labor, or participating in a movement to end capitalism.

When asked if they suspected if domestic violence increased during the uprising all twelve women from Colectiva Nueva Mujer present nodded their heads.

There were comrades who complained that "since the 1<sup>st</sup> of August and the Canal 9 takeover my woman doesn't serve me." There were many women who suffered domestic violence for being at the plantones, marches, even sometimes attempts to divorce or separate. The husbands didn't take well to the idea of women abandoning the housework to participate politically. "We are worried about this situation because we are fighting against the system and the result is that in the home this same repression occurs. Inside of the APPO it occurs. And it's not just our husbands that question us but our entire families."

One woman continued to defend a barricade with a broken arm — the result of her husband trying to prevent her from going to the streets.

As heterogeneous as the movement was, the assemblies were male dominated and women's voices were systematically silenced. At the APPO statewide congress on November 16<sup>th</sup> 2006, in which popular assemblies from around the state gathered to solidify the APPO's formation and

strategic direction, a directive body, or Consejo, was formed composing of representatives from the diverse sectors of the movement. It was to replace the provisional consejo, existing since the birth of the APPO, which was an exclusively male body. When the time came to vote for the percentage of women who would regularly participate as members of the Consejo, it was clear that the APPO had failed to integrate a gender analysis into their previous political debates during the congress or generally during the previous months of uprising. The debate that focused on the “State, National, and International Context” accomplished a coherent current class analysis of Mexico, but never discussed patriarchy and Mexico’s long history of oppression of women on a social and political scale as well as the economic exploitation of women’s bodies and labor. The congress also consisted mostly of male representatives.

Gender analysis was not taken into consideration in the concept of organizational representation. The vote between whether women should have at least a 33% representation or a 50% representation was debated for over an hour. The congress voted that women should have a 33% representation arguing that it would not be possible to have half of the representatives for each organization, region, or sector be women, because many had very little or no women participants. “We were angered by the vote at the Congress because we (women) have been most present in the streets, so why can’t we get full participation in the assemblies?” said a 23-year-old member of Colectiva Nueva Mujer.

## **Class Struggle Within the Women’s Movement**

When the antennas of Canal Nueve were destroyed by paramilitary gunfire, the women led other movement participants to take over thirteen other commercial radio stations at dawn the next day. Only two occupations lasted more than a few weeks. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August APPO’s Coordination of Women of Oaxaca (COMO) was formed, comprised of women from diverse backgrounds, including professionals and housewives. Some participated as individuals or as members of organizations. The COMO organized several marches and actions in the months following and gathered attention as the essential embodiment of the women of the uprising.

In the same way that many participants in the Oaxaca uprising identified with the politics of the rebellion but disagreed with the qualities of the structural organizations of the movement and did not identify with the APPO body, women participants in the Oaxaca uprising identified with the feminized politics of the women’s movement but deviated from the structural entities that pretended to represent the women of the Oaxaca movement: the COMO.

The women who split from the COMO were largely housewives who worked within the informal sector and others who experienced ideological differences with the women of COMO. Many of these differences stemmed from questions of class, and according to some women class privileges in the COMO resulted in internalizations of patriarchy and authoritarianism. The women noted that women who had more education and thus higher paying jobs claimed roles that involved articulation of the women’s issues and pretended to represent all the women involved, that these roles led to obscuration of poorer women’s needs and also put certain women in hierarchical roles.

The splits within the COMO not only reflected splits happening within the movement as a whole, but also reflected how capitalist restructuring has polarized women along class lines. Differences in identity not only adulterated gender relations within the anti-capitalist Oaxaca

movement, but also between women fighting capitalism itself and at the same time the gender stratification within society and the movement.

The women who are allotted the least privileges in society, who work at the lowest wages or in unpaid labor, are also marginalized the most within the movement against this exploitation. It is thus that such women who experience the intersections of class, gender, and ethnicity — mainly the Oaxacan housewives and indigenous women — who with the smallest income mediate the effects of patriarchal capitalism and repression at the base level in the community, rejected the COMO. The women who suffered the most from hierarchies outside the movement were highly skeptical of vanguard politics and all types of power relations within society that were recreated within the movement, and they sought a horizontal, anti-authoritarian, non-reformist, and non-representational alternative during times of struggle. They saw that they couldn't unite with all of the other women within the Oaxaca uprising simply on the basis of gender identification because of the ways that intersecting identities, particularly class, shaped the ideological grounds for their rebellion. "We (the housewives) don't want to take power, we don't want to negotiate with the government, we don't want leaders or communists around," Eva said forcefully. "We want autonomy and mutual aid."

Capitalist gender stratification was re-created within the APPO and the social movement, forcing women back to reproductive work, and class stratification was recreated within the women's participation within the APPO. In this way, hierarchies are built and re-built.

## **Sexual Violence as State Repression: Women's Bodies as Battleground**

*"Some felt like it was also a security measure to only let women into Canal 9, that that way we wouldn't suffer as much violence and repression."*

—Ita

Although women in Canal Nueve were semi-consciously applying a strategy such as that used by las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in 1977 (that is, subverting their gender identity in order to maintain the occupation), they in no way were unaware of the gendered violence often put forth by the state.

The patriarchal nature of the state means that its soldiers and police forces cannot and will never alleviate women of the oppression they experience because they are women. To rely on police and soldiers to "protect" women's bodies is a backwards misconception born out of sexism and a minimization of women's activities. In reality it is exactly the patriarchal profile of the state that heightens violent repression of women rather than diminishing it.

The phenomenon of soldier rape has been widely explored and researched. However, globalization has meant a change in methods of state control of its own people. As international financial institutions such as the IMF and the WTO weaken Mexico's political and economic autonomy, it is forced to lower trade tariffs and to allow multinational corporations to exert hegemony over its markets. The Mexican state has been strengthened in aspects of domestic security with funds from the US in order to protect private investments from local resistance. This has meant an expansion in national security forces and particularly a militarization of police forces. Rather than a full scale military operation, the Mexican government, in order to maintain

a democratic aesthetic necessitated by integration into the global market, militarizes its state and federal police forces to mediate crowd control and riot situations, like that of the Oaxaca uprising. The creation of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) during Vicente Fox's administration is an example of the militarization of the police forces. The PFP are given more highly sophisticated weapons and do not make regular local patrols but are deployed to outside states to "fight narco-traffickers" or to "maintain the peace." Like soldiers in a war, 3,000 PFP and armored vehicles and tanks were deployed to Oaxaca on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006 in order to temporarily occupy the city, evict the barricades and encampments and "maintain the peace." Police in Mexico, and the PFP in Oaxaca, have used sexual violence as a tool for repression in both similar and different ways to that of soldiers in wartime. However, gendered violence from police is an under-researched phenomenon that is barely analyzed by social movements.

Sexual violence on the part of a militarized police force is a tactic used not only to terrorize women, but also to make a point among men: by raping "their" women they were also damaging those men's property, and in the case of Oaxaca, the act of occupying space in the center of the capital, a space previously occupied by the movement, is represented and expressed by occupying women's bodies through sexual violence. Thus women's bodies become the political and symbolic battleground.

Further, as traditional gender roles remain static and women's role remains "in the home," women who leave their homes to take to the streets in protest are considered to have lost their "respectability" and therefore can be treated as "whores." When male comrades also discourage women from going into the streets and, instead of supporting women's participation in the movement, pressure them to fulfill reproduction activities, they play an ideological role in strengthening the tools of state repression and legitimize police sexual violence towards women on the streets.

In most of the cases of mass rapes that have been widely examined, like that of the Bosnian mass rapes, soldiers rape civilians of different ethnicities and nationalities, the supposed motivation being racial cleansing and nationalism. Mass rape has rarely, if ever, been examined outside of a framework in which race and nationalism are considered to be the principal characteristics. This framework ignores other social or political implications of mass rape, in particular the state's need to protect capital accumulation, and also reinforces biological motivations. Though Oaxaca is 70 percent indigenous, the PFP does not discriminate. A few months before arriving in Oaxaca, the PFP raped 23 of the 45 women arrested during the siege of Atenco, in the state of Mexico in May of 2006 while putting down the three-day rebellion there.

The total number of women raped during the PFP occupation and during arrests is unknown, but various accounts of sexual assault by the PFP surfaced after their entrance into the state. One 45-year-old woman called into the occupied university radio one night in mid-November to report that PFP officers sexually assaulted her while she was running errands downtown. A silence fell over the barricade as people listened to the live broadcast of the woman's account, and that night women began to organize, seeing a need to show a collective response to the use of sexual violence by the police. The next day, women organized a march to the site of the PFP occupation and protested the assaults, holding mirrors towards the police that read: "I am a rapist."

This occurred in the context of the systematic perpetuation of violence against women and femicide in Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca, where the federal government states an average of 60 women murdered every year. It also occurs in the context where as women work outside the

homes in the productive sphere, or leave their domestic work to spend time in occupations or barricades, they suffer a heightened trend in domestic violence.

Though research has been done concerning individual incidents of police sexual violence, and even on how such violence is the result of systemic features of police institutions, mass police use of sexual violence as a method of state repression is barely analyzed by scholars of social movements. Little has been written on how mass police sexual violence is a direct result of the disintegration of economic and social state control and the subsequent militarization of police forces, particularly under globalization. This is augmented by the changing gender dynamics of capital restructuring – with more women in the “public sphere,” with the exploitation of women’s bodies so essential for extraction of capitalist profit, and with women more active in social movements, police sexual violence will continue to become a more and more common feature of repression.

## **Conclusion**

The women of the Oaxaca uprising learned that a popular movement cannot confront the structural, social, and political crisis created by capital and state domination if the violent, gendered expression of capitalism is not simultaneously confronted – if the movement recreates the gendered aspects of the very social relations that an uprising pretends to transform. The strategic obstacles faced in the Oaxaca Commune were an expression of capital’s contradictions concerning women’s work, and it is feasible to say that the uprising may have had a different outcome if the sexual division of labor was openly confronted and did not disable women’s ability to hold the barricades and occupations.

An uprising, along with those who historicize revolt, cannot properly confront its context when “women’s issues” are atomized into a particular, specialized space in the movement, when capitalism as it truly functions and exists is not challenged.

However, the Oaxaca Commune and its barricades and occupations, its street battles and long nights of assemblies, all running on the blood and sweat of women’s resistance, continues to inspire the possibility of insurrection and mass popular revolt. The state of “ungovernability” that the movement claimed gestured toward true freedom, and the rebellious women of the movement refused, for a time with great force, to be governed by state authority, by the domination of capitalism in its everyday manifestations, by husbands, middle-class women, or by the police.

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