
THE WOMEN'S MUSEUM: CULTURAL CENTERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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The United Nations has dedicated more than a decade to the teaching of Human Rights. Unfortunately, during these ten years there have been massive and terrible violations to human rights around the world. This indicates it is necessary to have a permanent program to teach people what human rights are, and how to defend them.

We know that to generate a new culture of respect for human rights it is necessary to work in parallel actions. First, we need to have the legislation according to the international treaties. In the specific case of women, there is CEDAW, Belem do Pará and the OIT conventions. It is important to disseminate the knowledge of treaties and legislation, so that authorities and citizens know them. Secondly, we need public policies with a gender perspective: affirmative actions.

Third but not least, we need to include in the educational system, from kindergarten to university curricula, human rights issues with a gender perspective, not only in the formal educational system but also the informal one, by media campaigns in television, radio and internet, and by having cultural centers promote a new culture of peace.

The museums were originally born to exhibit the richness and power of states and empires, but the museums of the XXI century have to be spectacular cultural centers, with images and music, that can give their message vividly to the younger generation in a didactic way and with interactive plays, so that the exhibition can receive feedback from visitors.

History is a needed knowledge that opens our eyes to understand why things are the way they are in the present. That knowledge can help solve today's problems. The history of women has been a forgotten one until recent time, when feminism created the gender perspective as a methodology for social studies. Knowing the history of woman fortifies her image and contributes to change the culture that has discriminated against women throughout history. That culture undervalues women's work in the construction of society.

That is why I propose to create cultural centers and museums in which the history of woman is taught in an accessible way, with pictures, films, music and objects from women's life, supported with comparative charts through which the visitors can appreciate the difficult situation of women throughout the centuries. The idea is to make people conscious of injustice and reject it. The experience of the holocaust museums has been successful in promoting tolerance – we think that Women's Museums will have a similar effect and promote equality among genders.

There are some museums related to women in the world. One is in the United States. There is also *The People's History Museum* in the United Kingdom, in Manchester, dedicated to the suffragists fight, and *The Women's Museum* in Denmark, and *The Hanoi Women's Museum* in Vietnam.¹

It is necessary to have museums all around the world, in recognition of women, especially in the countries that have a high level of discrimination and violence against women. Let's see the case of Mexico.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN MEXICO

Mexico was at the continental forefront in fundamental topics of first generation human rights, like the abolition of slavery in 1810 and the establishment of a state independent of the church and freedom of religion in 1859–1860. Afterwards, it was the first nation to incorporate social right in its constitution in 1917.² The second was Germany's Weimar Republic, in 1919.

But we have been in retrogression in women's rights, having been one of the last six Latin American countries³ to recognize our political rights, in 1953, after the United Nations recommended their recognition in December of 1952. Our greatest setback is in the rights of the indigenous communities⁴, as the last constitutional reform gives less rights to these communities than those that were awarded in convention 169 of the International Work Organization and those of eight Latin American constitutions.⁵ Let's see what happens in the case of women.

INDIGENOUS ANTECEDENTS

The ancient Mexicans thought that in order to maintain universal balance, the World was divided into two equal parts: the feminine and the masculine. For every masculine deity there was an equally important corresponding feminine one. In Mayan city-states there were female governors, but in the Aztec Empire the situation of women did not correspond to the vision of a dual cosmos. They played a secondary role, not participating in political life. Many of the pre-Hispanic traditions still remain.⁶

COLONIAL ANTECEDENTS

As Catholicism was used to unify Spain, the Spanish conquest imposed Catholicism intolerance; this culture prevailed until the triumph of Liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

During the Novohispanic period, Marianism, or imitation of the Virgin Mary, was the model for women. For them there was no middle ground, their conduct could only fluctuate between virginal exaltation and reduction; between abnegation and sin. A patriarchal society was perpetuated, in which the social function of women was limited to reproduction. The life of women elapsed in private. They lived secluded in their family home; in the houses of God; in meditation or in brothels. Few could break out and transcend.

XIX CENTURY

Women actively participated in the construction of Mexico as an independent country. Once independence was gained, a group of women demanded citizenship, since 1824. However, none of the constitutions⁷ awarded it. Since the nineteenth century textile and tobacco workers demanded that equal work corresponds to equal pay, without achieving their objective.⁸

With the triumph of liberalism, non-religious teaching was established and primary school was made free and obligatory. The secondary school for young women was created, then teacher-training school, and afterwards women could enter university at the end of the nineteenth century.⁹ Nevertheless, the social function of women continued being reduced to reproductive life. First they had to educate children for the Holy Church and afterwards as citizens for the state. They were an object and not the subject of history.

Women's publications proliferated, as well as those of feminists. The former gave advice for women to continue being an angel in the home, the latter outlined their liberation.¹⁰

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth women organized political clubs against the dictatorship. They actively participated in the anti-re-election clubs. The Revolution 1910 favored the political participation of women.¹¹ But it did not do justice for women, nor award them citizenship.

FIRST FEMINIST CONGRESS

The First Feminist Congress was held in 1916. Hermila Galindo, twenty years of age, demanded maximum sexual liberty for both sexes and the right to vote for the female population. The report shocked both men and women.¹² Patriarchal atavism still prevailed in society and did not look kindly upon the feminist conquest of higher education. It was considered that whoever followed a professional career tended to become masculine. It was still less accepted that a woman entered politics, where she would become perverted.¹³

At the end of the Revolution, an authoritarian, patriarchal and patrimonial regime was established that had no room for women, and therefore not for democracy. A party from the dome of power was created, and this absorbed the women's groups, influencing the suffragist fight. The idea was expressed that women should not be given the vote, because it was to give the vote to the Catholic Church, which dominated them from the pulpit and the confessional. Others were opposed to giving women the right to vote by considering it as giving a double vote to married men, because the women would vote as her husbands indicated.¹⁴

The suffragist's fight continued in the decades of the 20's and 30's; multiple associations appeared.¹⁵ The Singular Front of Pro-Women's Rights arose, and united 800 feminist groups from across the country, with nearly 50 thousand members, whose objective was to win the right to vote. There was great resistance from legislators, and from the hegemonic party in the government, considering that the opposition would benefit from the female vote. They wanted to maintain women in their homes.

It was not until 1947,¹⁶ as part of the modernization program, that women had the right to vote and be voted for in municipal elections. The suffragist organizations had disbanded into the official party; as such the municipal vote was awarded as a gift of power. Finally in 1953,¹⁷ the federal vote was given to women. In this case, to strengthen the official party from the leftist opposition.¹⁸

In 1996, it was stated that 'national political parties will consider in their statutes that the candidacies of deputies and senators do not exceed 70 percent of the same gender.'¹⁹

In the second half of the XX century and the beginning of this one, women of different parties have demonstrated their ability and leadership. Nevertheless, the parties have denied the equal number of candidates of each gender in favor of popular election. They seek substitutes or candidacies that are considered losses beforehand. Today the female population continues to be under-represented in the three powers and levels of government. There is only one governor among 32 entities and one Federal District. In the current legislature the number of women has decreased and in the Supreme Court of National Justice there are only 2 out of 11 ministers.

In 1931, a general minimum wage was established. Nevertheless, today women are paid between 13% to 33% less than male workers.²⁰

At the present time feminist groups are still demonised, being considered as disintegrators of the family. Cases like the feminicide in Ciudad Juarez and other cities around the country, the high incidence of family violence, illiteracy and extreme poverty, remain significant in the female population and demonstrate the existence of discrimination against women. Of all the poor, the women are the poorest, but without the income generated by women, extreme poverty would double.²¹ Illiteracy is greater among women, although when they can exercise their right to an education, they obtain better grades.

The time that passed between the participation of women in the Mexican Revolution and recognition of their citizenship was nearly half a century. This is owed to the Mexican revolutionary movement that took place at the beginning of the XX century, when the concept of gender equality had not permeated. In the political system that came out of the revolution patriarchal culture subsisted, which had a negative effect, not only on the rights of women, but on the development of the country.²²

MILLENNIUM GOALS

Mexico was one of the 189 countries that signed the Millennium Goals. A recent study by the *Economist*²³ shows the utopianism of these goals. Nevertheless, the Mexican government reports achievements that national and international Civil Social Organizations denied.²⁴

1. Poverty has increased in the country, even though the number of people that live on less than one dollar a day has been reduced, going from 10.8 in 1985 to 3.5 percent in 2005. The amount of people found in a poverty situation is 30 percent of the population.²⁵
2. Illiteracy represents 10.6 % of the population from 15 years of age and on: of the 6.3 million illiterates, 3.8 million are women. As well, 7.8 million people of the population of 12 years of age have never studied; of the totality of women (4.7 million), 38.4 % could not study because their family hindered them.²⁶
3. Mexico is 98th among 115 countries in relation to economic participation and opportunity of women, with 40% of women compared to 80% of men. In terms of political power, it is situated in the 45th position, with 26%.²⁷
4. The worst result, in terms of gender equity, is the reference to female participation in the economy with 37.5 percent and a difference of up to 38 percent in relationship to male-female salaries.
5. There is an absence of public policies on sexual and reproductive health, for ideological reasons. Reproductive health of adolescents continues to be one of the most neglected by the federal government, when it should be a priority because of its close relationship with maternal health, abortion, HIV/AIDS, HPV and violence.²⁸

CONCLUSION

In a society where domestic violence affects two out of every three families, the task of preventing violence by fostering respect for the fundamental rights of the individual becomes a top priority.²⁹ Affirmative actions are necessary: the future of the world depends on the future of women.

Until only a few years ago, the history of women was a forgotten history, which is why within the context of the United Nations program for Human Rights Education, I proposed the creation of the National Women's Museum, which will serve as a cultural center that will foster, disseminate and support human rights.

The exhibit will show a historical overview with a gender perspective that will provide the visitor with information on women's role in national affairs, while establishing a comparison with other countries. It will also give emphasis to women's contributions to various cultural expressions. The intention is to strength women's image.

The proposed cultural venue must function as a forum to promote discussion and reflection on the past and present situation of Mexican women from the different social orders. The Holocaust's Museum has proved to be a positive experience. So can the mexicam Women's Museum.

¹There is a *National Women Museum of Art*, in Washington D.C., that has collected 3,000 biographical cards of women painters. There is an *International Museum of Women*, in San Francisco, California; the *National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame*, in Fort Worth, Texas; the *Women of the West Museum*, in Denver, Colorado; *International Women's Air and Space Museum*, in Cleveland; the *U.S. Army Women's Museum*, in Fort Lee, Virginia. Finally in Dallas, Texas there is *The Women's Museum™: An Institute for the Future*.

² Galeana, Patricia, "Los instrumentos internacionales de rights human de las mujeres y su aplicación en México", en: *Gaceta. Comisión de Rights Human del Distrito Federal*, México, CDH – DF, v. IX, nueva época, no. 11, noviembre, 2002, pp. 59 – 66.

³ Ecuador 1929; Brasil y Uruguay 1932; Cuba 1934; El Salvador 1939; República Dominicana 1942; Guatemala y Panamá 1945; Argentina y Venezuela 1947; Costa Rica y Chile 1949, y Bolivia 1952.

⁴ Galeana, Patricia, coord. *La Condición de la mujer indígena y sus rights fundamentales*, FEMU – CNDH - UNAM y SEGOB, 1997, 462 p.

⁵ Argentina, Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Venezuela, Perú y Nicaragua.

⁶ Mexican women were kept in virtual captivity until the moment they were married. They were taught to weave and spin and were punished physically for disobedience. Even in the noble classes they had fewer rights than the males.

Women that died during their first childbirth were transformed into goddesses that accompanied the sun, while the male warriors that died in battle had a similar destiny, but they returned to earth transformed into humming birds, sacred birds that would live in eternal happiness drinking the nectar of flowers.

⁷ 1814, 1824, 1836, 1843, 1847 y 1857.

⁸ The secularizing process that Carlos III began in Ibero-America toward the end of the XVIII century, culminated in Mexico until the triumph of liberal reform, with the establishment of the liberty of cults in December of 1860. This began a true cultural revolution.

The Mexican liberals of the XIX century, headed by Benito Juárez, considered the need to create institutions for the education of women.

⁹ Margarita Chorne on January 18, 1886; Matilde Montoya on August 25, 1887 and Maria Sandoval de Zarco on July, 1898, were the first women to graduate as a dentist, medical doctor and lawyer respectively.

¹⁰ Women like the journalist and writer from Guerrero, Laureana Wright Gonzalez, fought through her writing for the benefit and equality of women. The author of *The emancipation of women through study* founded the first feminist's publication of Mexico, *Violets of Anahuac*, as well as the newspaper *Women of Anahuac*. Laureana gave notice of the advances that the women-suffragists were achieving in other parts of the world in her articles and demanded right equality of both sexes, as the true regeneration of human kind.

¹¹ The suffragists demanded that Emilio Vazquez Gomez award them the vote. With the triumph of the Maderist revolution, the Friends of the People Club demanded the help of interim President Francisco Leon de la Barra. They argued that women's vote was not excluded from the Constitution of 1857 since the Carta Magna had not referred to the sex of voters, but their demand was not even taken into account.

The Maderist revolution managed to overthrow the dictator, but the government of Madero failed in its conciliation attempt and could not consolidate the new democratic order.

¹² Highlighted in the conclusions of the Feminist Congress were: 'the woman in the future can perform any public post that does not demand physical vigor, as there is no difference between her intellectual state and that of a man, and is just as capable of being a leading element of society.' *Ibidem*, p. 131

¹³ The deputy Felix Palavicini had written: 'We are partisans to the instruction of women, but we do not want the multiplication of brained ones.' However, during the Constituent debates, the same Palavicini asked to be explained why initiatives related to the vote of women were not under consideration. Palavicini, Félix F., *Problemas de la educación*, México, F. Sempere y Compañía Editores, 1910, p. 67.

¹⁴ Yet others sustained that there was no need to make constitutional reforms, because when the vote of Mexicans was spoken of it also included women, although such a right had never been put into practice.

¹⁵ The Southeast Socialist Party, headed by Felipe Carrillo Puerto launched the candidacy of three of his own deputies: Elvia Carrillo Puerto, Beatriz Peniche and Raquel Dzib Cicero. With the assassination of Carrillo Puerto, none of his deputies could exercise their functions, as the elections in which they had already triumphed were annulled.

¹⁶ President Miguel Alemán sent the initiative of addition to article 115° of the Constitution.

¹⁷ During the government of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines.

¹⁸ Position of the PRI facing the Henrriquism, a political movement of the left of center to which the female vote was considered a counterbalance.

¹⁹ An addition to subsection XXII transitory of article 1° of the Federal Code of Institutions and Electoral Procedures was approved.

²⁰ Ricardo Asuman, *et. al.*, The Global Gender Gap Report 2006, Geneva, World Economic Forum, <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2006.pdf>

²¹ "La fuerza de las mujeres", por Rodolfo Tuirán, en: *El Universal*, 6 de marzo de 2006, p. 27A.

²² Ricardo Asuman, *loc. cit.*

²³ “Millennium Development Goals. The eight commandments”, *The Economist* print edition, Jul 5th, 2007.

²⁴ Cf. Appendix.

²⁵ Comunicación e Información de la Mujer, A.C. (CIMAC), Godínez Leal, Lourdes, “México no cumplirá los objetivos del milenio”, México, *CIMAC – Noticias*, 27 de julio de 2007.

²⁶ Cifras del Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI).

²⁷ Ricardo Asuman, *et. al.*, The Global Gender Gap Report 2006, Geneva, World Economic Forum, <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2006.pdf>

²⁸ CIMAC, *loc. cit.*

²⁹ To achieve the foregoing purpose, I believe that a suitable venue for the Museum would be the house of Leona Vicario, that was bestowed upon her by Congress in recognition for her support to the War of Independence.

APPENDIX

1. The goal to reduce by half the percentage of people whose income is less than 1 dollar per day, between 1990 and 2015, has already been achieved. The percentage of the population that lives below this poverty line went from 10.8 to 4.1 percent between 1989 and 2002.³⁰

2. In Mexico today, both the net registration rate in primary schools, and the literacy rate among youth from 15 to 24 years of age are practically universal (99.4 and 97.3, respectively). However, problems still remain in the federal entities and regions most marginalized.³¹

While there was stability in illiteracy and the registration of girls in primary and secondary school, the registration of females in middle school progressed significantly.³²

At the secondary school level the desertion rate of males is higher than that of females; early marital relationships in their majority are a consequence and not the cause of an early pregnancy and this becomes a factor in school expulsions.¹³³

3. In Mexico, the gender gap has been eliminated at all educational levels, although inequality between men and women persists in other areas, as in the participation in economic activities, access to resources and in the political decision making, meanwhile violence against women is frequent.²

Although small advances have been registered, Mexico belongs to the group of countries below the average in political participation and access to decision-making positions.

4. Mortality in children under five was reduced from 44.2 to 25.0 deaths for every thousand births between 1990 and 2003; however, the goal of 14.7 deaths is still far off.³⁴

5. In Mexico, maternal mortality for each 100 thousand births was reduced from 89.0 to 65.2, with which the goal of 22.2 is found to be still quite far from being reached.³⁵

6. HIV/AIDS is held at one of the lowest incidence rates in North and South America and is concentrated in specific groups of the population. The reduction of tuberculosis has been slow.

The additional goals for 2015 are: to maintain malaria incidence at less than three cases per 100 thousand inhabitants; to reach only 5.5 cases of tuberculosis per 100 thousand inhabitants and reduce to 1.5 deaths by tuberculosis, a figure less than currently shown in the OECD countries.

In 2006, the National Registry of Cases of AIDS counted 107,625 cases of AIDS, of which 83% are men and 17% are women. For every 5 cases of HIV/AIDS accumulated in men, one case in women has been observed. People from 15 to 44 years of age make up the group most affected with 78.7% of the cases registered.³⁶ The estimate of the HIV prevalence rate among adults is 0.3%, according to *Social Watch 2005*, Mexico is found stable. The same goes for malaria, where 5 cases are presented for every 100,000 people per year.³⁷

7. Mexico, as with the rest of Latin America, presents mixed results. On the one hand, forested surface has diminished from 36.6 to 33.4 percent (preliminary figure) of the territory between 1993 and 2002, years in which the National Forest Inventory was carried out. On the other

hand, the goals related to water supply and plumbing coverage have shown improvements. The proportion of occupants in private housing with plumbing within the property or home went from 75.4 in 1990 to 89.4 percent in 2003, while the proportion with sewage connected to a public system or septic tank went from 58.1 to 77.3 percent during the same period.

8. Mexico has made important efforts in the matter of international cooperation. Those efforts respect the conviction that the challenges that the World is facing in all of the contemplated areas of the Millennium Declaration can only be overcome through the concerted action by the World's nations. The individual efforts are necessary, but insufficient.³⁸

³⁰ *Resumen ejecutivo...*, p. 8.

³¹ *Social Watch Informe 2005. Rugidos y murmullos, Género y pobreza: más promesas que acciones*, Montevideo, Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 2005.

³² Comunicación e Información de la Mujer, A.C. (CIMAC), Godínez Leal, Lourdes, "México no cumplirá los objetivos del milenio", México, *CIMAC - Noticias*, 27 de julio de 2007.

³³ *Resumen ejecutivo...*, p. 9.

³⁴ Social Watch, loc. cit.

³⁵ *Resumen ejecutivo*, p. 9.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Cifras del Consejo Nacional para la Prevención y Control del VIH/SIDA.

³⁸ *Social Watch Informe 2005*, p. 93.