

# Confronting Gender Violence in the Zongolica Mountains of Mexico: The Work of the Veracruz Network of Citizen Organisations

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**Abstract** This case study examines the role played by civil society in collaboration with the State of Veracruz government in implementing legal frameworks that support women's rights and freedom from violence in a region where *femicide* is a constant. It focuses on the relationship between the Veracruz network of citizen organisations (ROCOVER) and government actors in the implementation of the Women's Institute in Veracruz, which was created as a result of both citizen pressure and new legal frameworks. It looks at the way these networks played a key role in supporting the Luz Marina Center, which serves as a shelter and legal aid service for indigenous women who suffer from violence. The centre was established in early 2007 by missionaries from the Order of Immaculate Conception, in partnership with a group of local women.

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## 1 Introduction: gender violence and femicide in Mexico

It was only in 2000 that for the first time Mexico witnessed the peaceful transition of political parties in charge of the federal government. This process had started in the regions some years before, signaling the change to a multiparty state, but the year 2000 marked a major step forward. At first, things were not easy for the new government. There was a critical society, strong political parties in opposition, as well as an independent and powerful mass media. More difficult still was the presence of a broad and tolerated network of organised criminals involved with drug trafficking, kidnapping, traffic of influence and other activities. Today, the Mexican political system remains in transition. There are regions with a consolidated democratic system, an equal electoral competence and an organised and participative civil society. Others feature an older heritage: old political bosses (*cacicazgos*); old political practices such as electoral manipulation or vote-buying; political clientelist relations with the poor and those marked by racial, gender and social segregation. At Federal level, the expectations created by the political transition in

2000 have not yet been fulfilled. In 2006, a different party was voted in and there is currently a legitimacy crisis, with many Mexicans lacking confidence in their political leaders, including state governors, federal and local congress deputies and senators. And Mexico has been experiencing an unprecedented period of violence. There are cities where skirmishes are taking place on a daily basis, executions and shootings among drug traffic bands, kidnapping bands and police forces, and other kinds of violent crimes are becoming more and more frequent.

This case study is about a different kind of violence, that predates the present violent era. This sort of violence is not the reaction of tolerated criminal groups against democratic change, or the result of the lack of governance capacity to cope with the new context. It is a far older form of violence, which is the result of the social construction of gender, based on positions of male supremacy and female inferiority.

Gender violence is one of Mexico's biggest social challenges because of widespread social perceptions that it is a rare phenomenon, which is

not the case. Reports of women being beaten, raped or killed are considered rare and, for city dwellers, seem a very distant issue. However, it is much closer to home than they think. Cases occur all over the country, both within households and families and within social and institutional settings. Violence can be in sexual, physical, psychological, ethnic and economic forms (Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate the Violence Against Women 1994). Violence against women's rights increases the social exclusion that exists in all Mexican regions. It leads to differential access to other social rights such as health and education, as well as inequality in income. When gender and ethnicity combine, the result can be doubly disastrous. The general atmosphere of violence, including what is called 'femicide' (to distinguish it from homicide) can be seen, for example, in evidence presented to the Federal Chamber of Deputies in 2006. It concluded that more than 6,000 girls and women had been murdered in the six years between 1999 and 2005. Three girls and women had been murdered each day in the State of Mexico, Veracruz, Chiapas, Guerrero, the Federal District, Chihuahua, Oaxaca, Sonora, Baja California and Morelos (Cámara de Diputados 2006). The concept of 'femicide' encompasses a far wider range of crimes than murder, covering hate crimes towards women in general, which can lead to murder, suicide and psychological damage (Russell and Radford 1992).

Public opinion seems generally blind to gender violence. Mass protests took place when the son of a millionaire businessman was killed by his kidnappers; in August 2008, the media coverage brought people onto the streets against violence and crime under the slogan of 'lighting up' Mexico. By contrast, there have been few organisations and public figures prepared to speak up or protest against gender violence. Mass media names the issue, but there are no opinion leaders invited to prime-time talk shows to discuss the problem. However, in February 2007, following a number of congressional hearings in 2006, the Mexican Congress approved the 'General Law to Allow the Access to a Life Free of Violence for Women', considered a major conquest in the battle for rights for Mexican women (Poder Ejecutivo Federal 2007).

The passage from law to rights to be demanded and claimed in everyday life has not been easy.

The present case looks at how such a practice began to take shape in the state of Veracruz, through a process that linked non-governmental organisations (NGOs), lawmakers, government officials and new institutions together, demonstrating how NGO action can leverage positive change, even when they enter different areas from their usual advocacy focus. It draws on interviews with key political and social organisational actors and beneficiaries, as well as a close review of the official documentation and related literature. The research involved partnership with ROCVER, an umbrella organisation that networks civil society organisations, but which had not, to date, focused on violence against women as a major theme. As such, the researcher was able to achieve an unusual degree of access to the actors and the events.<sup>1</sup>

## **2 Change in Veracruz State**

The Chamber of Representatives' report on femicide noted the problem was particularly acute in Veracruz (Cámara de Diputados 2006). In the past five years, 1,494 cases of women being murdered had been recorded, but in 70 per cent of the cases there had been no prosecution. As a result, sensitivity began to grow among organisations active in the state. In 2004, Veracruz elected Fidel Herrera Beltrán of the previously dominant Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) as Governor of the State (to serve 2005–11). Although the PRI won the State government and some municipalities that had been in the hands of other parties prior to the election, it lost the majority in the State Congress. This meant it had to negotiate programmes and actions with other parties.

The result was a Pact for Governability and Development, called for by the newly elected Governor in 2005. The Pact was initially among political parties, and excluded civil society organisations. Among the items in the Pact was an agreement to tackle a recurring demand by social organisations to create the Women's Institute of Veracruz. The Women's Institute was to follow a federal model for gender issues, and would serve as the main public agency for women's rights.<sup>2</sup>

While civil society organisations had not been directly invited to take part in the Pact, they nevertheless found an entry point. One civil

organisation, the network ROCVER (Network of the Citizen Organisations of Veracruz), formed an alliance with the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) to force a number of issues into the Pact. This included the establishment of a Women's Institute, laws on accountability, and the protection of children. The mechanism that the Pact used to develop subsequent legislation was that of technical workshops in which each political party had a seat. When it came to the workshop that would develop the law to create the Women's Institute, the PRD gave its seat to ROCVER.<sup>3</sup> Through 2006, the workshop worked on developing the framework for the law. Following its presentation by the Governor to the State Congress, the 'Law Establishing the Women's Institute of Veracruz' was approved in January 2007.

ROCOVER was originally formed in 1996 following four years of discussion and debate between citizen-based organisations and NGOs active in the state of Veracruz. Its central principles are: independence from political parties and governments; horizontal and consensus decision-making; autonomy for member organisations; plurality and respect for the ideology of each group or person; the promotion of fraternal relations, supportive, inclusive egalitarian support among colleagues with different backgrounds and experiences; commitment to strengthening social movements and their work. Among the concerns that ROCVER has on its collective agenda have included: participatory democracy and elections; administration and enforcement of justice; the right to communication and information; municipal reform; the right to a healthy environment; the situation in rural Mexico and Veracruz; indigenous peoples in Veracruz; migrants from Veracruz; respect for the rights of children; gender equity; prevention and control of HIV/AIDS. One of the member organisations the Heriberto Jara Municipal Services Center (CESEM), specialises in municipal administration and capacity-building, and was to play a key role in this case.

The organisational design for the Women's Institute created two special committees in addition to the formal organisational structure:

- A Social Committee to receive and express civil society demands to the Institute

- An Advisory Committee, made up of experts on gender topics, to discuss and propose the politics and strategies followed by the Institute.<sup>4</sup>

Even though it follows a conventional management policy, the Social Committee has succeeded in brokering agreements between the President and civil society, and ROCVER has been able to place its demands through the different pro-women NGOs present.

The role of the Women's Institute is to guarantee the rights for women and to promote cross-cutting gender issues in all the politics and programmes of the different government agencies. It is also required to work with town councils of municipalities, to create similar institutes at municipal level.

From the Women's Institute of Veracruz (IVM) and with the broad participation of woman leaders from the ROCVER network, a second law was created and approved by the state congress: the 'Law for the Access to a Life Free of Violence'. Its objective is to prevent, punish and eradicate violence against women. One result of this law has been the 2008 State System to Prevent, Care and Eradicate the Violence against Women. ROCVER has a woman representative in this system. Since 2007, the IVM has been able to access resources from the Support of Women's Institutions in Federal Entities Program (PAIMEF) and, with them, has been able to support the work of different pro-women civil society organisations that work in the regions and municipalities of Veracruz, including the Luz Marina Center in the Zongolica mountains, and the focus of this case study.

The creation of the IVM and the State Law are the result of three decades of social mobilisation to defend and protect women rights in Veracruz State and across Mexico. Montserrat Díaz and Margarita Guillaumín<sup>5</sup> have argued that these two acts must be considered as social conquests, even although there were risks involved. One possible risk was that the state could use these acts to demonstrate its commitment and as a means of legitimation, rather than in order to take any effective action on women's rights. In this context, civil society action meant failures to act to protect women's rights to a life free of violence would have come at a high political cost.

### **3 Femicide and violence against women in the Zongolica mountains**

The Zongolica mountains is one of the poorest regions in the country. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), two of the municipalities in this region are among the 15 municipalities with the lowest rate of human development in the country. Tehuipango is the municipality with the lowest rate, followed by Mixtla de Altamirano, Astacinga and Atlahuilco (UNDP 2006). The mountainous Zongolica region is at the centre of the territory of Veracruz State, a largely indigenous region, with a mainly Nahuatl population. This region is known for its conflict, shaped by many factors: poverty, ethnic segregation, gender violence, and potential armed conflict. The indigenous communities have had many experiences of strong civil organisation and social action, such as CROIZ, a regional network of indigenous organisations in Zongolica. Its founder, Julio Atenco Vidal, has been an important leader in the battle to preserve its cultures against the attempts by the Mexican government to decrease its importance.

Public outcry against femicide has been increasing in this region. An emblematic case was the murder of Ernestina Ascención Rosario in February 2007, which was taken up as a human rights issue at the national level. Despite public evidence that she was raped and murdered by Mexican army soldiers, the Federal Government put the cause of death down to anaemia. At least two other murders have been committed with impunity since. The first was that of Adelaida Amayo Aguas, killed in May 2008, who was part of the Advisory Committee of Radio Zongolica, as well as part of a cooperative with an increasing presence in the region. The second was that of Susana Xocua, killed later in May 2008. Neither crime has been solved.<sup>6</sup>

Violence in the Zongolica mountains is something that women face everyday inside their families, in their community and in the region. They suffer offences, verbal aggressions, threats, as well as economic, sexual and physical violence. As many as 70 per cent of these women have faced some kind of violence. It is not unusual for young women to have been subjected to sexual abuse by fathers, brothers, relatives or family friends over years. Moreover, indigenous women suffer a permanent segregation, cultural,

ethnic and because of their language (Centro de Servicios Municipales ‘Heriberto Jara’ 2008)).

Zongolica’s indigenous women are in general also excluded from political, labour, social, cultural and even familial decisions, which is yet another form of this violence. Data from UNDP show that in terms of political representation, women occupy only 12 per cent of the available seats, and out of 14 municipalities, only in six are there women in political posts (UNDP 2006). In the region, the work and attention now being paid to femicide is beginning to document how gender violence is present even at official organisational levels.<sup>7</sup>

This situation is even more complicated when the factors that generate social exclusion are combined. This is what María López de la Rica, a nun of the order of the Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception, who started the Luz Marina Center project, calls ‘the triple oppression’:

The kind of violence that indigenous women are living [with] in the Zongolica mountains, is expressed in many ways, and could be recognized [from] the perspective of the triple oppression: for being poor, for being women, and for being indigenous. Many of them continue the conditions of subordination and give them as a heritage for their daughters as if it would be a value for being a woman.

I have found that many teenager women are living between the dream of freedom and the real subordination where they are maintained because of their communities’ beliefs. [To] be free, to be herself, to take her own decisions, to ask for respect to her rights, is still a desire. A desire that step by step is taking face and heart, and that will be possible by the time that we (women) start to be the voice of the other women still without voice. (Interview with María López de la Rica, 2008)

### **4 Luz Marina Center for Women’s Guidance and Promotion: constructing governance from within civil society**

Following the continued violence against women in the municipality of Rafael Delgado, where they face daily offences, verbal aggressions, threats and other types of gender violence, the Luz Marina Center for Women’s Guidance and

Promotion<sup>8</sup> was founded on 21 March 2007. Rafael Delgado is considered the gateway for the Zongolica mountains, located very near to Orizaba City. The centre was established as an initiative of the order of Missionaries of the Immaculate Conception led by Mother María López de la Rica, and with the support of a small group of local women actively worried about their own situations. The centre was named after Luz Marina Valencia Triviño, a Colombian member of the order who was killed in a violent act of misogyny by the Mexican state of Guerrero on 21 March of 1987.<sup>9</sup>

The centre gives guidance and legal or psychological advice and is especially concerned with providing integrated care for women that suffer violence. A characteristic of the Luz Marina Center is that it has established the institutional network necessary that enables it to refer women on to specific support institutions for specialised care. But its role extends beyond the provision of care, and it does not remain invisible within its four walls. Its objectives are also to raise its voice against gender violence, to promote gender equality and attend women in the defence of their legitimate demands, showing them how to demand respect for their human and women's rights.

The Luz Marina Center was the fruit of a very important collaborative initiative and joint venture between different organisations: those of ROCVER, the Feminist Collective Cihuatlahtolli, the Social Committee of Rafael Delgado and the consultants of the Heriberto Jara Municipal Services Center (CESEM). This group embraced the cross-cutting nature of the femicide concerns, and were key in helping to set up the organisational structure, legal form and for dealing with many other administrative matters.

Nearly two years on from the foundation of the centre it is now seen by many local organisations who were initially suspicious, as a serious and focused organisation that deserves support. However, the presence of other centres such as the Heriberto Jara, an important advisory NGO for local government administration training and development, also helped to open up the debate. As a result, a number of community and civic organisations have come forward to join in the growing movement against gender violence.

Among these organisations are:

- The Rafael Delgado IMSS-Solidarity programme which brings together a number of local institutions. Through them a programme for teenagers has been established as well as a medical clinic for victims of gender violence.
- The Psychology School of the Gulf of Mexico University. Its students support the centre by providing consultations or therapy.
- The Nursery School of the University of Veracruz at Orizaba also provides support for the activities of the centre.
- The work of the centre is also being supported by the Women's Institute of Veracruz (IVM), which has been able to draw down funds from the Support of Women's Institutions in Federal Entities Program (PAIMEF).

During this time, the centre has served 218 people: 165 women and 53 men who started to go with their spouses to receive help and guidance to overcome the violent situation. Most women who attended the Luz Marina Center have been in their twenties, which indicates the challenge that still has to be met, as gender violence and femicide are registered in the region across all ages, from childhood<sup>10</sup> until old age.<sup>11</sup> Its territorial influence now reaches well beyond the limits of Rafael Delgado, and today people from other municipalities receive attention at Luz Marina. Some 82 of the cases required other measures and help from different institutions, including the public prosecutor's office of the state police; tribunals; centres for women refugees; the IMSS clinic of Rafael Delgado; the Municipal System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF Municipal of Rafael Delgado); the Psychiatric Hospital of Orizaba; the Health Center of Orizaba and the Rehabilitation Center for Persons with Addiction Problems (Centro Luz Marina de Orientación y Promoción de las Mujeres 2008).

The centre is generating a significant impact, increasing awareness about violence against women both in Rafael Delgado, and nearby communities. Nowadays, more women are becoming conscious of their rights, and they are raising their voice demanding respect because they value themselves. Equally, the municipal authorities also recognise the efforts made by the team led by María López de la Rica and are

also providing support for the work. On 15 October 2008, the centre held a workshop to commemorate the International Day of Peasant Women. More than 150 people, including men, from many different organisations and social movements came to the event. Events of this kind have helped to put violence against women on the practical agenda.

### **5 Fighting and creating: a final reflection from a governance perspective**

People have the government that they deserve ... governments interact with the society and society needs to be able to mobilize itself; on both conditions depends development and governability. (Cabrero 2006)

The Luz Marina Center is two years old, and the the challenge it is facing remains immense. On the other hand, the creation of the Women's Institute of Veracruz and the State 'Law for the Access to a Life Free of Violence' are also the fruits of a long and difficult struggle by various

civil society organisations. Voices raised are now being listened to. However, there are still social and political actors that deny gender violence, and the temptation for government to use these achievements to date for political purposes.<sup>12</sup> This is why it remains important to continuously strengthen the social networks. This is particularly true of broader networks such as ROCVER, which are able to contribute to the theme and through their action in different arenas, demanding the attention of the municipal, state and federal authorities.

The case has shown how different windows of opportunity opening at different levels, very rarely in a coordinated manner, can be used to build new spaces and give significant visibility to hidden issues. Thus Federal and State laws, new institutional initiatives and on the ground movements have led to sustained activity, to a large part because the articulating ability of meso-level networks and social organisations which have been willing to embrace new themes.

### **Notes**

- 1 Interviews were conducted with social and political actors in 2008. Social actors interviewed included Julio Atenco Vidal, Leader of the Regional Collective of Indigenous Organizations of Zongolica (CROIZ), Ciudad Mendoza, Veracruz; María del Montserrat Díaz, Leader of the Feminist Collective of Xalapa, Veracruz; María López de la Rica, Founder and Director of Luz Marina Center for Women's Guidance and Promotion, Rafael Delgado, Veracruz; and beneficiaries of the Luz Marina Center, and workers at the clinic of Rafael Delgado (2008). Political actors interviewed included Margarita Guillaumín, local representative in the Congress of Veracruz for the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), Xalapa, Veracruz, and Javier Pérez Pascuala, Ex Mayor of Soledad Atzompa municipality, Ciudad Mendoza, Veracruz.
- 2 The Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (INMUJERES) is the national body set up in 2001, and charged with 'directing' gender policies, including through 'institutionalising and mainstreaming' gender perspectives throughout the Mexican State. State-level Women's Institutes are charged with undertaking such direction and institutionalisation at the state level, as this case study documents.

- 3 Montserrat Díaz was the ROCVER representative to the workshop, using the space provided by the PRD. She is part of a NGO named Feminist Collective of Xalapa, and was interviewed for this research.
- 4 Interview with Montserrat Díaz, 2008.
- 5 Margarita Guillaumín is local representative to the state congress of Veracruz for the PRD. She is worried because the IVM is being painted in red, the official colour of the governor.
- 6 However, Julio Atenco Vidal, Leader of the Regional Collective of Indigenous Organizations of Zongolica (CROIZ), believes that these deaths were not related to gender violence. He supports the idea that they were yet another expression of state persecution against the social organisation and their causes.
- 7 According to the network 'Todos los Derechos para Todos' [All Rights for Everybody], in the period 1994–2007, at least eight cases were recorded where elements of the Mexican army raped women in different Mexican communities (Centro de Servicios Municipales 'Heriberto Jara' 2008).
- 8 Considering data given by the Luz Marina Center, seven out of ten women suffer some type of violence at this municipality.
- 9 *XX Aniversario de la Muerte de Luz Marina Valencia Triviño, Misionera de la Inmaculada*

- Concepción* (2007) (XX Years of Luz Marina Valencia Triviños's death, Missionaire of the Immaculate Conception), pamphlet.
- 10 María López de la Rica said that: 'Housing, for most of the families, is reduced to one or two rooms, where all live piled, without privacy. This situation is propitious for sexual abuse from fathers or brothers against women. There are many women, children or teenagers, that had been and still are raped by their own relatives'. Interview conducted in 2008.
- 11 For instance, Ernestina Ascención Rosario was 73 when she was raped and killed by Mexican soldiers.
- 12 This is a concern expressed by Margarita Guillaumín, Democratic Revolution Party (PRDI) representative, when interviewed in 2008.

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