

Feminist Activism, Union Democracy and Gender Equity Rights in Mexico*

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Abstract. Beyond competitive elections, democratisation should include a transformation of the institutions of state and civil society into spaces that recognise the rights of citizens and allow for their participation. This study explores the question of how Mexican labour unions are transformed into institutions with a commitment to the rights and participation of women workers. Drawing on evidence from five unions, the paper shows that compared to their corporatist counterparts, unions with a ‘democratic ethos’ provide a context within which gender equity rights are more readily recognised. However, recognition of gender equity is primarily dependent on feminist activism and union leadership. The paper argues that women’s efforts to transform their unions into spaces that reflect and advocate for gender equity rights are critical to strengthening democratic citizenship in Mexico.

Keywords: women workers, gender equity, labour unions, Mexico, citizenship, institutional democratisation

Introduction

If democracy is fundamentally a system of governance based on the participation of citizens in the public realm, it follows that democratisation involves more than the institution of competitive elections.¹ Democratisation also requires the transformation of the institutions of the state, economy and civil society into public spaces that reflect a culture of citizenship, in which there is a recognition, encouragement and protection of the rights of citizens and their ability to participate in all spheres of public life.²

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¹ Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, ‘What Democracy Is ... and Is Not’, in Larry Diamond and M. Plattner (eds.), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore MD, 1993), p. 40.

² Elizabeth Jelin, ‘Citizenship Revisited: Solidarity, Responsibility, and Rights’, in Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg (eds.), *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Solidarity in Latin America* (Boulder CO, 1998), p. 102.

Although Vicente Fox's victory in Mexico's 2000 presidential election was crucial in ending 71 consecutive years of one-party rule by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI), democratic consolidation in Mexico will be contingent upon transforming many of the country's authoritarian institutions into spheres that recognise and promote a culture of citizenship. As Graciela Bensusán and Maria Lorena Cook argue, the labour sphere is an area in need of institutional reform. They characterise Mexican labour institutions as an 'authoritarian-corporatist' system that emerged during Mexico's authoritarian regime and gave unions affiliated with the PRI access to power and resources in return for electoral and policy support from union members and restrictions on union autonomy. According to Bensusán and Cook, the necessary development of transparent and democratic labour institutions that foster balanced representation of labour, state and employer interests in the current neo-liberal economic context can only be achieved through significant reforms of Mexico's labour laws and a 'shift away from an authoritarian-corporatist system ... towards a democratic model of labour governance'.³

If transformation of the labour sphere so that workers' interests are better represented is a crucial aspect of democratisation in Mexico, it is important to examine the specific ways in which labour unions are transformed from such authoritarian-corporatist organisations into ones that are representative of workers' interests and supportive of their rights in political and economic dialogue. More specifically, this study explores the factors that are necessary for the transformation of unions into organisations that recognise and support gender equity and the rights of women workers. Because access to the workforce is crucial to the effective exercise of full citizenship, this gender-oriented transformation of labour unions is important in creating spaces within civil society in which women unionists can articulate their interests and subsequently make demands on union leaders, and is a crucial part of the broader public dialogue about the gender equity rights that foster women's equal access to the workforce, the quality of working conditions, and the ability of women and men to effectively balance work and family responsibilities.⁴

³ Graciela Bensusán and Maria Lorena Cook, 'Political Transition and Labor Revitalization in Mexico', in Daniel B. Cornfield and Holly J. McCammon (eds.), *Labor Revitalization: Global Perspectives and New Initiatives* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 229–67, quoted on p. 229.

⁴ I use 'gender equity' instead of 'women's' rights' to emphasise policies that guarantee women's equal access to the paid workforce, including policies like maternity leave, which are often referred to as social rights. The use of 'gender equity' is also intended to be inclusive of identities that intersect with gender, including race, sexual orientation, and indigenous status.

Although little work has been done to examine the reform of labour unions from a gender perspective, it has been argued that a move towards union democracy in Mexico will facilitate the recognition of women's rights in unions to the extent that it will eliminate the legal mechanisms of corporatism that restrict effective representation of the interests of the rank and file.⁵ The analysis presented here is a first effort to assess the validity of this argument. I find that unions' commitment both to democratic procedures and to the recognition and representation of the interests of all members in union policy, or what I call a 'democratic ethos', contributes to systematic attention to gender equity rights in union statutes, collective contracts and informal union policies. I also demonstrate that a democratic ethos is not sufficient to ensure the promotion of gender equity rights, as these are recognised in the policies of some unions that continue to follow a corporatist model of interest representation. I argue that two additional factors are necessary for gender equity rights to be addressed within unions: firstly, attention to gender equity requires the presence of feminist activists within the unions; and secondly, these feminist activists must be supported to some degree by union leadership. Ultimately, these findings support theoretical arguments that the transformation of institutions into ones that reflect a culture of citizenship will depend largely on the agency of those groups that have a stake in such a culture.

This article proceeds in three sections. First, I examine how transforming unions into institutions that recognise, encourage and protect gender equity is an important part of developing a culture of citizenship. Second, after discussing the methodological approach to this study, I analyse the activism of women in five Mexican unions. I conclude by arguing that women's engagement in a gender-oriented transformation of labour unions is an important factor in defending women's citizenship rights as Mexico democratises.

The Culture of Citizenship, Union Transformation, and Gender Equity Rights

In a democracy, formal rights of citizenship articulate the relationship between the state and individuals, and specify who can participate in society, and in what ways. But it is often the case in developing democracies that citizenship rights formally granted by the state exclude certain groups, or that they are not effectively applied (i.e., recognised, promoted and enforced). In the latter case, this can be because the state lacks the capacity to enforce laws and policies; it can also be because authoritarian practices and unequal

⁵ Jennifer A. Cooper, 'Feminismo y sindicalismo en México: dos visiones compatibles?', in Griselda Gutiérrez Castañeda (ed.), *Feminismo en México: revisión histórico-crítica del siglo que termina* (Mexico City, 2002), pp. 103–4.

distributions of power resources prevent some citizens from participating as political, economic or social agents.⁶ In such cases, democratisation must involve the transformation of institutions so that they represent a culture of citizenship, meaning that existing rights of citizenship are recognised, encouraged and enforced within those institutions and that citizens can effectively participate in them, sometimes with the purpose of joining a broader public dialogue.

Of course, authoritarian and exclusionary practices within institutions do not change of their own accord, and many scholars of Latin American politics have thus begun to focus on the development of a culture of citizenship as a process of social struggle that takes place 'from below'. Elizabeth Jelin argues that to develop a culture of citizenship, citizens must learn about their rights and participate in the development of institutions that reflect them by monitoring practices within those institutions and advocating changes, through public dialogue and social struggle, when they are not recognised and enforced.⁷

Corporatism and the Challenge of Union Transformation

Historically, unions have played a key role within Latin American civil society in supporting the expansion of democracy and citizenship rights. This has been exhibited in at least three ways. Firstly, unions have often been at the forefront of mobilisations for democratic transitions.⁸ Secondly, unions have been supporters of social welfare rights.⁹ Finally, unions have provided a left-leaning voice within the public sphere that represents the interests of marginalised sectors of the population, as well as the working class.¹⁰

There are generally strong links between unions, citizenship and democracy in Latin America, but the Mexican case is substantially different. Mexican unions played an important role supporting the authoritarian rule of the PRI because of the dominant role of 'official' unions and the corporatist system of state-labour interest representation.¹¹ Corporatism refers to a form of interest representation in which the state structures non-competitive and compulsory interest associations, provides subsidies and resources to

⁶ Jelin, 'Citizenship Revisited', p. 102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–14.

⁸ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore MD, 1986); Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁹ Ruth Berins Collier, *The Contradictory Alliance: State-Labor Relations and Regime Change in Mexico* (Berkeley CA, 1992).

¹⁰ Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy*; Kenneth Roberts, *Deepening Democracy? The Modern Left and Social Movements in Chile and Peru* (Stanford CA, 1998).

¹¹ See Collier, *Contradictory Alliance*.

support those associations, and imposes certain constraints on their internal functioning.¹² According to Collier and Collier, state–labour corporatism in Latin America can be understood as an exchange between labour leaders and the state. Labour leaders benefit from the official recognition of their unions, the provision of material and political resources to unions, and legal provisions making union membership compulsory, which is particularly important given that unions’ political influence ultimately relies on collective action. In exchange, labour leaders surrender aspects of their organisational autonomy and accept state intervention into leadership decisions.¹³ In a system characterised by the relationship between unions and the state, the representation of workers is understood as the ability of union leaders to use their political status to deliver material benefits to the rank and file. Union elections may take place, but representation refers to the relationship between union leaders and the state, not the rank and file.¹⁴

The development of corporatism and the emergence of official unions in Mexico was part of the process of state consolidation in the 1930s, when the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM) was established to unite myriad unions under an umbrella federation that would have a voice with the PRI. The CTM became the largest federation of workers officially linked to the PRI and consistently delivered electoral support to the party. State–labour corporatism in Mexico grew from this alliance between ‘official’ unions and the PRI, and was institutionalised in part through particular aspects of the Ley Federal del Trabajo (Federal Labour Law, LFT). Firstly, the LFT’s ‘exclusion clauses’ require that anyone employed by a unionised company be a member of the union. If a union refuses to grant an individual membership, or revokes it, the individual cannot be hired, or loses her job. Secondly, the Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje (Labour Arbitration and Conciliation Boards, JCAs), which make decisions on industrial relations issues like union registration and strikes, require representation from unions, business and government.¹⁵ Since labour is typically represented by official unions, JCAs rarely certify independent unions or find in their favour when collective contracts are challenged.¹⁶

¹² Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton NJ, 1991), p. 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–2.

¹⁴ Enrique de la Garza Toledo, ‘Democracia, representatividad y legitimidad sindical’, in Enrique de la Garza Toledo (ed.), *Democracia y cambio sindical en México* (Mexico, 2001), p. 10.

¹⁵ The Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare) registers industries under federal jurisdiction through its Registro de Asociaciones (Registry of Associations).

¹⁶ Maria Lorena Cook, *The Politics of Labor Reform in Latin America: Between Flexibility and Rights* (University Park PA, 2007), pp. 153–4.

Conceptually, corporatism and authoritarianism cannot be conflated.¹⁷ As Bensusán and Cook note, Mexican labour law formally supports procedures of union democracy and autonomy. In practice, within individual unions and in broader civil society, corporatist labour institutions and the dominance of official unions have had the effect of stifling the participation and representation of diverse interests that is crucial for democracy. Within unions, a model of representation based on leaders' relationship with the state can lead to neglect of rank-and-file concerns, and the possibility of state intervention into union decision making can lead to undemocratic elections, removal of elected leaders and suppression of dissent.¹⁸ Exclusion clauses are a boon for unions because they guarantee compulsory membership, but they also free union leaders from having to court new members by appealing to those members' specific interests and ensure that leaders do not need to attend closely to the interests of the rank and file in order to maintain support.¹⁹ Exclusion clauses also eliminate the possibility of the worker being able to associate with the organisation that will best represent her interests.²⁰ This limits the opportunity for the rank and file to advocate for their interests and have their interests represented by unions. At the level of civil society, Mexican corporatism allows for the suppression of dissident unions and limits the participation of non-official unions in policy discussions. In fact, the corporatist model has been characterized as an alternative to a democratic and autonomous civil society.²¹ For these reasons, Bensusán and Cook refer to Mexico as an 'authoritarian-corporatist' system and argue that a process of labour revitalisation is necessary for unions to be effective advocates for workers' interests vis-à-vis employers and the state. 'At a minimum', they write, 'labor reform should create legal and institutional guarantees for workers' free choice of union affiliation and leadership and eliminate the current advantages and protections granted to unions that coerce or dupe workers into affiliation without representing their interests'.²² In short, for workers' interests to be genuinely represented within and by their unions, a revitalisation of labour institutions requires changes to the corporatist structure of interest representation.

¹⁷ Ian Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico: The Case of the Automobile Industry* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 34.

¹⁸ Bensusán and Cook, 'Political Transition and Labor Revitalization', pp. 235–7.

¹⁹ Cooper, 'Feminismo y sindicalismo', pp. 103–4.

²⁰ Augustín Rodríguez Fuentes, 'Libertad sindical, una premisa necesaria para la democracia en México', in Inés González Nicolás (ed.), *40 años, 40 respuestas: ideas para la democratización del mundo del trabajo* (Mexico City, 2009), pp. 75–8.

²¹ Collier, *Contradictory Alliance*, pp. 96–7.

²² Bensusán and Cook, 'Political Transition and Labor Revitalization', pp. 230, 232.

Throughout Latin America, neoliberal economic transition weakened unions' political power, including that of the CTM.²³ Following the 1982 debt crisis, the CTM continued to play a role with the PRI in establishing wage pacts, but it was unable to win material benefits for workers or guarantee workers' support for the PRI. Many Mexican workers began to re-evaluate the usefulness of traditional Mexican state–labour relations.²⁴

While there have always been independent unions in Mexico challenging the corporatist model and supporting union democracy,²⁵ the strength of this challenge grew considerably after 1997, when several unions left Mexico's official umbrella labour federation, the Congreso del Trabajo (Labour Congress), and formed the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (National Union of Workers, UNT). The UNT became the second-largest labour federation in Mexico, at one time representing an estimated 1.5 million workers.²⁶ Among the founding members of the UNT was the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana (Mexican Telephone Workers' Union, STRM), whose secretary-general, Francisco Hernández Juárez, had been influential in challenging the traditional corporatist model and advocating for new workers' organisations.²⁷ The UNT has corporatist aspects, including a focus on elite-level negotiations rather than organisation at the factory-floor level; nevertheless, the UNT supports reforms of the LFT that would eliminate the exclusion clauses and implement secret balloting in union elections.²⁸ Beyond these specific democratic procedures, it is also important

²³ Katrina Burgess, *Parties and Unions in the New Global Economy* (Pittsburgh PA, 2004); John Weeks, 'Wages, Employment and Workers' Rights in Latin America, 1970–98', *International Labour Review*, vol. 138, no. 2 (1999), pp. 151–69. ²⁴ See Burgess, *Parties and Unions*.

²⁵ Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico*; Kevin J. Middlebrook, 'Union Democratization in the Mexican Automobile Industry: A Reappraisal', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1989), pp. 69–93; Burgess, *Parties and Unions*.

²⁶ In what has been seen as a major blow to the independent union movement in Mexico, the UNT's largest member union, the National Union of Social Security Workers (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Seguro Social, SNTSS), representing 400,000 workers, has left the federation. See 'UNT Loses Largest Member Union', *Mexican Labor News and Analysis*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2010), available at www.ueinternational.org/Mexico_info/mlna_articles.php?id=169#1137.

²⁷ Hernández Juárez is credited with pushing a 'neo-corporatist' model in which unions and the state collaborate to minimise confrontation, but where union demands focus on modernising production and linking wages to productivity. Hernández Juárez was also instrumental in advocating for a new federation of goods and services unions. See Enrique de la Garza Toledo, 'The Restructuring of State–Labor Relations in Mexico', in Maria Lorena Cook, Kevin J. Middlebrook and Juan Molinar Horcasitas (eds.), *The Politics of Economic Restructuring: State–Society Relations and Regime Change in Mexico* (San Diego CA, 1994), p. 213.

²⁸ De la Garza Toledo, 'Democracia, representatividad y legitimidad sindical'; Francisco Zapata, 'La negociación de las reformas a la Ley Federal del Trabajo (1989–2005)', *Foro Internacional*, vol. 183 (Jan.–March 2006), pp. 95–103.

to emphasise the democratic discourse found within UNT documents. For example, leaders of the UNT argued that one of the federation's objectives was 'to achieve a democratic restructuring of... unions as organisations that defend and promote the interests and rights of workers ... and that promote change and justice ... as conscious social critics'.²⁹ As part of its discursive focus on democracy, justice and workers' rights, the UNT has made gender equity an official element of its platform.³⁰ This explicit commitment to gender equity is important because, as described further on, democratic procedures are not guarantees that women's rights will be taken into account in decision making. It is this democratic ethos – a commitment to democratic processes, as well as an explicit commitment to the advocacy of all workers' interests, including women – that has made the UNT 'the most important organisation in Mexico calling for democratic reform of labour institutions'.³¹

As important as the UNT may be for democratic labour reform in Mexico, does its democratic ethos mean that UNT-affiliated unions will espouse gender equity policies? Jennifer Cooper has argued that for women in unions, state-labour corporatism is a major obstacle to the implementation and enforcement of policies that would recognise and enforce gender equity. Even if support for gender equity exists, corporatist representation, especially through the exclusion clauses, lessens the chance that union leaders will be held accountable to rank-and-file pressure for changes to policy that reflect women's gender equity demands.³² The corollary of Cooper's argument is that in unions committed to democratic procedures and representation, leaders will be obliged to respond to women's interests in order to maintain and increase support. Accordingly, the UNT provides the opportunity to explore whether a democratic union ethos is a factor in the transformation of unions into institutions that advocate for gender equity rights. As I argue in the next section, however, the lessons from women's activism in Latin American democratic transitions suggest that a democratic ethos will be insufficient for the transformation of unions into institutions that advocate for gender equity rights.

Democracy, Feminist Activism and Gender Equity Rights in Unions

Although women represent a growing percentage of the paid workforce in Latin America (see Table 1), they continue to face structural inequalities and

²⁹ UNT, 'La reforma social y democrática del estado Mexicano en su vertiente laboral-productiva y la creación de un nuevo proyecto histórico del sindicalismo en México' (1998), available at www.unt.org.mx/docs/reflabprod.htm.

³⁰ UNT, 'La reforma social y democrática del estado' (1997), available at www.unt.org.mx/docs/refsoedem.htm.

³¹ Bensusán and Cook, 'Political Transition and Labor Revitalization', p. 251.

³² Cooper, 'Feminismo y sindicalismo', pp. 103–4.

Table 1. *Women's Workforce Participation (% of Total Population Aged 15 and Over)*

Country	2000	2010, projected	2020, projected
Argentina	44.5	51.4	55.8
Brazil	56	58.9	60.9
Chile	38	43.4	48.6
Mexico	37.5	44.2	50.2
Latin America	48.1	52.8	56.7

Source: ECLAC, *Statistical Yearbook for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2009* (Santiago, 2010), p. 39.

discrimination.³³ According to the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), women's inability to take part in the workforce on equal terms as men prevents them from fully exercising their citizenship.³⁴ This is because citizenship entails being able to enter public life under conditions of equal opportunity and participate in the various institutions that affect one's life.³⁵ Effective access to the workforce is crucial to women's citizenship because it gives them greater economic autonomy and access to social welfare rights. Moreover, participating in workers' organisations allows women to engage in public dialogues about workers' rights and labour policy. Iris Marion Young notes that much of the activism aimed at creating more inclusive workplaces has involved 'associational activity within private businesses'.³⁶ Thus, transforming labour institutions so that women can participate within them and advocate their interests is important to creating a culture of citizenship.

Although labour unions have an important role to play in workers' advocacy, scholars have argued that they are not effective advocates for women workers because of their historically patriarchal nature and failure to respond to the specific needs of women.³⁷ Patriarchal union culture is often manifested in forms of sexism and discrimination that include sexual harassment, sexist language and attitudes, a failure to undertake gendered

³³ Data from ECLAC includes individuals aged 15 and over. The Mexican Constitution establishes 14 as the legal minimum age of employment, and all children under 18 must have the permission of a guardian or parent to work.

³⁴ ECLAC, 'Roads Towards Gender Equity in Latin America and the Caribbean', report of the Ninth Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean (cited 2004), available at www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/UnidadMujer/4/LCL2114/cl2114i.pdf, pp. 11, 14, 22–3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11; Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* (New York, 1997), p. 37.

³⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford, 2004), p. 160.

³⁷ Marina Prieto and Carolina Quinteros, 'Never the Twain Shall Meet? Women's Organizations and Labor Unions in the *Maquila* Industry in Central America', in Deborah Eade and Alan Leather (eds.), *Development NGOs and Labor Unions: Terms of Engagement* (Bloomfield CT, 2005), pp. 183–94.

analyses of labour trends and to educate male workers about those trends, and a resistance to women's activism within unions.³⁸

Nonetheless, I argue that unions are important institutions for women workers. Firstly, unions can serve as important spaces where women can articulate their specific needs, such as day care and parental leave, as well as discussing traditional issues like wages.³⁹ Secondly, collective bargaining makes unionised women materially better off and provides benefits beyond those required by law. Marta Lamas argues that many women's less-than-desirable working conditions (in export factories, the informal sector or domestic service) are 'exacerbated by the impossibility of organizing themselves into unions'.⁴⁰ Unionised women have an organisational capacity and material benefits that exceed those of many other working women despite unions' hostility and/or indifference to gender equity. Alternative workers' organisations are important because the majority of women are not unionised, but it remains crucial in the broader process of democratisation for unions to be transformed into institutions where women can articulate and advocate for the establishment and enforcement of gender equity rights that facilitate their workforce participation.⁴¹

How, then, are unions transformed into institutions that advocate for gender equity? Cooper's hypothesis about union corporatism in Mexico suggests that union democracy may lead unions to advocate more explicitly for women workers. However, the struggle for women's rights during Latin America's democratic transitions suggests that democracy is not sufficient for the expansion of women's rights. Although women were at the forefront

³⁸ Maria Lorena Cook, *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State, and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico* (University Park PA, 1996), p. 79; Elizabeth Jelin, 'Women, Gender, and Human Rights', in Elizabeth Jelin and Eric Hershberg (eds.), *Constructing Democracy: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Society in Latin America* (Boulder CO, 1998), p. 192; Liesl Haas, 'Changing the System from Within? Feminist Participation in the Brazilian Workers' Party', in Victoria González and Karen Kampwirth (eds.), *Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right* (University Park PA, 2001), p. 261; Ancelmo Garcia Pineda, 'Legislación laboral, contratación colectiva y cláusulas relativas a la mujer y a la equidad de género: el caso de México', unpubl. presentation, *Negociación colectiva y equidad de género en América Latina*, Lima, 30 Sep.–2 Oct. 2002, p. 85.

³⁹ Henry J. Frundt, 'Central American Unions in the Era of Globalization', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2002), pp. 17–18.

⁴⁰ Marta Lamas, 'The Role of Women in the New Mexico', in Joseph S. Tulchin and Andrew D. Selee (eds.), *Mexico's Politics and Society in Transition* (Boulder CO, 2003), p. 130; Ancelmo Garcia Pineda, 'Legislación laboral'.

⁴¹ According to Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (National Institute of Geographic and Computing Statistics, INEGI), 8.2 per cent of women workers belonged to a union in 2000. INEGI no longer publishes these data. See INEGI, *Mujeres y hombres* (Aguascalientes, 2000), p. 413. One way to reverse declining union membership could be for unions to recruit in female-dominant sectors, respond to women's specific interests and open up leadership structures to women's participation. See Svenja Blanke, 'Género y trabajo en México', unpubl. document (2008), available at www.fesmex.org.

of social mobilisations calling for democratic transitions, the democracies that emerged in the 1980s were not accompanied by a more even distribution of power between men and women. As the contentious politics that preceded transition gave way to traditional party politics, women saw their political role shrink. In short, democratic politics do not necessarily lead to greater participation of women in public life.⁴² Nor has democratic government necessarily led to the expansion of women's rights. Mala Htun's study of reforms in the Southern Cone shows that depending on the issue, democratic governments can remain resistant to expanding women's rights, whereas military governments sometimes have an interest in promoting them.⁴³ Despite the uneasy relationship of women's citizenship with democracy, women have secured legal and policy changes on issues such as domestic violence, quotas, parental rights and marital property. Recent research has emphasised that the expansion of gender equity policies has been most successful when activism from civil society has been met by receptive actors within government institutions who will usher policy changes through the requisite channels.⁴⁴ In addition to democratic processes, strong women's movements and advocates in government have been necessary for change.

Susan Franceschet and Laura Macdonald argue that the advance of gender equity rights in Mexico has been hampered by the absence of a strong women's movement. This was a likely result of corporatism, which prevented the separation between state and civil society necessary for an autonomous women's movement to flourish. In this context, women's rights 'came more as "a gift from above" than as a result of active contestation by women's organizations'.⁴⁵ This was certainly the case for working women's rights. Mexico's 1917 Constitution established provisions for equal pay, protection against sex-based discrimination and provisions for mothers like maternity leave and leave for breastfeeding. As Teresa Healy argues, however, the Constitution assumed a traditional, gendered division of labour, with the

⁴² Georgina Waylen, 'Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics', *World Politics*, vol. 46 (1994), p. 353.

⁴³ Mala Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family Under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁴⁴ Susan Franceschet, 'Explaining Social Movement Outcomes: Collective Action Frames and Strategic Choices in First- and Second-Wave Feminism in Chile', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5 (2004), pp. 499–530; Linda S. Stevenson, 'Gender Politics in the Mexican Democratization Process: Electing Women and Legislating Sex Crimes and Affirmative Action, 1988–97', in Jorge I. Domínguez and Alejandro Poiré (eds.), *Toward Mexico's Democratization: Parties, Campaigns, Elections, and Public Opinion* (London, 1999), pp. 66–72; Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton NJ, 1990).

⁴⁵ Susan Franceschet and Laura Macdonald, 'Hard Times for Citizenship: Women's Movements in Chile and Mexico', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2004), p. 15.

family as the basic unit of society. Where protections for women were addressed, women were equated with children or discussed in terms of motherhood. The minimum wage provision was intended to provide a family wage for an explicitly male head of household, and although pay equity and non-discrimination were specified, it was never intended that men and women should hold the same jobs. In short, the ‘progressive’ rights granted to women were intended not to open up the economic sphere to women as citizens, but to protect those women who were not playing their rightful role.⁴⁶ Today many of those rights are rarely enforced, and maternity leave rights have led to the pervasive use of pregnancy testing in order to avoid hiring pregnant women. The need for activism to establish meaningful gender equity rights for women workers is strong.

Women workers have organised throughout Mexican history, but their organisational efforts increased in the 1970s along with their participation in the workforce. In the 1980s they began organising women’s committees within unions. While some committees focused primarily on social activities, others focused on gender equity demands, such as access to day care, rights for pregnant women and opportunities to become involved in union politics.⁴⁷ For a time the middle-class feminist movement collaborated with union women, but by the 1990s union women in Mexico were working more independently to advance gender equity.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, their own unions were a primary focus of their activism. As I show in the subsequent analysis, women’s activism within their unions, along with support from union leaders, has been critical to the transformation of unions into institutions that advocate for gender equity policies.

Methodology

Given the paucity of attention paid to the activism of unionised women outside of the *maquiladora* sector, this analysis is an initial effort to explore the factors necessary for Mexican unions to adopt gender equity policies. To ensure sufficient diversity of the three variables that may play a role in unions’ adoption of gender equity policies – feminist activism, support of union leadership, and a democratic union ethos – I used a purposive sample of five unions, three belonging to the UNT and two belonging to federations with a corporatist model of interest representation. With one exception,

⁴⁶ Teresa Healy, *Gendered Struggles against Globalisation in Mexico* (Farnham, 2008), pp. 11–12.

⁴⁷ Sara Lovera, ‘La participación de la mujer trabajadora en la historia del sindicalismo’, in Mujeres en Acción Sindical (ed.), *Comisión nacional de la mujer trabajadora* (Mexico City, 1995).

⁴⁸ Teresa Carrillo, ‘Women and Independent Unionism in the Garment Industry’, in Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig (eds.) *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico* (Boulder CO, 1990).

these are public and service sector unions, which traditionally represent larger numbers of women.

For the purposes of this analysis, feminist activism refers to a range of activities that challenge gendered (power) dynamics that discriminate against women.⁴⁹ These include coordinating gender awareness programmes, promoting gender equity policies within the union or running for a leadership position with the intention of advocating gender equity within the union. The analysis looked at levels of support from union leadership, which is understood as a gauge of leaders' encouragement of or resistance to feminist activism. Supportive leadership refers to leadership that provides explicit encouragement and support for gender equity policies. Accommodating leadership refers to situations where union leaders give feminist activists autonomy in their work – the ability to pursue objectives without interference – and are responsive to suggestions for policy changes. Unsupportive leaders explicitly resist or block feminist activism.

Given the complexity of union corporatism in Mexico and the difficulty of union democratisation without reform of the LFT, it is difficult to label unions as purely democratic, authoritarian or corporatist. For the purposes of this analysis, I understand unions with a democratic ethos to be those whose internal union procedures and culture allow for and explicitly recognise and encourage the representation of diverse interests of rank-and-file workers within union leadership structures. The explicit recognition of interests is particularly important in understanding advances in gender equity because, as noted previously, democratic procedures like elections have never been sufficient to guarantee women's participation and rights. Despite its corporatist characteristics, there is a consensus that the UNT is at the forefront of the democratic union movement in Mexico, and it has been explicit in calling for gender equity. Therefore, UNT-affiliated unions are considered here to have a democratic ethos. This is contrasted against corporatist unions, whose culture and procedures reflect the dominant position of union leaders and the exclusion of rank-and-file voices in labour politics. Although it is not the antithesis of 'democratic', I opt for the label 'corporatist' instead of 'authoritarian' to be consistent with the literature's focus on state–labour corporatism, with the understanding that corporatism can have the effect of suppressing participation and restricting the ability of workers to advocate for their interests.

The dependent variable, as it were – transformation of unions into organisations that advocate and support gender equity rights – can be measured

⁴⁹ This definition is drawn from Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (London, 2006) and Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado, *Fronteras No Más: Toward Social Justice at the U.S.–Mexico Border* (New York, 2002). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for recommending this literature.

by the adoption of policies in union statutes, collective contracts and informal union directives that promote women's ability to take part in the workforce and in their unions, and that go beyond the requirements of Mexican law. A distinction is made between 'official' union policies found in governing statutes or collective contracts and 'unofficial' policies, which are merely ad-hoc agreements between various parties. I argue that official union policies are more reflective of a union transformation because they require a greater degree of consensus between feminist activists, union leadership and/or the employer and because, as institutionalised policies, they legitimate subsequent demands for enforcement, should the policies not be followed.

Gender equity rights emphasise women's ability to participate in the workforce free from discrimination. They include equal remuneration, access to training/employment opportunities, freedom from harassment and discrimination, and affirmative action. Gender equity rights also include provisions like parental leave and child care that help women and men balance work and family. While some of these rights may exist under the law, lack of access to or enforcement of them may render them ineffective for many women. Moreover, age-old practices of gender discrimination require that specific gender equity policies be articulated and enforced (e.g., stipulations against sexual harassment).⁵⁰ Although all Latin American countries have instituted formal guarantees of women's equality, if discrimination limits their access to the workforce, women's formal citizenship rights will not be effective.

The primary source of data for this analysis was a series of ten semi-structured interviews with representatives of five unions.⁵¹ In the four cases

⁵⁰ Grupo de Trabajo sobre la Normatividad Laboral con Perspectivo de Género, 'Propuesta de reforma laboral con perspectiva de género', unpubl. document (2002).

⁵¹ This represents a sample of a larger study of union women's activism in Mexico City that comprised 28 women from 15 unions (in addition to politicians, academics and NGO activists). Although the literature on union women in Mexico is small, there are many important examples of union women's activism that have shaped union politics. Among these is the case of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (National Union of Education Workers, SNTE), the biggest union in Mexico, with a majority female rank and file and, since 1989, a female secretary-general, Elba Esther Gordillo. Studies of the SNTE show that women's activism in the democratic teachers' movement was crucial to bringing attention to gender discrimination and moving women into leadership positions. At the same time, Gordillo's long involvement with the PRI shows that female leaders will not necessarily break with traditional power structures. The cases that follow build on these insights from prior studies of the SNTE, bolstering our understanding of the processes through which gender equity becomes addressed in union politics and policy. The seminal study of the democratic teachers' movement is Cook, *Organizing Dissent*. An excellent analysis of gender in the SNTE is Regina Cortina, 'Gender and Power in the Teacher's Union of Mexico', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1990), pp. 241–62.

Table 2. *Women on National Executive Committees*

Union	Women on NEC	Total membership of NEC	Women's officer within NEC (date of establishment)
ATM	2	9 (as of 2007)	Yes (2003)
SUTS	2	20 (as of 2002)	Yes (1988)
STRM	2	19 (as of 2007)	Yes (2004)
STUNAM	3	19 (as of 2007)	Yes (1976)
DF union	12	49 (as of 2003)	Yes

Sources: ATM, *Estatutos*, p. 11; STRM, 'Organización', available at www.strm.org.mx/indexa.htm; STUNAM, 'Comité Ejecutivo, 2005–2008', available at www.stunam.org; interviews with Inés González Nicolás, Mexico City, 8 May 2007, and María S., Mexico City, 24 March 2003.

where consent was given, the activists' real names are used. In the one case where consent was not granted, a pseudonym is used, and given the activist's position in the union it was also necessary to withhold the name of her union.

All the activists interviewed had experience in union leadership positions, ranging from two years as a departmental delegate to 14 years on the national executive committee. Their years of union membership ranged from 17 to 33. Interviewees were identified based on their participation in gender awareness and leadership programmes for union women conducted by various Mexican NGOs that focus on gender and/or labour rights. In the cases of all five unions, efforts were made, using a snowball sampling method, to secure interviews with a number of feminist activists and/or union leaders. As it turned out, this was a difficult endeavour. Because of the patriarchal character of unions, feminist activism can be rare and difficult to sustain. It is primarily practiced among women with many years of union and leadership experience. Not all women in leadership positions are conscious of women's rights or active in promoting them, however, and even those that are can have difficulty promoting issues that may be viewed as unimportant or threatening to male leaders. As such, in some cases there was only one identifiable feminist activist within the union who was available and/or willing to be interviewed, even when many women held leadership positions (see Table 2). Interestingly, the gender equity policies discussed here were often the result of the work of a single person, so the small sample is actually reflective of the small population of feminist activists within a given union.

Interview data were supplemented by a variety of official and unofficial documents, including, when possible, copies of collective contracts and union statutes. It is worth noting that Mexican unions are not transparent institutions; few provide online access to contracts and statutes. The interview data were therefore crucial in cases where it was not possible to obtain

union documents. Along with providing factual information about union policies and practices, the interview data were essential in acquiring detailed accounts of women's efforts to transform their unions into spaces that reflect a culture of citizenship for women workers.

Gendered Transformation of Unions in Mexico with a Democratic Ethos

An examination of three Mexican unions belonging to the UNT – namely, the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Workers' Union of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, STUNAM), the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana (Telephone Workers' Union of Mexico, STRM), and the Alianza de Tranviarios de México (Alliance of Mexican Streetcar Workers, ATM) – reveals that attention to women's rights in union policies, statutes and collective contracts is quite explicit. While the democratic ethos provides an important context for advancing gender equity within the unions, feminist activism and support from union leaders has been critical to the transformation of these unions into institutions that recognise and support gender equity rights.

STUNAM represents about 30,000 administrative staff of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM). STUNAM has a democratic union structure that uses secret ballots and holds competitive elections.⁵² Women constitute approximately 40 per cent of union members. Despite the significant presence of women in the union, only three of the 19 members of the union's national executive committee (NEC) are women. STUNAM has been involved in efforts to end women's workplace discrimination since the 1970s.⁵³ Over the years it has confronted discrimination based on pregnancy status and taking of maternity leave, as well as sexual harassment and occupational segregation.⁵⁴

Most of the union's advances in promoting gender equity have resulted from the efforts of the union's official women's officer, the *secretaría de acción femenil* (secretary for women's action, SAF). The post of SAF was established in 1976 after a group of women lobbied for an executive position through which they could organise in support of social benefits for

⁵² Interview with former SEF Columba Quintero, Mexico City, 14 May 2007.

⁵³ Guadalupe Gamboa Ortiz, 'Situación actual y tareas de la mujer universitaria' (STUNAM draft report, 2003); Patricia Ravelo Blancas and Sergio Sánchez Díaz, 'Transformando las estructuras de poder: notas sobre las sindicalistas en México', *El Cotidiano*, vol. 18, no. 110 (2001), p. 93.

⁵⁴ Interview with Columba Quintero, Mexico City, 14 May 2007; Gamboa Ortiz, 'Situación actual'; executive committee information is available at www.stunam.org.

women.⁵⁵ Through the SAF, women were successful in securing changes to the collective contract that included eliminating pregnancy testing for job applicants and providing financial assistance to cover day care costs.⁵⁶ Over the years, other gender equity clauses have been added to the contract. As of the 2000–02 collective contract, an employee can be fired for committing sexual assault at a university campus or worksite, and equal pay for equal work is guaranteed.⁵⁷ The union's statutes also emphasise gender equity, stating that the union must promote activities that increase women's participation in the union and in the labour movement, promote activities in defence of women's rights, raise gender awareness in the union, and represent the union in local, national and international organisations that defend women's rights.⁵⁸

The importance of feminist activism in achieving such changes is illustrated by the work of Columba Quintero Martínez, who served as SAF from 1998 to 2003 and used her tenure to focus on two policies for women workers. The first was the explicit prohibition of sexual harassment in the union's statutes. Building support for this statute clause required Quintero Martínez to overcome two challenges: raising awareness about the nature of sexual harassment, which, she noted, was poorly understood by men and women; and showing that harassment was a problem, which was difficult because of many women's reluctance to discuss their experiences. A third challenge was securing the support of male leaders in the union, who held the ultimate decision-making power. Eventually the union approved language in its statutes denouncing harassment and sexual violence, making STUNAM one of the first unions in Mexico to do so.⁵⁹

The second issue on which Quintero Martínez focused was securing UNAM support for the establishment of the Casa de la Mujer Universitaria (University Women's House), a centre that would provide legal, educational and health services to the university's women, provide gender-related programming, and collect and disseminate data on the university's women workers.⁶⁰ Initial support for the University Women's House was established

⁵⁵ In 1997, the title of the position was changed to the *secretaría de acción para la mujer*, which also translates to secretary for women's action.

⁵⁶ Gamboa Ortiz, 'Situación actual', pp. 8–10; Ravelo Blancas and Sánchez Díaz, 'Transformando las estructuras de poder', p. 93.

⁵⁷ STUNAM's collective contract is available at www.stunam.org.mx/27contrato/27pcontrato.htm.

⁵⁸ STUNAM's statutes are available at www.stunam.org.mx/21declaracion/21pprincipios.htm.

⁵⁹ Interview with Columba Quintero Martínez, Mexico City, 20 Feb. 2003; 'Declaración de principios', available at www.stunam.org.mx/21declaracion/21pprincipios.htm.

⁶⁰ Columba Quintero Martínez and Magdalena Guerrero Martínez, 'Anteproyecto: casa de la mujer universitaria STUNAM', unpubl. proposal (2000).

in the 2000–02 collective contract.⁶¹ Although Quintero Martínez did not experience the same obstacles in promoting the House as in promoting the sexual harassment clause, securing support for the required resources and space still took a great deal of effort.⁶² Quintero Martínez noted that she was able to pursue these two projects because, far from being micro-managed by the secretary-general, the SAF had autonomy within the NEC:

[As SAF] you can move autonomously; you have your project, you can direct the themes that you want, and nothing depends on anybody else. Clearly ... the secretary-general must sign on ... but you can really move in the directions you want and do what you want.⁶³

Union leadership thus permits feminist activists within the union to advocate for women workers' rights within union policies and collective contracts.

Quintero Martínez's work on the sexual harassment clause and the University Women's House highlights the relationship between the three variables of democracy, union leadership and activism. It was only as a result of STUNAM's democratic practices that a feminist activist such as Quintero Martínez could be elected in the first place, considering that she ran on a different slate of candidates than the majority of the NEC.⁶⁴ However, the autonomy of the SAF within the national executive was crucial in allowing Quintero Martínez to pursue projects that recognised women workers' rights. Ultimately, it was feminist activism that was primarily responsible for changes in STUNAM's policies. The degree to which this is the case is illustrated by more recent developments within the University Women's House. When Quintero Martínez's SAF term ended in 2003, the House lacked the personnel to make it fully operational, but the space was being used for workshops and other activities for women. In the intervening years, the focus of Quintero Martínez's successors shifted away from the activities originally envisioned for the House, and the physical space for the House was reduced. Without someone explicitly fighting for the House, 'it exists but doesn't function', according to Quintero Martínez.⁶⁵ The STUNAM case shows that a democratic structure and relatively supportive union leaders cannot guarantee policy implementation. The impetus is on feminist activists themselves.

The second example, the STRM, primarily represents the workers of Telmex, Mexico's major telecommunications corporation. Between 1976 and 1982, the union's corporatist leadership was confronted with a series of strikes.⁶⁶ The STRM has held regular leadership elections since the strikes,

⁶¹ UNAM and STUNAM, 'Contrato colectivo de trabajo: 2000–2002', p 126.

⁶² Interview with Columba Quintero, Mexico City, 20 Feb. 2003.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Interview with Columba Quintero, Mexico City, 14 May 2007.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Steve Dubb, *Logics of Resistance: Globalization and Telephone Unionism in Mexico and British Columbia* (London, 1999), p. 124.

although Francisco Hernández Juárez has served as secretary-general of the union since first being elected in 1977. While the 30-year tenure of Hernández Juárez may call into question the democratic nature of the union, the STRM has a strong ideological commitment to union democracy in Mexico.

Women make up about 50 per cent of the union's membership. Women interviewees from the STRM suggested that although the union's contracts and statutes have been gender-neutral, women have more difficulty getting access to job training and taking the exams that are necessary for promotion and advancement up the salary scale, thus reinforcing occupational segregation. Sexual harassment of women workers has been a problem, although it may be in decline as women begin to report it more often. Finally, with only two women on the 19-member NEC (and eight of 46 other national union positions), the union's leadership is overwhelmingly male.⁶⁷

The first women's office in the STRM was established informally in 1997 by Rosario Ortiz and Gloria Olvera, who were then serving on the NEC. Under their leadership, an informal commission began to lobby for an official women's office in the union and organise workshops and conferences on women's issues, including gender awareness training for other members of the NEC. Although they had support from some women within the union, there was also resistance to their efforts, including from other women who were not convinced of the importance of gender issues.⁶⁸

One of the specific objectives of this informal women's commission was to lobby for a collective contract clause that would prohibit and penalise sexual harassment. Olvera, who was part of the union's negotiating committee, noted that the informal women's group had worked hard to get the issue of harassment onto the bargaining agenda. During the negotiations, she noted, negotiators from Telmex and the union denied that sexual harassment was a problem. As she recalled, 'there were *compañeros* who said, "What's happening is that the women want to be harassed!"'.⁶⁹ Ortiz echoed this sentiment, suggesting that 'none of the *compañeros* ... wanted to negotiate this clause'.⁷⁰ Ultimately, resistance from both negotiating teams meant the sexual harassment clause never made it into the contract.

Attention to gender equity in the STRM has not abated, however. The informal women's committee continued, although its leadership changed, and pressure to formally address gender equity that had been building since

⁶⁷ Interviews with *telefonistas* Rosario Ortiz, Mexico City, 5 Dec. 2002; Martha Heredia, Mexico City, 14 Jan. 200; and Gloria Olvera, Mexico City, 2 Feb. 2003.

⁶⁸ Interviews with Rosario Ortiz, Mexico City, 5 Dec. 2002; and Gloria Olvera, Mexico City, 2 Feb. 2003.

⁶⁹ Interview with Gloria Olvera, Mexico City, 2 Feb. 2003.

⁷⁰ Interview with Rosario Ortiz, Mexico City, 5 Dec. 2002.

1997 yielded results in the 2004 union statutes. These statutes identify sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, which represents a major reversal from the 1997 contract talks. Moreover, the statutes have created the post of SEG within the NEC. The SEG's responsibilities include taking steps to eradicate sexual harassment and workplace violence in the union, establishing mechanisms to handle complaints of harassment and violence, evaluating the application of anti-discrimination policies, promoting women's participation at all levels of the union, and executing leadership training and gender awareness programmes for union members.⁷¹ Explaining the creation of the post of SEG, Martha Heredia, a *telefonista* and vice-president for equity and gender in the UNT, stated that it was an initiative from within the union intended to 'bring ourselves in line with what women in developed countries are doing' and to empower women to participate at all levels of the union.⁷² The degree to which the responsibilities of the SEG recognise key factors in promoting equality of women in the union make these among the most progressive union statutes in Mexico.

Electoral structures of union democracy did not have the same role to play in the STRM's gradual embrace of women workers' rights as they did in STUNAM's. The attention to women workers' rights in the STRM's 2004 statutes, which represents such a remarkable change from the resistance to the informal women's commission in 1997, owed more to a change in the level of support from union leadership. It would be a mistake to discount the role that a democratic ethos played in the STRM, however. On the one hand, the 2004 statutes represent a clear response to demands from women in the union that had existed since the creation of the informal commission in 1997 – a democratic, rather than corporatist, form of representation. Moreover, the STRM's commitment to gender equity in the 2004 statutes is clearly influenced by the gender equity mandate of the UNT. Nonetheless, we can trace the source of the demands for attention to women's labour rights to feminist activists themselves, especially to Olvera and Ortiz, who founded the informal commission, and to Heredia, who has helped keep it active within the union.

The third union, the ATM, represents workers of Servicios de Transporte Eléctricos del Distrito Federal (Federal District Electric Transport Services), a public transportation company operating Mexico City's light trains and streetcars. It is the oldest of the unions discussed here, with a history of progressive labour activism dating back to the Mexican Revolution.⁷³ With only about 84 women out of 2,600 total members, it has the fewest female

⁷¹ The 2004 STRM Statutes are available at www.strm.org.mx/docs/estatuto2004.pdf.

⁷² Interview with Martha Heredia, Mexico City, 15 May 2007.

⁷³ John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: The Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln NE, 2001), p. 71.

members of the unions featured in this study. As such, women are disproportionately represented on the union's NEC, holding two of nine positions. Despite this, Rosa María Hernández, a member of the NEC, noted that until 1994 women did not participate much in the union, and there had not been a single female delegate or officer. Not surprisingly, Hernández noted, 'because we never came to participate, there was nothing [for women in the collective contract]. The contract was made by men for men'.⁷⁴ According to Hernández, women's participation in the ATM began in the 1994 union election when some women decided, in response to harassment from a male colleague, to organise candidates in order to improve female representation within the union leadership. Their effort was a success: the first female union delegate was elected in 1994, and Hernández took up a leadership position in 1995.

As a result of their activism, Hernández said, women have been successful in securing several policy changes supporting the rights of women of the ATM. Prior to women's involvement with the union, no women were conductors of public transit vehicles. In one round of collective contract negotiations, female ATM members overcame some resistance and secured a clause allowing women to become conductors.⁷⁵ Feminist activists also secured a contract clause protecting pregnant women from immediate disqualification as applicants for jobs or promotion.⁷⁶ The union statutes also subtly take up the issue of sexual harassment by obligating members to respect all workers in an effort to prevent all forms of harassment, denigration, ridicule or similar situations.⁷⁷ Beyond the actual policies, there have also been educational efforts directed at women in the union and the spouses of male members, including courses on topics such as labour rights, human rights and domestic violence.⁷⁸ Policies resulting from women's activism culminated with the establishment in the 2003 statutes of a new position of secretary for union relations and gender. The secretary's responsibilities include promoting the representation of women in the union and raising women's awareness of their rights.⁷⁹

Support from the union's leadership has played an important role in helping feminist activists promote women's labour rights in the ATM. Benito Bahena was elected as secretary-general in 1994, the same year that the first woman was elected as a union delegate. In an interview, Bahena noted that one of his goals as secretary-general was to support women in the ATM so that they could achieve a more equitable situation. Commenting on the

⁷⁴ Interview with Rosa María Hernández, Mexico City, 7 Feb. 2003.

⁷⁵ There are currently six female conductors. See ATM, *Contrato colectivo de trabajo* (2003), p. 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ ATM, *Estatutos* (2003), p. 7.

⁷⁸ Interviews with Rosa María Hernández, Mexico City, 7 Feb. 2003 and 17 May 2007.

⁷⁹ ATM, *Estatutos*, pp. 44–5.

Table 3. *Union Democracy, Leadership Support and Feminist Activism*

	Union federation	Leadership support for gender equity	Feminist activism
STUNAM	UNT	Autonomy of SAF; support of leadership not explicit	Historically activist women, primarily through SAF
STRM	UNT	Autonomy of informal women's commission before 2004; shift among leaders from resistance to support of gender equity policies	Primarily through informal women's commission from mid-1990s through 2004
ATM	UNT	Since 1994, explicit support from secretary-general	Prior to 2003, through women elected to union positions; since 2003, through gender secretary
SUTS	Corporatist	Implicit support for the particular SEG	Between 1988–2002, through SEG
DF Union	Corporatist	None	None

Sources: Interviews with Inés González Nicolás, 8 Jan. 2003; Rosa María Hernández, 7 Feb. 2003; María Rodríguez, 24 March 2003; Gloria Olvera, 2 Feb. 2003; Rosario Ortiz, 5 Dec. 2002; and Columba Quintero Martínez, 20 Feb. 2003, all in Mexico City.

advancement of women in the ATM, he noted the historic inclusion of women as conductors and the growth of female representation in the union, and when asked about the then-absence of an official post of women's officer, he noted that it was an issue under consideration.⁸⁰ Hernández herself cited Bahena's leadership as important in helping the feminist activists achieve their goals, saying: 'We have a secretary-general who struggles for [social] justice, so he has really supported the work of women. And with this secretary-general, we've been able to bring women into the structure of the union.'⁸¹

In the case of the ATM, a democratic ethos was critical in allowing women to promote gender equity within the union. Specifically, it allowed women to respond to experiences of sexism by organising candidates in a union election. The secretary-general of the ATM has explicitly supported the inclusion of women in the union structure, which is all the more remarkable given the small number of women in the union. In this sense Bahena represents quite the opposite of a corporatist union leader in that he has used his position to respond to a small and marginalised sector of the rank and file. But the primary catalyst of the advance of women's rights in the ATM has been the activism of women themselves, first through their

⁸⁰ Interview with Benito Bahena Lome, Mexico City, 26 March 2003.

⁸¹ Interview with Rosa María Hernández, Mexico City, 17 May 2007.

electoral efforts and subsequently through their demands for changes to the contracts and statutes.

Efforts at Gender-Oriented Transformation in Corporatist Unions

In the previous three cases, a democratic ethos created a context within which women promoted gender equity rights, but in all three cases feminist activism, with support from union leaders, was the catalyst for the changes. The next two cases, the Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores de Serfin (Serfin Workers' Union, SUTS) and one union within the government of the Distrito Federal (Federal District, DF), underscore the idea that feminist activism is the primary variable explaining the promotion of gender equity in unions. However, these cases also show that when activism is beholden to the approval of corporatist union leaders, the achievements of activists may be vulnerable to reversal. This suggests that democracy is all the more important for unions' transformation into institutions that reflect a culture of citizenship.

SUTS represented workers of the Mexican bank Serfin until 2002, when Serfin merged with the Spanish bank Santander and the union was dissolved. SUTS was affiliated with the Federación Nacional de Sindicatos Bancarios (National Federation of Banking Unions), which has corporatist ties to the Mexican government. Women represented about 50 per cent of Serfin workers, holding the majority of bank teller and customer service positions.⁸² Like STUNAM, SUTS had a post of women's officer from an early date: the post of SAF was first established in 1988 and was renamed *secretaría de equidad de género* (secretary for gender equity, SEG) in 1997. Inés González Nicolás, a self-described feminist unionist, served as SEG for most of the 1988–2002 period, and in 2002 was one of two women on a 19-member NEC.

González Nicolás noted that her activism was a response to the gendered effects of changes in the banking sector in the 1990s, when work demands intensified while salaries and benefits shrank. According to González Nicolás, this context affected women differently than men because as primary caregivers, women's domestic labour often had to take priority over their paid labour in the bank and involvement in the union. She noted that women ran greater risks of getting fired or passed over for promotion if caretaking responsibilities prevented them from taking part in training activities or meeting productivity goals. Additionally, some women were fired when they became pregnant, which was often attributed to the need to adjust the workforce in response to company restructuring. In addition to

⁸² Inés González Nicolás, 'Una mirada a las enfermedades de las trabajadoras bancarias' (unpublished report, PROEQUIDAD/Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2001).

patterns of discrimination rooted in the particular labour climate of the banking sector, González Nicolás said that women faced day care shortages and sexual harassment at work.⁸³

As SEG, González Nicolás was able to secure a number of policy changes that addressed many of these issues. For example, she was able to work with the state-run day care system to make day care more accessible for women. She also worked with the union to create a manifesto condemning sexual harassment.⁸⁴ Most notably, she intervened in cases where women were fired while they were pregnant so that the women received their pre- and post-natal care benefits, noting that there are guaranteed rights for pregnant women and that ‘it is easy to prove that the pregnancy occurred while the woman was active within the institution’.⁸⁵ González Nicolás also conducted surveys about the experiences of union women and advocated for women workers at government forums.⁸⁶ She was adamant, however, that real changes in support of women workers’ rights would not occur without broad support for those rights among the rank and file. This is why she also stressed arranged educational workshops, wrote articles and distributed information within the union ‘so women begin to understand that they have rights like every person in this society, that they have a right to maternity, that they have the right to have their work at the bank recognised, that they have the right, like every worker, to earn an equal salary for equal work’.⁸⁷

Despite the existence of a post of official women’s officer, González Nicolás noted that she only gained decision-making authority over time as she earned the support of the secretary-general and other male colleagues. While support from leadership is important, González Nicolás cautioned that where unions lack a democratic ethos, women promoting greater gender equity run a real risk of getting used by union leadership. She commented that ‘having a democratic perspective allowed me to use my position within the union to make progressive proposals’, but cautioned that this can create a situation where other union leaders point to the activism and say, “‘Look, we’re democratic. She’s making progressive proposals, and if we weren’t democratic we wouldn’t be allowing this.’”⁸⁸ In other words, one person’s activism can be used to prevent further progressive change.

That said, feminist activism in SUTS did yield policy changes that addressed the rights of women workers. Moreover, the personal support González Nicolás earned from male union leaders allowed her to pursue these efforts. Even so, from González Nicolás’ perspective there is a crucial

⁸³ Interview with Inés González Nicolás, Mexico City, 8 Jan. 2003.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Inés González Nicolás, ‘En Banca Serfin, S.A. no se despiden por embarazo’ (report for SUTS, Mexico City, undated).

⁸⁶ González Nicolás, ‘Una mirada’.

⁸⁷ Interview with Inés González Nicolás, Mexico City, 8 Jan. 2003.

⁸⁸ Interview with Inés González Nicolás, Mexico City, 8 May 2007.

difference in the context provided through a democratic ethos. With a single individual serving as the ‘progressive’ voice in a union with no ideological commitment to union democracy or gender equity, there is little need to support concrete changes such as collective contract clauses or union statutes that would address the rights of women workers. And it is worth underscoring that none of the policies González Nicolás secured were written into the statutes or the contract. Her activism thus allowed her to operate on behalf of women in the union, but from her perspective the absence of democracy meant that her work would not transform the fundamental nature or structure of the union.

To emphasise the importance of feminist activism in advancing women’s rights in unions, and of union leaders enabling such activism, it is important to discuss a case in which both variables were lacking. Because of confidentiality requirements this union cannot be identified by name, and a pseudonym is used. The union represents certain workers of Mexico’s Federal District and belongs to the *Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado* (Federation of Public Service Workers’ Unions, FSTSE), a federation that has been associated with the Mexican government since the beginnings of the corporatist state–labour system in Mexico in the 1940s.

María Rodríguez, who held a position on the NEC and participated in NGO-sponsored gender awareness workshops, suggested that for women to be able to participate more fully in the workplace and union, there was a need for policies to help them balance paid work and domestic caregiving responsibilities. More accessible day care centres were especially important. Additionally, she said, women faced the burden of sexual harassment and were not well represented in union leadership positions. A total of 12 out of 49 NEC and other committee positions in the union were held by women, but only three carried any real decision-making power. The SAF was not among these.⁸⁹

Changing the situation, according to Rodríguez, required ‘a serious effort’ among women to organise, and she attended NGO-run workshops on union and gender issues in order to empower herself to organise in support of women’s interests. Nevertheless, her personal efforts did not translate to feminist activism within the union. Moreover, the activities of the SAF mainly revolved around planning family-centred activities (e.g., Mother’s Day events) and health care, not advancing any gender equity rights. Rodríguez felt that the union could have benefited from an executive position explicitly committed to promoting gender equity that would serve as a centre of feminist activism and pressure the union to address women’s

⁸⁹ Interview with NEC member María Rodríguez, Mexico City, 24 March 2003.

difficulties in balancing work and family roles, but there was little demand for such an office.⁹⁰

A major obstacle to any feminist activism in the union, according to Rodriguez, was the secretary-general, who she described as ‘a person who expresses fear and resistance to [the idea] that women could develop their capabilities’. In her view, the secretary-general allowed her to attend gender workshops because she went on her own, but if there was a collective desire on the part of women to attend such workshops, he would create obstacles.⁹¹ Not surprisingly, given the absence of feminist activism combined with a resistant leader, issues of gender equity were not taken up by the union. Indeed, a review of the collective contract showed attention to women workers only as required to by the LFT.

As in the previous cases, the DF union had a member with an interest in feminist activism, to the point where she participated in workshops to improve her own understanding of gender issues. In the other cases, however, the women had relative autonomy and some degree of support from union leadership in order to do the work they felt responded to the needs of women in the union. In the DF union, the secretary-general’s lack of support made it impossible for women to promote the recognition of women workers’ rights. Moreover, the lack of a democratic ethos meant that it would be difficult to hold him accountable for his lack of support.

Conclusion

Bensusán and Cook have argued that the democratisation of labour institutions is a critical part of the overall process of democratic transition in Mexico. Only through a transformation of the authoritarian roots of labour laws and the corporatist state–labour framework will unions gain the ability to negotiate effectively with employers and the state in the interest of the workers they represent. While Bensusán and Cook focus on the institutional and legal reforms necessary for this to happen, this analysis examines the factors that are important in transforming unions internally so that they become spaces reflecting a culture of citizenship, which refers to the recognition, encouragement and enforcement of citizenship rights, including the right to participate in broader public dialogues. More specifically, considering that women are a growing part of the workforce but continue to face various forms of discrimination and unequal access to employment opportunities, this analysis represents an initial effort to examine the factors that lead unions to adopt policies that recognise gender equity beyond what is specified by the LFT.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Table 4. *Gender Equity Policies Beyond Legal Requirements*

	Contract clause	Statute clause	Informal policy
STUNAM	Penalties for sexual assault; equal remuneration; support for University Women's House	Directive to promote women's rights, raise gender awareness; prohibition of sexual harassment	Gender awareness-raising activities
STRM	None	Sexual harassment recognized as discrimination; call for procedures to handle discrimination complaints	Gender awareness-raising activities
ATM	Women can operate light trains Prohibition of pregnancy testing	Employees obligated not to engage in harassment	Gender awareness-raising activities
SUTS (Prior to 2002)	None	None	Gender awareness-raising activities; improved daycare accessibility; condemnation of sexual harassment; secure maternity leave
DF Union	None	None	None

Sources: ATM, *Contrato colectivo*; ATM, *Estatutos*; STRM, *Contrato colectivo*; STRM, *Estatutos*; STUNAM, *Contrato colectivo*; STUNAM, *Estatutos*; Inés González Nicolás, 'De la Secretaría de Acción Femenil a Secretaría de Equidad y Género de la Federación Nacional de Sindicatos Bancarios' (report for SUTS, Mexico City, undated); González Nicolás, 'No se despide'; interviews with Inés González Nicolás, 8 Jan. 2003; Rosa María Hernandez, 7 Feb. 2003; María S., 24 March 2003; and Columba Quintero Martínez, 20 Feb. 2003, all in Mexico City.

In a recent essay, Martha Heredia of the UNT noted that unions are indispensable in the defence of workers' rights as well as in achieving democracy and social justice in Mexico. But taking steps toward democracy and social justice, Heredia argued, requires unions to recognise the socio-cultural factors that have led to discrimination against and inequality of opportunity among women, and to take action to develop gender equity policies. Moreover, it requires that women themselves be active in support of gender equity.⁹² In other words, a progressive and democratic union movement cannot exist without the active presence of women who take action in conjunction with their union leaders to rectify the inequality women face in the workforce.

⁹² Martha Heredia, 'La agenda de género: parte de la modernización sindical', in González Nicolás (ed.), *40 años, 40 respuestas*, pp. 91–5.

Heredia's claim that change cannot happen without women's active participation is largely borne out by this analysis. Using as a point of departure the hypothesis that corporatist unions block women's representation, my examination of five Mexican unions reveals that unions with a democratic ethos provide a positive context within which feminist activists can advocate for the rights of women workers. Although the role of democratic processes and culture differed in each case, all three UNT-affiliated unions showed the development of contract clauses and/or statutes that recognised rights that would facilitate women's participation in the workplace and union. Because contract clauses and union statutes represent a binding recognition of gender equity, they allow women to hold leaders accountable should those policies not be respected. However, the analysis showed that a democratic ethos is insufficient to explain gender-oriented union transformation. Informal gender equity policies were also developed in the case of corporatist SUTS. In SUTS, as well as in the UNT-affiliated unions, gender-oriented policy changes occurred as a result of feminist activism and only when there was at least an implicit level of support from other union leaders. Absent feminist activism and leadership support, gender-oriented transformation did not occur.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Más allá de elecciones libres, la democratización debe incluir una transformación de las instituciones del Estado y de la sociedad civil en espacios que reconozcan los derechos y la participación ciudadana. Este estudio explora la cuestión de cómo los sindicatos mexicanos son transformados en instituciones con compromiso hacia los derechos y participación de las mujeres trabajadoras. Basándose en la evidencia de cinco sindicatos, el artículo muestra que en contraste a sus contrapartes corporativistas, los sindicatos con un 'ethos democrático' proveen un contexto en cual los derechos de equidad de género son reconocidos más fácilmente. Sin embargo, el reconocimiento de la equidad de género depende primeramente del activismo feminismo y del liderazgo sindical. El artículo señala que los esfuerzos de las mujeres por transformar sus sindicatos en espacios que reflejen y aboguen por los derechos de equidad de género son cruciales para el fortalecimiento de la ciudadanía democrática en México.

Spanish keywords: trabajadoras, equidad de género, sindicatos, México, ciudadanía, democratización institucional

Portuguese abstract. A democratização deveria ir além das eleições competitivas, incluindo a transformação das instituições de estado e sociedade civil em espaços que reconhecem os direitos dos cidadãos e que permitam sua participação. Este estudo explora a transformação de sindicatos de trabalhadores mexicanos em

instituições comprometidas com os direitos e a participação das trabalhadoras. Baseado em evidências de cinco sindicatos, é demonstrado que em comparação com seus pares corporativistas, sindicatos com um ‘ethos democrático’ fornecem um contexto dentro do qual os direitos de igualdade entre os gêneros são mais facilmente reconhecidos. No entanto, o reconhecimento da igualdade entre os gêneros depende primeiramente do ativismo feminista e da liderança sindical. O empenho das mulheres para transformar seus sindicatos em espaços que reflitam e defendam o direito de igualdade entre os gêneros é fundamental para o fortalecimento da cidadania democrática no México.

Portuguese keywords: trabalhadoras, igualdade entre os gêneros, sindicatos de trabalhadores, México, cidadania, democratização institucional