

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE, MEXICO CITY (1920-1950)

HACIA UNA HISTORIA DE ACOSO SEXUAL EN EL LUGAR DE TRABAJO, CIUDAD DE MÉXICO (1920-1950)

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Abstract

In response to the phenomenon of sexual harassment, feminists have taken to the streets, painted statues and public walls, and organized for change. This essay responds to the calls of Mexican feminist scholars for an approach to sexual harassment that takes into consideration the specificities of Mexican realities. The essay examines the conditions that shaped sexual harassment in the 1920s in Mexico City, taking into account the participation of women in the workforce, the cultural representation of working women, and legal, institutional, and cultural spaces that shaped the space within which women could speak out against sexual harassment.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, work, feminism, Mexico.

Resumen

En respuesta al acoso sexual, las feministas han tomado calles, pintado estatuas y muros públicos, y se organizaron para el cambio. Este trabajo responde a los llamados de teóricas mexicanas feministas por un enfoque al tema de acoso sexual que atienda las especificidades de las realidades mexicanas. Examina las condiciones que dieron forma al acoso sexual en la década de 1920 en la Ciudad de México, tomando en cuenta la participación femenina en la fuerza laboral, la representación cultural de las mujeres que trabajan y los espacios legales, institucionales y culturales que delimitaron cómo se pronuncian contra el acoso sexual.

Palabras clave: acoso sexual laboral, trabajo, feminismo, México.

Introduction

In Mexico, almost twenty-seven percent of women who work outside of the home have experienced “some type of violent act, primarily sexual in nature and gender discrimination, including due to pregnancy”. Men sexually harass women across the workforce. Women employed in factories and maquiladoras are the most likely to suffer discrimination (24.75%), followed by public sector employees (15%). Single women are more likely to experience sexual harassment, though married women do as well. The majority do not report their aggressors, stating that they “didn’t think it was a big deal”, didn’t expect justice would be served, and feared retaliation. Indeed, of those who did report, a minimal number found justice (EN-DIREH (Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares), 2006; Frías, 2011: 351-356; Inegi (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía), 2017). Mexico is not unique: 41% of women who work outside of the home in the United States have experienced sexual harassment at work (Siuta and Bergman, 2019).

Workplace sexual harassment is one of several types of harassment and gender violence that Mexican feminists have protested and organized to combat. Feminists have taken to the streets, graffitied statues and public walls, and they have organized for change. Mexican feminists have also studied and theorized the phenomenon as it plays out in Mexico. Anthropologist and political scientist Marta Lamas makes an important intervention in debates about sexual harassment in Mexico, arguing for an approach that attends to the specificities of Mexican realities (Lamas, 2018, 2020). She argues that the adaptation of theories and remedies external to Mexico can have deleterious effects. For example, in a country with high levels of impunity, the adaptation of punitive models of response is ineffective. Furthermore, Lamas argues that punitive models of justice have the potential to reinforce the *machista* culture that underlies sexual harassment and further stigmatize women’s sexual

expression. This essay contributes to a Mexico-specific approach with an examination of the history of labor practices, legislation, and cultural symbols that shape our understanding of female bodies, sexuality, and the conditions of consent.

This essay draws on Mexican sociologists and legal theorists who understand workplace sexual harassment within the context of the gendered construction of the workplace (Frías, 2011; Kurczyn Villalobos, 2013; Velázquez Narváez and Díaz Cabrera, 2020). The historical evolution of women’s place in the workforce laid the foundation for sexual harassment at work and women’s response to the same (Berebetsky, 2012). The essay examines the integration of women into the metropolitan industrial workforce of Mexico City in the early twentieth century and the boom in women’s employment in white-collar work in the 1920s. The work force was organized in such a way that men exercised power over women, at times in ways that historical actors defined as sexual harassment. Examples include women who worked in factories, on the streets and in municipal markets, and in the offices of Mexican Federal government. After tracing the contours of journalistic reports of sexual harassment, the essay then maps the history of legal and institutional spaces that have governed labor disputes and where, if anywhere, women could denounce sexual harassment. The spaces were few and far between. Labor law did not acknowledge sexual harassment let alone provide remedy. Women occasionally made mention of sexual harassment as supporting evidence in complaints over seniority violations or wage disputes, in factory inspection reports, and newspaper reports. The law placed much of the burden of proof on women themselves and left them defined by long-standing regimes of honor and shame (Nazzari, 1998; Lipsett-Rivera, 1998). It was, rather, in the feminist press where women made their clearest denunciations of sexual harassment at work. When in the 1920s women began writing publicly on the subject, they did so in the third person so as to protect their individual respectability

and that of the white-collar office jobs they occupied. Those who spoke out provided a feminist critique of patriarchy in and beyond the office, exposing the way work and socio-cultural spheres mutually reinforced patriarchy.

Women's work force participation

Sociologists and legal scholars point to the fundamental role that social and workplace inequality play in the exercise of power at work, one manifestation of which is sexual harassment (Velázquez Narváez and Díaz Cabrera, 2020: 428). Unequal workforce participation, hiring, promotion, and wages, for example, lay the basis for devaluing women, the gendered exercise of power, and sexual harassment, which they refer to in broad terms as workplace violence (*violencia laboral*). In Mexico, as in many countries, as women entered into the paid labor force, they did so along lines of gendered segmentation of the work force, occupational segregation, and gendered wage differentials. Discrimination reinforced barriers to women's advancement (Rendón, 2003; Porter, 2008, 2020). Just as contemporary scholars associate workplace inequality with sexual harassment, so too did Mexican women in the 1920s. What were the working conditions they faced at that time?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class gender norms associated women with the private sphere in such a way that when they took work outside of the home, they were understood to have entered a masculine space where they were sexually vulnerable. When Indian and Mestiza women worked in the public sphere, marketing goods or carrying laundry to and from clients, despite such class-based norms, middle- and upper-class observers associated them with licentious sexuality (Arrom, 1992). In speaking about women's entrance into factories and workshops, politicians, employers, and journalists fretted over the impact of "mixing the sexes". Newspapers described women facing a workplace as filled with "sarcasm", a reference to crude

and aggressive language that could include sexual harassment (Porter, 2008: 106). When in the 1880s women first worked in federal offices, observers expressed concern over the morality of that workspace as well. The writer, diplomat, and government employee, Federico Gamboa, for example, was very concerned about the changes in the moral fabric of Mexican society, especially as it related to women. Reflecting on the hire of the first women to work in government offices, he wrote:

At first I thought it fine, which indeed it is; but, just because it is fine doesn't mean that the inevitable dangers caused by proximity between the two sexes don't exist. As long as a man is near women there will always be desires, temptations, and risks (Gamboa, 2016: 230-234).

Some intellectuals understood work as a corrupting force on women's morality, as did Dr. Luis Lara y Pardo, who ranked the occupations most likely to corrupt women and lead them to practice prostitution. His rankings reflected his race and class biases and did not acknowledge the ways certain occupations were more likely than others to leave women economically and sexually vulnerable (Lara y Pardo, 1908: 35).

Once the violent phase of the Mexican Revolution ended, Presidents Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928) committed themselves to the institutionalization of the revolution. Specifically, institutionalization meant that politicians and statesmen began to work on the approval of laws and the opening of offices to carry out the reforms promised by revolutionary leaders and in the Constitution of 1917. Their objective was to create a strong state to support economic growth, mediate class conflict, and create political consensus. These initiatives required an enormous amount of paperwork. According to Mercedes Blanco, between 1920 and 1924, the Federal government grew at an annual rate of 11.5% (Blanco, 1995: 125). The demand for employees was met, to a large degree, by

women. As a result, during the 1920s the female workforce in government offices was young, single, and new to the workplace (Porter, 2020: 55).

The explosion in the number of female public employees provoked public commentary. Observers expressed concern about the sexual vulnerability of women in the paid work force. During the 1920s, cultural critics, journalists, and legislators, all drew on the legal concept of *atentado al pudor* (Sloan, 2008; Sloan, 2017). Cultural critic Rodrigo Cifuentes, for example, in *El desastre moral de México. La bancarrota del pudor*, lamented the recent decline in modesty. For Cifuentes, women's entrance into the workforce figured centrally in this process. "Bureaucratic employment has devoured young girls. Poverty is notoriously corrupting, and political instability worsened conditions, further contributing to the problem. Over the course of fifteen years, Mexico has broken with all its traditions and completely transformed its way of life" (Cifuentes, 1924: XXVII). Cifuentes was not unique in understanding these processes as rooted in changing class relations. He argued that the "total amorality" of the lower classes had, through a process of Americanization, corrupted the Mexican middle classes. In effect, Cifuentes and other observers like him reified conceptions of the workplace as a sexually dangerous place for women. A woman who worked outside of the home could be seen as accepting her association with a sexualized space.

From the time a woman interviewed for a job to her departure from the workforce, she might face sexual harassment. Newspaper want-ads announced open positions for a "señorita de buena presencia" while, hoping to ward off problems, women who published their services described themselves as *señorita decente* (*El País*, 1916; *El Nacional*, 1918). Newspaper reports surfaced incidents of men objectifying women, as when secretaries in federal offices were paid to pose as models for calendar girls (Villalba, 2006). Minister of Public Education José Vasconcelos referred to two office workers

as trembling, silky doves when he "penetrated an interior office of a Private Secretary". They were, he wrote, "no exaggeration, gorgeous" (Vasconcelos, 1982: 630). The emphasis on women's appearances as integral to the job contributed to a work culture that objectified women. In "Crónicas de Loreley", journalist María Luisa Garza addressed the case of a young woman who interviewed with a "gentleman from a well-known office". The man told her that he would give her a job, but that he needed "elegant ladies" so that the office would make a good impression. "Show me your garters", he asked, "and then I will know how you will dress when you are my secretary" (Loreley, 1939).

As they arrived at work, women removed the hat and overcoat that, like men, they wore while going to and from work. In the office, men wore suits that identified them as professionals. Secretaries, typists, telephone operators, and office assistants wore dresses and shoes that emphasized femininity as integral to their work identity. Some had the luxury of wearing silk stockings and a well-fitted dress, while others were content with a homemade dress made thanks to sewing skills learned in school. Shortly before starting work, a typist might stop by the restroom to powder her face and touch up her lipstick. Attractiveness was part of the uniform. Magazines encouraged women to exercise to maintain a slim body and clear skin (Departamento de Salubridad Pública de México, 1928; de la Barrera y Vargas, 1928). The self-identified feminist magazine *Mujer* published articles with beauty and fashion tips (Ríos Cárdenas, 1928c). A plethora of work-place beauty pageants and casting calls for film productions reinforced the primacy of physical beauty for the office worker (*El Demócrata*, 1925: 7). It is likely that some who dreamed of acting responded to the newspaper's calls, some even starred in films, as was the case with the office workers Adela Sequeyro and Otilia Zambrano (Rashkin, 2001: 41; Porter, 2018: 78).

Typist, stenographer, clerk, or executive secretary—all were referred to as *señorita*, regardless of age, marital status, or position.

Historians have used the term *señorita* as a description of a woman's civil status, but it has also played a role in women's work identity. In the Mexico City offices in the 1920s, *señorita* was used in daily interactions, official documents, and the press, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies at work. It was used not only to address a woman but also to refer to job categories of clerks, such as *señoritas taquígrafas*, for example. The word *muchacha* was also used to refer to women in the workplace, thus reinforcing their femininity, youth, and novice status.

Women's psychological orientation to the needs of women was also a part of the job. The journalist Arlette (pseudonym for María Aurelia Reyes de Govea) praised the office worker who oriented herself to the needs of her male employer. Arlette joyfully discussed the increased efficiency and personal pleasure of the male employee whose secretary was always one step ahead of him, providing him with the appropriate papers for his meetings. According to the article, such efficiency on the part of his secretary would allow him time for personal pleasures like going to the movies. Women's columns gave advice to typists and secretaries on how to dress, what exercises to do to maintain an attractive body, and how to discipline "feminine traits", such as being chatty, to the demands of the workplace. Women were also counseled to be discreet, and to foresee when they should absent themselves from the room instead of eavesdropping to pick up tidbits of gossip. And while at work, secretaries should never, ever cry (Arlette, 1937).

Cultural representations of office workers reinforced the objectification of women even when also pushing back against stereotypes. Arqueles Vela's "Señorita Etcetera" (1922) and "Mabelina" (1924), and Salvador Novo's "Señorita Remington" (1924) represented the modern woman as an office worker. In all three stories, the women are identified by their typewriter. Vela refers to Señorita Etcetera as "an automaton... her gestures moving in straight lines, her words as if produced by a delicate phonograph

needle ...her breasts, trembling amperes". Sexual desire and modern technology supersede the woman. In *Miss Remington* the protagonist, a writer, discusses his book with a typist. The writer, having no fixed employment, seeks affirmation of his literary work and his place in a world where women seem to be snatching up jobs left and right. Miss Remington, despite her seeming disinterest in work, has a secure job. As with "Mabelina", Miss Remington stands out more as a consumer than as a productive laborer. Miss Remington avoids supplying the existential affirmation the writer seeks. The writer impugns her intelligence, commenting that "Remi" does not understand Einstein's concept of relativity, though she "completely rules out time and space ... when she powders her face". Remi engages such objectification of women but concludes by shifting the conversation: "There is no one like us to celebrate the latest fashion. When journalists ... organize competitions for the best secretary, or conduct polls, they find we spend our paycheck on Mme. Combe, Able, and Guerlain...concluding that we work solely for *mise en scene*. But nothing is farther from the truth" (Novo, 1924: 27, 61). Women are responsible, she continues, for making the federal government function and their priority is the vote. Like many 1920s feminists, Remi thus shifted the conversation away from characterizations of secretaries as frivolous to highlight their crucial contribution to the workplace and demands for equal rights.

Contours of reports of sexual harassment

Historically, women have been reluctant to report incidences of sexual harassment, making discussion of rates of incidents difficult. We can, nevertheless, trace the contours of the phenomenon. In 1919, for example, the newspaper *Excelsior* reported that the Chamber of Deputies found itself forced to close the doors of the telephone offices that served the Chamber, to prevent deputies from constantly interrupting the

operators' work with their *atenciones*. Here, *atenciones* refers to the expression of romantic or sexual sentiments. The journalist, while lamenting such behavior, contributed to the objectification of women and relegated them to secondary actors in a drama of male honor. Referring to the operators, one journalist wrote that "in addition to being pretty, they are friendly and engage in pleasant conversation". Deputy Espinosa (Chiapas) could not resist such temptation and constantly sought their company. One day, when he found the doors closed and a sign prohibiting entry, he knocked on the door. In response, "the telephone operators, blondes and brunettes – because there was something for all tastes – curvaceous or svelte and languorous, like women from tales of romantic love, refused to open the door". Deputy Lorandi (Veracruz) intervened to defend the women and by that afternoon the two deputies found themselves on the outskirts of Mexico City, engaged in a duel. Lorandi's pistol did not fire and, since he was not injured, they agreed to a second round. Both deputies were such a lousy shot, with bullets flying over their heads, they decided to reconsider the whole affair. After consulting with each other and with the spectators gathered there, they agreed that they had sufficiently demonstrated their bravery and there was no need to continue. The duel was canceled, and everyone made it home before six that evening (*Excelsior*, 1919). This tale of male honor serves as both a description of the type of harassment women endured at work and the way the press not only romanticized it but centered male honor in how the incident played out.

The press also reported on incidents of quid pro quo, understood historically and in contemporary Mexican law as demands of a sexual nature made within the context of hierarchical relations. As the following report suggests, the very conditions of women's workforce participation laid the foundation for male bosses and coworkers to make demands of a sexual nature, using their position of power and authority as leverage. According to the newspaper

El Demócrata, stenographer *señorita* Barba Guichard employed in the fifth civil court reported how her boss, Judge José María Rincón, had favored her at work. Then one day, as all the office workers headed home, Mr. Rincón asked her to stay behind. He called her into his office, not uncommon for one who employs a woman to take dictation. Rincón then invited her to sit on the couch. He began talking about how much he loved her, and then hugged her aggressively. "The girl (*muchacha*) then stood up, protesting such abusive behavior". The judge held her down, covering her mouth so she wouldn't scream. Seeing that there were still employees in a neighboring office, *señorita* Barba threatened to call their attention, and the judge released her. The next day, when *señorita* Barba returned to work, the judge fired her. Another stenographer, Emma Montiel, affirmed that on one occasion the judge had attempted the same sorts of behavior with her (*El Demócrata*, 1924). As in the case of the telephone operators mentioned above, the journalistic report that described the secretary as *muchacha* reinforced a workplace identity for women anchored in their femininity and subordinate status.

Women who experienced sexual harassment at work would have had to weigh the relative costs and benefits of speaking up. Often, the onus of responsibility for sexual harassment fell on the woman, not only in terms of her individual sexual honor but also the status of her employment as an office worker, a job closely identified with middle class identity. For example, shame and a lack of recourse may have motivated Angelina Ruiz, a ticket seller at Salón Rojo, who was deceived by her employer to commit suicide. Her mother believed so, and letters found among her effects suggested as much. Angelina Ruiz climbed the stairs of the Cathedral and then leapt to her death. In another case, Sara Ramos, deceived by a coworker at the Post Office, chose the very place they were employed to jump from a window and end her life (Sloan, 2017: 24, 171, 185-189, 192).

Legislative frameworks

Women had a limited set of legislative and institutional spaces to which they could recur in the case of sexual harassment. With no specific mention of sexual harassment in Mexican labor codes prior to 1970, a woman's complaint rose to the level of a civil case if she chose to seek redress. The Mexican Penal Code of 1872, a virtual copy of the Spanish Penal Code of 1870, "down to the grammatical errors", according to one jurist, accounted for, described, and provided remedy for *atentado al pudor* (acts against modesty) (Almaráz, 1931:11-16). Title Six, Chapter III, article 789 of the Code stated that *atentado al pudor* included "any immodest act that could offend and that is enacted against the will of another person, regardless of their sex, but that does not result in copulation" (Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública, 1872: 289). The stipulated punishment for *atentado al pudor* differed according to whether the act was committed with physical or moral violence.

Whereas some jurists argued for a narrow definition of the crime, others considered a wide range of behaviors to fall within the legal definition of *atentado al pudor*. Licenciado Salvador J. Ferrer published a study in 1904 in the *Diario de Jurisprudencia del Distrito y Territorios* that argued *atentado al pudor* should be understood to exist in degrees of intention and offense. The possibility of offense was contingent on social class and respectability. Ferrer wrote that the offence included:

Any immodest act, from a simple gesture to certain types of touch; and this range of acts should be evaluated according to their seriousness and the social condition of the individual in question in order to determine the nature of the crime and the level of punishment. To be sure, violations of modesty by means of dishonest gestures is not as serious a crime as that of more or less vulgar caresses or more or less indecent touching. Nor are these of equal seriousness when inflicted upon a person known as honest as when they

are inflicted upon a person of licentious habits; and it is inconceivable that such an offense could be considered against a public woman or a person, due to age or social condition, who has no concept of modesty (Ferrer, 1904: 638-639).

By including indecent gestures and touching, Ferrer opened room for a wide range of behaviors to be included in the legal definition of *atentado al pudor*. At the same time, the ambiguous characterizations of those gestures and touch as "more or less indecent or offensive," meant that context was essential to interpreting the law. In particular, the respectability of the woman in question determined whether such acts could be considered criminal. A woman's reputation and occupation were both relevant. While factory workers and office employees were by no means considered "public women" (prostitutes), women's recent entrance into new public spaces blurred the boundaries of their respectability—recall the comments of Federico Gamboa and journalists regarding the "mixing of the sexes" and the "sarcasm" that characterized the workplace into which those women had chosen to enter. The organization of the workplace meant that a woman who was held back to take dictation in her bosses' office after hours, for example, might have been clear that her boss had crossed a line, but not confident that she could defend her own reputation in a court of law or of public opinion. Further increasing the stakes, article 86 of the *Código de Procedimientos Penales del Distrito Federal y Territorios* stated that an investigation into accusations of *atentado al pudor* could include a medical examination, something many women may have considered revictimization (*El Asesor Jurídico*, 1908: 90).

Between the Penal Code of 1872 and that of 1931, only minor changes were made to articles related to *atentado al pudor*. A study to revise the 1872 Penal Code was conducted in 1913, but was later dismissed when, in late 1925, the President charged a committee to revise the Penal Code. The committee

included Ignacio Ramírez Arriaga and Antonio Ramos Pedrueza y Castañeda, the latter replaced by José Almaráz. They were soon joined by Enrique C. Gudiño and Manuel Ramos Estrada. Their work led to the 1929 Penal Code, which, upon facing criticism for being overly positivistic, was again revised in 1931 (Almaráz, 1931; Santillán Esqueda, 2016: 140). The 1931 Penal Code retained the requirement that “the crime of *atentado contra el pudor* can only be punished if the attempt has in fact been accomplished” (article 261); and that “the offended woman, her parents, or in the absence of those, her legal representative”, must file a complaint for a case to be pursued (article 263). Whereas the 1872 Penal Code made explicit reference to a criminal act “regardless of sex” (article 789), in 1929 *atentado contra el pudor* was more narrowly construed as a crime committed against women. The 1931 Penal Code retained the language from 1929, with the notable exception of specifying *atentado contra el pudor* as “an erotic-sexual act” that does not result in copulation (Secretaría de Gobernación, 1931:59)

The other space where one might look for legislation regulating workplace sexual harassment is labor law. The Constitution of 1857 acknowledging the right of all Mexicans to an honest means of making a living but said little more about workers’ rights. Mexican labor law shifted significantly after the Revolution. Worker mobilization, strikes, and demands informed the Constitution of 1917 that identified social groups such as workers. Article 123 used the word *obreros* to specifically to identify workers. During the 1920s workers and the courts debated who, precisely was an *obrero*. After a series of cases that resulted in contradicting findings, the Supreme Court determined that public employees were not *obreros* and so while Article 123 might serve as a guide, it did not pertain to public employees. Subsequently, Section A of Article 123 referred to *obreros*, or workers, and Section B addressed *empleados*, meaning public employees. The Constitution made specific provisions for *obreras*. Article 123, Section

V guarantees working women who become pregnant shall have access to paid maternity leave before and after giving birth. They are also promised job security. Once having returned to work, a new mother also has the right to nurse her newborn child. Constitutional articles addressing women’s rights as workers did not include acknowledgement of sexual harassment.

The rights outlined in the Constitution of 1917 would need to be elaborated upon in subsequent legislation, as was the case with Article 123. The 1920s saw heightened worker mobilization and legislators debated how to create legislation that would regulate workers’ constitutional guarantees. In 1929 the Federal government produced the “Propuesta de ley federal del trabajo”. The Ministry of the Interior called a worker-employer congress to elicit feedback and the proposal was then debated in congress on November 15, 1928. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Labor drew up the proposal, designating it law rather than a code. Congress debated the proposed law and approved it as the *Ley Federal del Trabajo* (LFT) on August 18, 1931. The LFT addressed the constitutional guarantees regarding maternity leave and the right to nurse a newborn child (DOF, 1931: 21; DOF, 1938: 3). Article 22, Section V, stated that contracts would be null and void if, based on “age, sex, or nationality”, workers were not given equal pay for equal work (DOF, 1931: 6.) The LFT also addressed how employer obligations to workers, exhorting them to “treat workers with all due respect, abstaining from abuse in word or action” (DOF, 1931: 6.)

The Supreme Court and the federal government had both argued that as employees of the State, public employees did not enjoy the same constitutional rights as *obreros*. When this became clear, public employees quickly mobilized to secure the same rights as those granted to workers. They split, however, over whether they wanted to be included in the Federal Labor Law or supported an initiative for a Civil Service Law. In 1938, the Federal government published the *Estatuto Jurídico de los Trabajadores al*

Servicio del Estado (1938), which was replaced in 1963 by the *Ley Federal de los Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado* (DOF, 1963). Both the Statute (1938) and the Law (1963) provided for maternity leave as had been granted to workers (DOF, 1938: 3; DOF, 1963). Neither addressed sexual harassment in the workplace. The *Estatuto Federal de los Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado* (1938), Section VII, article 5, established the conditions under which an employee could be fired, including when the individual “lacks decency (*probidad*) or honesty, or commits violent acts, makes threats, or mistreats their boss or coworkers” or for “committing immoral acts while on the job” (DOF, 1938; DOF, 2020). Currently, the punishment for sexual harassment in the public sector is greater than in the private sector (Palomino, 2012). Regardless, a 2010 study found that women in public administration preferred not to report sexual harassment, for fear of losing their job (Frías, 2011, 2020; INMUJERES (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres), 2010: 11).

Institutionalized spaces of workplace conflict mediation

In the wake of the Mexican Revolution, the federal office and two bodies charged with mediating worker-employer conflicts did not hear sexual harassment complaints. Francisco I. Madero opened the Department of Labor in 1911. Department Inspectors conducted factory inspections and, upon rare occasion, reported threats of a sexual nature. The relationship did not need to be hierarchical, as was the case when a mechanic requested sexual favors in exchange for his repairing the machine a cigarette roller worked on (Porter, 2008: 186). Telephone operators faced sexual harassment from managers and from customers (Porter, 2015). In other instances, men in positions of authority made advances on women, as was the case of a Mexico City Municipal Market Inspector. A woman wrote a letter to the Municipal government complaining that, to retain her preferred location, the Inspector

had demanded that she kiss him. The archive does not reveal whether the Inspector faced a reprimand. Street vendors also faced sexual harassment from customers and other vendors (Porter, 2008: 208, 214).

By the 1930s, two institutions mediated worker-employer conflict: the Federal Arbitration Board (private sector mediation) and the Federal Arbitration Tribunal (public sector mediation). The Federal Arbitration Board mediated wage disputes and union conflict. The Federal Arbitration Tribunal had the authority to hear complaints over seniority violations, wage disputes and union conflict. It did not have the authority to mediate incidences of sexual harassment. In the rare instances when an individual mentioned a hostile work environment it was in reference to a specific labor violation the Tribunal was authorized to weigh in on, however such references were rare. In one case, a woman complained that her seniority rights had been denied due to her boss' preference for another young woman, even though it was she herself who had performed better on an examination taken to apply for the position (Porter, 2020: 144).

Making Themselves Heard

With the central offices designed to address labor conflict leaving no clear means to seek redress for sexual harassment, women formed a movement to make themselves heard. As Ana Lau shows, women from different walks of life came together under a capacious set of concerns during the 1920s (Lau Jaiven, 2011). Hundreds upon hundreds of women shared their experiences at work and attended conferences; some wrote or spoke to the newspapers; occasionally they took to the streets or showed up on the doorsteps of government offices. Indeed, the women's movement of the 1920s and 1930 was, in no small part, a labor movement. Working women brought issues to the table such as equal pay for equal work, the right of mothers and married women to work outside of the home, and the vote. A few women raised the subject of sexual ha-

harassment at work. When they did, however, it was not in the first person. By speaking in third person, a woman was able to protect her personal reputation. Thus, in the 1920s, the first complaints of sexual harassment at work were not made about personal experience, rather the author positioned herself as an advocate for others. (Steedman, 1992:82)

One such advocate was María Ríos Cárdenas. Known for her role in the women's suffrage movement, Ríos Cárdenas also wrote on a wide range of work-related concerns (Ramos Escandón, 2003). In 1922 she published a short novel, *Atavismo*, that told of the unequal relationship between men and women both in and outside of the workplace. The protagonist's lower wages make her vulnerable to the conquest of a man of higher economic and social standing who is also her employer's son. Inequality at work and in society at large are interrelated. The novel concludes with the protagonist accepting a marriage offer from a man willing to help her hide her shame of having been the object of sexual conquest.

Ríos Cárdenas then published the self-proclaimed feminist newspaper *Mujer* (1926-29) that gave women a venue to discuss culture, politics, and work-related issues (Ríos Cárdenas, 1928c). In 1927, Ríos Cárdenas wrote of the trials women faced as they entered a new workspace: "The feminine soul hardened in the difficult and sarcastic struggle of human suffering" (Ríos Cárdenas, 1927: 1). A front-page article in 1929 was more explicit in its denunciation of sexual harassment. María Ríos Cárdenas recounted the story of a young office worker – referred to alternatively as *empleada*, *jóven*, and *chica*, whose boss invited her to take a walk with him. "The modern-day tenorio tried to call a taxi, and the girl (*chica*) refused, asking: "– Where are we going?" "– I would like to spend some time with you, and, if you would allow it, have dinner together", the man answered.

Ríos Cárdenas followed the two to a restaurant and, like a detective, hid behind a plant to continue her observation. The man

ordered a glass of wine. Shortly thereafter he tried to kiss the young woman. When she resisted, he threatened to fire her. While she continued to protest, the man aggressively kissed her on the neck. Ríos Cárdenas described the kiss as "loud", a description meant to invoke in the reader the shame the young woman felt at being the object of such behavior. The girl then fled. Reflecting on the incident, Ríos Cárdenas lamented: "The office employee, the worker, and the campesina, should she be obliged to take on the double role of worker and lover? It seems so, given the behavior of the majority of bosses with the women who report to them" (Ríos Cárdenas, 1929a:1). Dramatic details aside, Ríos Cárdenas' report was grounded in the types of behavior she had observed as characteristic of the "modern-day tenorio" – not a harmless flirtation but as part of a strategy of abuse made possible due to women's vulnerability within the workplace.

The feminist paper *Mujer* drew on a wide network of professional women for its columns, some of them also willing to share their perspective on workplace harassment. María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, for example, understood equality in the workplace as essential to combatting sexual harassment. García Sánchez Facio was a professional music composer, singing instructor, and active in the women's movement. She served as General Secretary for the Comité de Paz y Arbitraje and was a representative of the Consejo Nacional de la Mujer Mexicana at the Panamerican Conference of Women (1929). García Sánchez Facio had also won the contest "The Most Intelligent Woman in Mexico" carried out by *Mujer* magazine. In her article titled "Our Feminism", García Sánchez Facio held that "what is lacking is bosses with morality, that don't seek to shorten distances, that are respectful and demand morality and competency of their employees, not the latest fashion in dresses, not a willingness to go out on dates or outings". García Sánchez Facio called for working conditions that centered on professional skills, not being available for one's boss. While she implied that some

women were not professional, she also held that there were those who were. Equal pay for equal work would empower competent female employees. She wrote, “The only solution is to hire competent women willing to work, and to pay them the same wages that men receive” (García Sánchez Facio, 1927). Like Ríos Cárdenas, she did not write about her own experience but rather about a general phenomenon. And it is noteworthy that García Sánchez Facio wrote this article after she had left the workforce. For many, to denounce sexual harassment was more possible once they had distanced themselves from the space where such behavior occurred.

In response to reports of sexual harassment at work, the 1920s saw multiple efforts to control female bodies newly in public spaces and the workplace. The 1920s were years of rapid changes in the social role, labor force participation, and physical appearance of women. Conflicts arose over women’s clothing, haircuts, or other physical aspects of the female body, conflicts that served as a mechanism to delimit the autonomy of women over their own bodies and selves. In 1924, for example, a group of male students attacked some women who had cut their hair *a la garçonne* or, as they were referred to in México, *las pelonas* (Rubenstein, 2010: 91-126). The men who attacked *las pelonas* not only wanted to express their distaste for the latest haircut, but to punish women’s incursion into public spaces. In a similar effort to control women’s bodies, in 1929 Congressman Sotelo, proposed that women working in government offices wear uniforms so as to counter widespread “indiscretions”. The debate over the use of uniforms filled the pages of newspapers.

While their reasons varied, women resisted control of their bodies as a means to respond to sexual harassment. Important newspapers, such as *Rotafolio*, joined in the debate with articles like “Las empleadas dicen...” by Juan Zaravé (AGN, OZ, 1924-1932). Most of the women interviewed for the article felt the initiative was misguided. Otilia Zambrano, who worked in the Minis-

try of Public Education, opined that men would always be tempted by women and that male government employees would have to get used to the presence of beautiful young women in the halls of government. She asserted that women had the right to act autonomously and that it was men who had the responsibility to behave appropriately – an argument that, while directly relevant to the uniform debate, was also a more general comment on women’s equal right to occupy the public sphere. Ríos Cárdenas, writing for *Mujer*, supported the use of uniforms as a way for women to save money. However, as always, she advocated for absolute equality between the sexes and asked why male employees would not also be required to use uniforms (Ríos Cárdenas, 1928a). Also bristling at the control of female bodies, longtime public employee Leonor Llach expressed concern over how uniforms might impact the status of *empleadas* (Porter, 2019). From her perspective, uniforms would turn women into nothing more than service employees (*mozos*). If sexual harassment tainted the middle-class status of office work, so too might the use of uniforms.

At the same time *empleadas* fought to defend control of their bodies, they continued the fight for workplace equality and rights. As Congress debated the proposed Federal Labor Law, some public employees fought to be included in the law. In 1929, María Ríos Cárdenas reported that she typed a draft of article 90 of the proposed Federal Labor Law. She reported that the Minister of the Interior was an ally and noted that he had, requested several modifications to the law to benefit workers, peasants, and employees (Ríos Cárdenas, 1928a). Several articles in the proposed law were reported to reaffirm the constitutional right to maternity leave for female workers. Women who worked in the public sector wanted the same rights. In addition, Ríos Cárdenas stated, the law declared that “when a woman, due to an *atentado al pudor*, is forced to leave her job, she will have the right to three months wages” (Ríos Cárdenas, 1928d; Ríos Cárde-

nas, 1929b; Ríos Cárdenas, 1929c). When she reported on the proposal in *Mujer*, Ríos Cárdenas, undoubtedly concerned about the obvious victim-blaming, responded to the proposal with “no comment”. Consistent with her belief in equality between men and women, her silence implied a questioning of why a woman would lose her job if a man was the aggressor. If in fact there was a discussion about whether to address sexual harassment in the proposed law, it did not make it either into the 1929 published version of the proposal or the final version of the Federal Labor Law published in 1931 (Mexico, Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, 1929). The Federal Labor Law (1931) simply stated “Workers shall be paid for lost time when they are unable to work as a result of their employers’ actions” (DOF, 1931: 24). There was no consideration, however, of the specific ways women may have found themselves in such a situation.

Conclusion

Working women in 1920s Mexico City had to navigate how to denounce sexual harassment in the workplace while protecting their personal and professional honor. Prior to the 1910s, longstanding discussions of *atentado al pudor* infiltrated public discussions of harassment, however the high stakes of a legal case led many observers, women and men alike, to refer to sexual harassment in other terms. Thus, reference to “sarcasm”, “temptations”, “indiscretions”, and “mixing the sexes” allowed them to raise awareness without using explicit descriptions. By the 1920s, some Mexican feminists shifted to more explicit descriptions of sexual harassment, as was the case for María Ríos Cárdenas. Others, like María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, continued to shy away from direct language. When in the 1920s women like María Ríos Cárdenas, Otilia Zambrano, María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, and others spoke of sexual harassment, they spoke not of personal experience but that of others. Speaking in the third person allowed them to distance themselves as individuals

from association with specific instances of sexual harassment. It also allowed them to disassociate such behavior from the middle-class status of their occupation.

At the close of the decade of the 1920s, the Mexican federal government contemplated two ways to confront sexual harassment at work, both of which placed the onus of the issue on women. The first, the implementation of uniforms for women (1928), sought to control female bodies. The second, a clause in the “Federal Labor Law Proposal” (1929), that provided compensation to a woman who lost her job due to indecent behavior but did not punish the aggressor. As Marta Lamas might point out, neither initiative critiqued a *machista* culture, and both left intact the sense of shame a woman might feel when faced with sexual harassment. Neither of the two initiatives were implemented. Perhaps more important than the implementation of practices and laws was the growing awareness of women themselves of their shared condition. Unlike Lamas, however, 1920s feminists favored a capacious definition of sexual harassment. They denounced comments of a sexual nature, unwelcome physical proximity, and invitations to share a meal or go out for a walk. Feminists in the 1920s considered workplace equality central to combatting sexual harassment: women’s right to work, equal pay for equal work, equitable promotions, transparency, and respectful work relations. Such workplace equality broadly construed is the “preventative measures called for by today’s political theorists, legal scholars, and sociologists”.

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