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La Patrulla Feminista: Feminist Grassroots Interventions in Southern Mexico

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FRANCO LAGUNA CORREA, NOV 1 2021

Right on the International Day of the Girl Child (October 11), the capital of Oaxaca³ in southern Mexico⁴ witnessed the emergence of the feminist collective “La Patrulla Feminista” (The Feminist Patrol). The main purpose of the feminist collective is exposing local fathers who haven’t paid their child support, some even for years, without any action from the local authorities. Since October 11, “La Patrulla Feminista” has been patrolling through the city of Oaxaca making stops in the addresses of the fathers to hang up their photographs on the façade of their houses (and in some cases, members of “La Patrulla Feminista” even dared to smear their doors and façades with fecal matter). These fathers were identified by “La Patrulla Feminista” through the multiple denounces made public by courageous ex-wives and ex-partners.

Many women from Oaxaca have joined “La Patrulla Feminista” movement, which now is comprised of more than three hundred women. As it was expected, the coverage of the grassroots movement has reached millions of people through social media and the national news outlets. As for today, there are various public “tendederos” (clotheslines) exhibiting the faces of the most notorious fathers that have been denounced, which include men who were municipal presidential candidates and local politicians. The ultimate purpose of “La Patrulla Feminista” is to take the cases of the unpaid child support to the national senate with the purpose to force the parents to pay their debt or be legally punished. However, many women have expressed their fear to be condemned by local authorities or be assaulted by their ex-partners in retaliation to their denounces.

In 2019, according to data provided by a report issued by Mexico’s Executive Secretariat of Citizenship Protection, ten feminicides were perpetrated at the national level on daily basis. In 2020, these numbers went up at disproportionate records. However, this data doesn’t take into consideration the complaints of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, family violence, and the various forms of rape that the report provides in relation to women. Thus, the emergence of “La Patrulla Feminista” in Oaxaca³ one of the most dangerous Mexican states for women, indigenous people, and Afromexicans³ fills a gap in terms of grassroots organization that through overt, and even radical, feminist maneuvers challenge local authorities to force them to take a step further in both the contention and eradication of gendered and racialized violence in Oaxaca.

Oaxaca is one of the Mexican states with the highest levels of murders at the national level. It is well documented the contemporary paramilitarization of various Mexican states, where most of the population belongs to an indigenous ethnicity or identified as Afromexicans. Oaxaca is the state with the highest national percentage of speakers of indigenous languages. It is not only the historical homeland of the Mixtec people, the third largest ethnic group in Mexico, but also in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca³ shared with the neighboring state of Guerrero³ most of the Afromexican population of the country resides. In 2015, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) included for the first time in history the ethnic identifier “Afro-mexican/Afrodescendant” in a preliminary census that reported that 1.2 million of the total Mexican population surveyed in the census identified as Afromexican.

The alarming increase of violence in southern Mexico³ with a focus on Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, and Michoacán³ has made the Mexican local and national authorities surrendered to a “pandemic of paramilitary groups.” From the Ayotzinapa Massacre (Iguala mass kidnapping) in 2014, to the ongoing attacks perpetrated by

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paramilitary groups with strong ties to drug trafficking that target indigenous and Afromexican peoples across the country, not to mention that Mexico's bio-cultural diversity is also in peril due to paramilitarized violence. In a study published in 2020, Omar Vidal and Richard Brusca established the correlation between the endangerment of both biological diversity and linguistic diversity in Mexico, placing the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Guerrero, and Michoacán as the states that harbor most biological and linguistic diversity in the country.

In a study published in 2017 by The Wilson Center, a team of six experts from the Mexican Institute outlined that the main causes of the rise of violence in Mexico, based on murder rates, is due to: 1) the increase of conflict between criminal groups, without disregarding that this is a byproduct of the state's own strategy to fight these criminal groups; 2) the lack of capacity of local authorities to contain criminal groups; 3) the impunity fostered by the state at both the federal and state levels; 4) the complexity of the nature of the origins and evolution of violence in Mexico; and 5) the violence directed towards journalists, local social leaders, and other independent voices that bring to the surface those voices that are silenced under various forms of threats, which makes public security more difficult.

So far, "La Patrulla Feminista" hasn't declared any ties to any political entity, thus stating feminist self-determination as the only principle that is driving their public maneuvers. This way, "La Patrulla Feminista" adds another layer to other movements taking place in Oaxaca, such as the "autodefensas" (self-defense armed autonomous community-based collectives) that have grown also in numbers in the state as the means to defend their communities from organized criminal groups. In the state of Oaxaca, members of most of the 417 municipalities of the state have already enforced this "horrific and non-remunerated job." In the Mixtec and northern regions of Oaxaca, where masculine migration to the United States is a historical phenomenon, women have also joined "autodefensas," thus the feminization of the so-called "autodefensas" is not a new phenomenon in the southern state.

Only a few days after the launch in Oaxaca of "La Patrulla Feminista," in the neighboring state of Guerrero it made national news the case of Angélica, an indigenous girl that at eleven-years-old was sold to get into a forced marriage with a twelve-year-old boy. On October 14, Angélica escaped after four years being kept captive by the boy's family and after various attempts of rape by the boy's father. While the practice of "forced marriage" among indigenous communities in southern Mexico ³/₄including the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero³/₄ has circulated on regular basis among many national and international news outlets, Angélica's case reignited at the national level the ongoing debate on women's rights in Mexico.

Many feminist groups in recent months have been demonstrating in the capital cities of the most populous Mexican states, with a series of even violent demonstrations by feminist groups in Mexico City, where the government had to place protection fences around the frontispiece of the National Government Palace in downtown Mexico city to avoid vandalism. Most of these feminist groups have been acting autonomously, thus evidencing a lack of cohesion among them. In a study that focuses on feminist movements in Mexico between 2019-2020, Lucía Álvarez Enríquez places the epicenter of these movements among the feminist youth on the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM), where young women, not all of them students, have organized many sociopolitical maneuvers to close several universities and have carried on manifold public demonstrations to protest against the radicalization of violence against Mexican women in recent years.

Furthermore, Álvarez Enríquez recognizes that these feminist sociopolitical maneuvers have emerged as new ones without paragon with former ones. Álvarez Enríquez points out that these movements are new because they lack a unified and specific leadership, while they also have witnessed the diversification of their main actors and have forged their own language to communicate their messages, often relying on the use of violence to shake and confront the official institutions and political groups that they are challenging. While it would be difficult to rationalize the current feminist maneuvers, some already radicalized, as one cohesive entity, "La Patrulla Feminista" is focusing on one aspect of the Mexican patriarchal system that other feminist groups have not denounced yet.

As a corollary, according to scholars like Álvarez Enríquez, the future success of these feminists groups resides in creating channels to better communicate among themselves and potentially find points of encounter to establish a more cohesive and effective dialogue with society. So far, the response of the leftist Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been a lack of desire to establish an organic dialogue with these feminists groups and

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official institutions have enacted various forms of repressive measures in order to frame feminist groups as both violent and “toxic” for the fragile Mexican social order.

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