Between Comradeship and Sorority

Gendered Frictions and the Making of Solidarity in Mexico City's Urban Popular Movement

ANABEL YAHUITL-GARCIA

ABSTRACT

This article examines how comradeship and sorority operated as competing forms of solidarity within Mexico's urban popular movement by analyzing Union, an organization founded in 1975 in Mexico City, amid Mexico's Dirty War, accelerated migration, and a nascent feminist movement. I argue that comradeship, structured through homosocial leadership networks, operated both as a form of solidarity and as a political grammar that rendered women's organizing around social reproduction – childcare, health, and everyday survival – subordinate, despite materially sustaining the movement. Drawing on ethnographic and historical analysis, I show how the formation of the Group of Women in Struggle challenged this hierarchy by translating reproductive labor into collective political claims, expanding the definition of political work, and prefiguring sorority as a political practice. Yet, these interventions unfolded within masculinist political architectures, that is, historically sedimented gendered norms of leadership, legitimacy, and outspokenness, that constrained their transformative reach. A feminist rereading of the urban popular movement reconceptualizes solidarity as a contested, frictional field made and unmade through gendered struggle, and invites a rethinking of how transformative practices endure, leave traces, and reshape political architectures from within, even when they cannot fully dismantle them.

KEYWORDS

gendered frictions; social reproduction; solidarity; social movements; feminist ethnography

HOW TO CITE

Yahuitl-Garcia, A. (2026): Between Comradeship and Sorority: Gendered Frictions and the Making of Solidarity in Mexico City's Urban Popular Movement. In: Berliner Blätter 93, 103–119. DOI: 10.60789/931239.

ISSN (Online): 2702–2536 | Creative Commons CC BY 4.0

Mexico City underwent profound transformations in the 1970s and 1980s, marked by accelerated rural-to-urban migration (Chávez Galindo 1998), political repression (Aviña/Smith 2024), and the consolidation of popular struggles for housing and basic services (Yee 2024, 10). These transformations were shaped by processes of unequal urban expansion, speculative land markets, and the peripheralization of working-class settlers who occupied irregular land in the city's margins under conditions of infrastructural scarcity, prolonged uncertainty, and recurrent harassment at the hands of developers and police forces (Eckstein 1977; Corona Martínez 1984; Bennett/Bracho 1993, 93). Fragmented and selective state planning led to extensive self-built settlements that soon became key sites of political organization. The urban popular movement (UPM)[1] emerged in the aftermath of the Mexican Student Movement of 1968 as a constellation of neighborhood organizations across Mexico City and other urban centers, fighting for dignified living conditions for working-class populations relegated to the urban periphery (Moctezuma Barragán 1984, 64). At its height in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, it mobilized hundreds of thousands of people and constituted one of the most significant expressions of urban collective popular action in twentieth-century Mexico (Moctezuma Barragán 2012).[2] The UPM articulated an emancipatory political project grounded in class solidarity and relative autonomy from the state (Ramírez Sáiz 1986; Moctezuma Barragán 1999), through which peripheral settlers advanced broader claims for political recognition and urban citizenship (Tamayo 1999). It became one of the most enduring collective struggles in Mexico's contemporary history (Ramírez Sáiz 1992).

Feminist scholars since the 1990s have shown that this history has been selectively narrated, leaving the gendered organization of political action largely unexamined (Guadarrama Olivera 1994; Espinosa Damián 1994; Mogrovejo 1994; Espinosa Damián 2009; Castañeda López et al. 2016), a pattern also documented across Latin American social movement historiography (Stoltz Chinchilla 1993; Stephen 1997; Rodríguez 1998), where women often appear as indispensable yet theoretically peripheral figures. Mixed-gender organizations have frequently incorporated women's participation, while simultaneously subordinating their claims, framing feminist interventions as divisive or secondary to class-based demands (Kergoat 1978; Fillieule/Roux 2009; Federici 2015; Biglia 2020). This tendency has shaped academic and movement-produced accounts of the UPM alike, less an individual oversight than a reflection of the frameworks available at the time. Ramírez Sáiz acknowledged women's presence as an emerging analytical axis without developing it (1992, 9), and Union's own documents recognized women's organizing as meaningful, while leaving it encapsulated, present but not threaded through the movement's understanding of collective struggle (López Guerra/Muciño Coleote 1983).

I have drawn on an ethnographic and historical case study of Union, an urban popular organization founded in 1975 in the borough of Iztapalapa, eastern Mexico City (Moctezuma Barragán 2012) to examine these dynamics.[3] Iztapalapa was then, as it is now, among the city's most densely populated boroughs, and concentrated irregular settlement, infrastructural scarcity, and popular organizing. Union emerged from settlers who had been defrauded by real-estate developers and lived

1 *Movimiento Urbano Popular* in Spanish.
2 »Popular« is not used here as an essential or homogeneous category but as a historically contested political formation shaped by tensions between class, identity, and state projects in Latin America (Acha et al. 2007).
3 This article draws on my unpublished PhD dissertation (Yahuitl-Garcia 2023), based on most of the same fieldwork and archival materials. I am grateful to Renata M. Islas-Rojas for her stylistic editing of the manuscript and to Sidhartha Manzano-Valenzuela for his assistance scanning documents.

under eviction threats, water scarcity, and police repression (Moctezuma Barragán 1999; Gissi 2009). It mobilized a large share of the borough's settler population between 1975 and 1985 and secured property titles, public services, and basic infrastructure. While the UPM provides the historical and political framework, Union is the empirical site where solidarity, legitimacy, and recognition can be analyzed as contested.

Existing research has read Union through land tenure struggles (Moctezuma Barragán 1999; Pike 2005), urban policy (Bolos 1995; Njoh 2009), and organizational scaling (Brugada/Ortega 1987; Gissi 2009), interests that organize the UPM's historiography more broadly and have largely overshadowed the gendered dynamics of popular urban organizing. The two exceptions that attend to gender (Espinosa Damián 2000 [1992]; Cahuich Campos 2004) remain isolated contributions rather than a consolidated field, a gap this article addresses at the intersection of political anthropology, social movement studies, and feminist and gender studies.

The study combines ethnographic fieldwork (2019–2022),[4] including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with longtime members, younger generations with familial ties to the organization, and local cultural workers, with archival research drawing on pamphlets, the National Newspaper Archive's press holdings (1968–2021),[5] and prior historiographic accounts of Union. It is grounded in a feminist ethnographic sensibility attuned to a feminist standpoint, the politics of memory, and the affective dimensions of social movements (Harding 1991; Jelin 2002). This proved particularly consequential when working with the silences, partial archives, and contested organizational memories that characterize Union's history.

Women constituted the majority of Union's grassroots base, while leadership remained overwhelmingly male. Beneath this division of labor lies a conflation. The UPM's political culture coded class struggle as masculine and comradeship operated as a gendered boundary and form of solidarity that positioned feminist claims as divisive intrusions into an ostensibly universal project (Espinosa Damián 2009). This configuration was not a contradiction between the organization's emancipatory ideology and its internal practice[6] but the operation of gendered frameworks of solidarity that structured recognition itself: participation was broad, yet, authority, legitimacy, and outspokenness[7] were hierarchically distributed along gendered lines.
Comradeship asked for sacrifice, confrontation, and loyalty to the collective. It drew those demands from languages of struggle forged in Cold War politics and class organizing, and from popular resistance to state repression, where solidarity and camaraderie circulated as part of the UPM's own political vocabulary. Homosocial leadership and visible militancy became the markers of political legitimacy.

4 Fieldwork was conducted in 2019 and early 2020; the COVID-19 pandemic then forced a partial reorientation toward digital ethnography and telephone interviews, and physical archives remained closed for extended periods. Two later in-person visits, in late 2021 and 2022, fell outside the scope of the original doctoral project.
5 *Hemeroteca Nacional de México* in Spanish.
6 I use ›practice‹ rather than ›praxis‹ to signal the concrete organization of political life, labor, and recognition in the UPM rather than its theoretical elaboration. Ideology refers to the UPM's explicit discourse of class struggle, autonomy from the state, and collective dignity.
7 Outspokenness does not name the capacity for speech here but its public recognition and institutional legitimation. The analysis attends to the conditions under which certain forms of public expression were rewarded and others were not, rather than implying that women lacked a voice. It draws on feminist critiques of »voicelessness« as a framework that risks reproducing the erasure it seeks to address (Spivak 1988; Mahmood 2005).

Sorority, by contrast, is used as an analytical concept for the gender-marked solidarities that emerged through women's interventions around care and the everyday labor of holding collective life together.[8] Though not part of the movement's emic vocabulary at the time, it allows for a conceptualization of solidarities structured by gendered expectations.[9] Neither framework was the other's opposite. History produced them as distinct and often competing modes of political relation, and women's organizing repeatedly demonstrated that opposition was historically contingent, even as gendered hierarchies and masculinist forms of authority worked to reinforce it (Dunezat 2017).

Solidarity, in this reading, is not a stable moral ideal but a political practice shaped by frictions inside popular organizing. Theorized as dependent on processes of identification – on shared experience, oppression, or goals – it risks privileging what groups hold in common at the expense of differences that may be equally or more politically consequential (Sangiovanni/Viehoff 2023). Anna L. Tsing calls the places where different political logics meet and come out of the encounter altered »zones of awkward engagement« (2005, xi). I follow her in approaching solidarity-making as a patchwork of uneven encounters rather than a seamless narrative of collective unity. Friction surfaced in Union where male-coded comradeship met women's practices of collective sustenance, becoming legible in gendered divisions of militant labor and differentiated forms of political legibility (Falquet 2002).[10] It exposed what comradeship rested on and opened political horizons through women's collective practices.

Union's history speaks to a broader challenge facing feminist politics in mixed-gender popular organizations: how to sustain transformative practices in institutional frameworks that were not built to accommodate them. Placing gendered frictions at the center of the analysis, thus, reframes the UPM's history as a contested terrain of solidarity-making, beyond celebratory or dismissive accounts. This argument is structured through four analytical moments: the masculinist architecture that structured Union's founding decade; the frictions generated by women's recognition of reproductive labor as political; the emergence of sorority as a prefigurative practice; and the erosion and afterlives of feminist transformation in popular organizing.

The Masculinist Architecture of Political Legitimacy in Union

Union's emergence and early consolidation must be understood not only as a struggle for land, services, and legal recognition, but also as the production of a political imaginary through which legitimacy, authority, and collective identity were defined. Union positioned itself within the broader UPM from 1975 onward and

8 No explicit trans, nonconforming, or queer political identifications appear in Union's organizational discourse for the period under study.

9 In Spanish, *sororidad* is a concept coined by feminist anthropologist Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos to name a specific form of solidarity among women: an alliance that, despite differences and antagonisms, seeks to dismantle misogyny and patriarchal power through collective commitment (2012, 34).

10 Falquet's analysis of the Salvadoran revolutionary process shows how the sexual division of labor structured militant organizations: tasks lost value precisely because women performed them, and gained recognition when reframed as male or technical, while men monopolized visible, prestigious roles. This finds a close parallel in Union's organizing.

took up the repertoires common to popular struggles of the period. These were deeply gendered. Contentious engagement with external political opponents – developers, state authorities, police forces, and intermediary brokers – and internal disciplinary practices that regulated dissent installed sacrifice and loyalty as the primary markers of political commitment, while leadership stayed lodged in homosocial networks: the male-dominated circuits of trust, recognition, and political apprenticeship through which authority circulated and was renewed. This architecture did not merely accompany Union's achievements; it set the boundaries of comradeship inside which those achievements were possible.

The only published historical account of Union, written by Pedro Moctezuma Barragán (2012), opens with a scene that has since acquired near-mythical status within the organization. A social scientist and longtime movement participant, Moctezuma Barragán was among those who supported Union's early organizing efforts before going on to cofound and direct the National Coordinating Body of the UPM (NCBUPM)[11] between 1980 and 1992, a positionality that shaped both his analytical emphasis and narrative choices. Reading this account as a situated production of political memory rather than neutral documentation attends to what feminist standpoint approaches identify as the structuring effects of power relations on what gets recorded, remembered, and recognized as politically significant (Rolin 2009).

He narrates the moment in which Cantia, a settler leader, forcibly disarms Vega – an intermediary imposed by real-estate developers – and compels him to surrender the documents that named him the borough's representative: »Defiant, Cantia, clutched the pistol that had just been ripped from Vega's hands and stared at him with stony eyes. Kneeling under the peppercorn tree, Vega tremblingly handed over the papers that accredited him as the borough's representative« (Moctezuma Barragán 2012, 9).[12] Moctezuma Barragán calls this a »liberating act« (ibid., 15), the moment settlers overcame fear and recognized their collective power. Yet, the scene simultaneously inaugurates a political grammar grounded in violence, moral purification, and masculine heroism, and fixes, from the outset, an association between legitimate leadership and the willingness to assume bodily risk as the implicit currency of political worth.

Regimes of land ownership and urban legality had long assigned the roles this narrative rearranges. State institutions, developers, and property discourse constructed peripheral settlers as irregular or illegitimate occupants, while formal ownership and intermediary authority stood for order. Recasting settlers as morally legitimate political subjects against a corrupt broker reworks these longer histories of marginalization, repositioning who is recognized as a rightful political actor and who is marked as expendable or suspect. State institutions and the official press fought on the same terrain. *El Nacional*, a newspaper funded by the Ministry of the Interior, portrayed the NCBUPM as a »paramilitary body« (NNA 1985, 17)[13] operating outside the law. Union drew the same boundary inward, separating the legitimate settler from the traitor in its own ranks, a frontier that would continue to shape negotiations over land, authority, and recognition in the city's urban struggles for decades.

11 *Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular* in Spanish.
12 All translations from Spanish and French are my own, assisted by DeepL and Google Translate.
13 *El Nacional* was founded by the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario*, PNR), predecessor of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and financially sustained by the Ministry of the Interior throughout this period, making it a key vehicle for official narratives about popular organizing.

Within this founding narrative, Vega is swiftly cast as a traitor: corrupt, cowardly, aligned with developers, and, by extension, with the Institutional Revolutionary Party,[14] Mexico's ruling party for most of the twentieth century (1929–2000). Informational pamphlets circulating in Iztapalapa during the late 1970s describe him as someone who »drank a lot,« »took bribes,« and »was selling us out« (Late Iztapalapa n.d., 14). What he embodied was *charrismo*, the corporatist practice by which the ruling party co-opted intermediary leaders with bribes and patronage to contain grassroots organizing from within (Joseph/Buchenau 2013). Expelling him was a sacrifice, and it gave Union its moral clarity and internal cohesion. Against him stood Cantia, decisive and fearless, willing to confront danger. The opposition between hero and traitor crystallized an implicit political lesson: loyalty and courage secured legitimacy; treason warranted removal. Cantia himself never assumed leadership. Bodily risk consecrated political worth but it did not convert into formal authority.

This logic outlasted the founding moment. Successive male leaders and directive boards reiterated it through Union's first decade, a dynamic legible across three archetypical figures: the traitor (Vega), the failed administrator (Montiel), and the redeemer (Emilio). Vega was the external enemy absorbed into founding mythology. Montiel led without moral credibility. He assumed the presidency shortly after Union's founding, and almost immediately settlers sensed he would »turn« (interview with Salvador, March 2020). He did: he informed the police during the occupation of the plot intended for the settlement's first school, then demanded payment for administrative assistance, and sold lots without authorization.[15] Settlers recognized the practice as the same *charrismo* they had fought to expel. He remained in power for four years (1975–1979), partially because the ongoing repression and governmental pressure kept reinforcing the case for centralized leadership. He eventually departed to the United States and appointed his successors by *dedazo*, the practice of handpicking one's successor without consultation. All of them were male (Moctezuma Barragán 2012, 48).

Emilio's arrival in 1979 expanded the movement's political horizon and left untouched the gendered terms on which legitimacy and authority were distributed. A university professor newly settled in the borough, he expressed reluctance to lead, seeking to learn from residents before accepting the presidency at the end of that year (Moctezuma Barragán 2012, 49). Union underwent a genuine organizational transformation: the directive board became a council, forms of participation diversified, and the movement's scope broadened past land struggles into cultural work and political education (López Guerra/Muciño Coleote 1983). »He opened our eyes,« Luz recalled (interview with Luz, September 2020); »he even went to jail because of us,« Salvador added (interview with Salvador, March 2020). Two intertwined registers braid together there: the new political lens and the personal risk, with imprisonment serving once again as the measure of a man's worth. Meanwhile it was Gloria, a teacher and Emilio's wife, who spearheaded women's committees from the early 1980s onward (Flores Hernández 1998, 52).

Political authority and heroic endurance were welded together in these narratives, and the weld held. Socialist movements experimented briefly with counter-masculinities that embraced solidarity over nationalism and peace over confrontation, but

14 *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* in Spanish.

15 Special Online Event. »46 aniversario de la UCSMT.« Facebook Live, November 20, 2020. The recording is no longer accessible online; a transcription is in the author's possession.

emancipatory movements found themselves dependent on stereotypically masculine traits – strength, courage, and the will to victory – precisely because these were the terms through which political legitimacy was legible (Mosse 1996, 107–111, 131). Leadership in Union was consistently associated with masculine-coded practices, while political authority circulated through homosocial networks that privileged men's experiences and modes of action.[16] The question was never how much a class-based struggle could crack masculinity open, but how far it depended on it. This was not a feature unique to Union but a broader characteristic of the UPM's political culture, in which the self-sacrificing male militant functioned as the implicit standard against which political engagement was measured.

Union organized under surveillance. The so-called »Dirty War« (1965–1990) was a long campaign of state counterinsurgency: leftist activists, students, guerilla groups, and popular organizers were subjected to forced disappearances, imprisonment, and political repression (Aviña/Smith 2024). Union belonged to national coordinating bodies, such as the NCBUPM, which the state monitored directly, and kept ties to figures associated with radical leftist struggles (MEH 2024). These conditions further consolidated the premium placed on confrontational, risk-assuming forms of political action.

A political imaginary of enemies and traitors acquired special force under those conditions. Union's leadership narratives held the organization together by naming an enemy – developers and brokers aligned with the ruling party – and condemning internal treason as a moral failure, a structure María Esperanza Casullo identifies in populist mythologies more broadly (2019, 65–67). Comradeship hardened as a solidarity of vigilance, discipline, and confrontation. It also closed off internal critique, because within it, dissent, feminist dissent included, occupied the same position as betrayal.

The architecture governed two things at once: who could lead, and what counted as political work. Exalting sacrifice and confrontation privileged high-risk, visible action, and consigned labor of care and social reproduction to a subordinate place in the framework of recognition. Women were central to Union's everyday functioning and illegible within a framework that equated politics with heroic endurance. Those are the conditions under which the frictions of the following decade were generated.

Reproductive Labor and the Limits of Comradeship

Women made up roughly eighty percent of the UPM's grassroots base by the early 1980s (Massolo 1995, 79) and occupied what Union's own documents called a »principal and determinant place« in the organization's consolidation (López Guerra/Muciño Coleote 1983, 6). They carried the material and organizational weight of collective life, while confronting daily scarcity, including inadequate schools and health centers, water, transport, the chronic crisis of the cost of living, frequently as the sole earners in their households (ibid.). Leadership and negotiation with the state stayed in men's hands; not for want of commitment or capacity, both of which the base held in surplus, but because comradeship filtered what counted as political work and who was qualified to perform it.

16 On homosociability as a key but underexplored mechanism in the construction and transmission of masculine political authority in Mexico, see Irwin (2003).

The Group of Women in Struggle (GWS) formed inside Union in 1982 out of the organization's own grassroots structure (Espinosa Damián 2000 [1992], 45). Its origins were cumulative: a Housewives' Committee had existed since 1978 (ibid., 44), and feminist activists had been visiting the settlement since the late 1970s with workshops on nutrition and sexuality (Moctezuma Barragán 2012, 43). Members kept doing everything they had been doing – assemblies, mobilizations, community initiatives, always beside their comrades – and began meeting on their own as well. That double position is what exposed the contradictions of comradeship; not by anyone denouncing them, but by women occupying two rooms at once and noticing what the second room made visible about the first.

The scholarship on the UPM placed women as »protagonists« of mobilization (Massolo 1983), a word generous about how indispensable they were and silent about what they got for it. The women of Union declined the compliment. »Everyone had to participate equally,« Luz said (interview with Luz, September 2020). That was an aspiration, not a description. Nobody's participation converted into authority. The labor essential to collective survival went on being treated as though it cost nothing.

Union's leaders sorted political action into two boxes, and the words they used were »strategic« and »non-strategic« (López Guerra/Muciño Coleote 1983, 9; Ramírez Sáiz 1986). Confrontation with the state, negotiation over land tenure, expansion through alliances, activities overwhelmingly performed by men and coded as political by definition, were strategic. Food provision, health, and domestic support, which belonged to necessity rather than to struggle, were non-strategic. Community kitchens, dairy shops, and food-security projects were counted as logistics. The conditions of politics, never politics.

One episode makes the hierarchy legible. As Union and allied organizations debated mobilization priorities, women demanded a local dairy shop to address everyday nutritional needs. Moctezuma Barragán considered the demand secondary next to the struggle over housing and territorial expansion: »I thought it was more important to advance this fight for Cabeza de Juárez – a landmark,« he told me, noting that focusing on a dairy shop risked »wearing ourselves out.« The women declined the framing: »No way, they said, let's go and demand our own thing« (interview with Moctezuma Barragán, April 2020). They pushed the initiative forward and secured the dairy shop. Their insistence revealed friction between two political logics: one oriented toward visible confrontation, the other toward sustaining the social reproduction of daily life. What had been dismissed as »non-strategic« proved to be materially and politically transformative.

Comradeship's universalizing discourse met women's lived experience of exhaustion and care work, and the encounter exposed its dependence on the systematic devaluation of the reproductive labor that sustained it. In other words, comradeship operated through an implicit denial of interdependence. What it consolidated was a figure: the militant who owes nobody anything, sustained, in fact, by kitchens, clinics, and unpaid hours his own political compass could not see.

Women in Union, and across the UPM, made the case in the language available to them. They called their work a »struggle against the high cost of living« and a fight for »family survival« (López Guerra/Muciño Coleote 1983, 20). They called their initiatives popular, never feminist. The choice was defensive and it was intelligent in a political culture that read division as betrayal; the word feminist cost more than

it bought. As a former member reflected, when women later began to engage directly with authorities, they struggled precisely because »the ones who negotiated were always men« (Sánchez Olvera 2002, 174). Absence from strategic spaces reproduces the hierarchy that produced it. Under that framing, the sexual division of labor could not itself be put on the table as a political problem. Comradeship had no grammar for what these women were doing, and what a movement cannot name, it cannot reward.

The kitchens, meanwhile, out-organized the marches. Food security initiatives pulled in hundreds of women prepared to spend hours of collective labor in exchange for basic resources (interview with Irais, March 2020). Far from diverting energy from the struggle, the projects expanded Union's social base and demonstrated that the reproduction of social life was a central terrain of political action. Massolo, writing from a Marxist-feminist perspective, observed that the UPM responded to »needs linked to the reproduction of labor power« (1983, 154). Women's practice went further and insisted that the quality of everyday life was itself political. The claim did not reject class struggle; it relocated its ground.

Sorority as Prefigurative Politics

Separation was never the goal, and neither was abandoning class struggle. The women of the GWS understood what they were doing as the emancipatory project extended and complicated at once, and the language they built it in survives in workshop materials that UPM members kept. Working from Marxist vocabularies, they named domestic labor as one of the mechanisms by which capitalism reproduces domination: »by doing domestic labor we comply with the role that the capitalist system has assigned to us as reproducers of domination and bourgeois exploitation,«[17] one document states. The demand that follows is addressed not to capital but to their own organization: »as the majority of UPM leaders are men, in women's groups we learn through struggle and consciousness to lead as well […] through women's groups we move from being only the support base of the movement to being its leadership« (Flores Hernández 1998, 55). Feminism was not adopted as an external critique. It was produced where class struggle and the experience of gendered labor collided.

Sorority was a political practice oriented toward collective learning, mutual support, and the defense of women's autonomy. The GWS took up what men in Union had filed as apolitical – food security, sexuality, and domestic violence – and turned tortilla coupons and health workshops into demands tied to *vida digna*, a horizon wider than material need, taking in the texture of daily life, care, and the right to self-determination. The services had been secured by then. »There was still a lot to do to live well,« Irais recalled (interview with Irais, March 2020). Pursuing it cost the women their week: »we don't get to rest a single day of the week. There's the health center, the workshop, the assembly, the coordination meeting, the delegation. We are at a breaking point« (Flores Hernández 1998, 172). Five obligations, one week, no rest.

17 Document displayed at »El derecho a la ciudad: Los Movimientos Urbano Populares,« Galería Ágora, Mexico City, February 2021. Photograph in the author's possession.

Reordering the organization's priorities meant touching the distribution of power inside the house. The claim raised tensions; it did not settle them. Men answered with hostility and, often enough, with force. Irais described husbands who threatened their wives with divorce, locked them out of their homes after a GWS meeting, and beat them for attending women-only spaces (interview with Irais, March 2020). »What was that all about? Violence, right?,« she asked. For Irais, the group existed because women needed protection and autonomy against reprisal (ibid.). Solidarity was contested in the organization, public space, and domestic life.
The GWS was prefigurative in Boggs' sense: »the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal« (1977, 100). Collective kitchens became spaces of shared decision-making; workshops functioned as sites of political knowledge production; mutual aid networks modeled forms of interdependence that contrasted sharply with the ethos of sacrifice and individual endurance that structured comradeship. These practices worked against the implicit separation between public and private spheres that underpinned comradeship as the dominant framework, insisting that the personal was not merely political in the abstract but concretely so in the organization of everyday life.

The productivity of friction was, however, accompanied by instability. The GWS's pamphlets, fanzines, and workshop materials – often handwritten and photocopied – built shared analysis, coordinated participation, and held together the everyday infrastructures through which collective action became possible. The materials that made the work possible are the same ones that made it invisible. Pedagogy and reproduction fall outside the ways recognition and resources are handed out. Union won its material gains with mass demonstrations; women's organizing was the condition that made demonstrations possible, and it entered neither the leadership's narratives nor the archive. Indispensable in practice, illegible in the record. It carried mobilization for years without once being written down as the work behind the »strategic« victories.
Friction gives the measure of both things at once: how far feminist intervention reached, and how little of it could be made to hold. The GWS did not bring down Union's gendered foundations. It cracked them, and through those cracks, built political imaginaries that went on shaping the movement without ever hardening into institutional form, carried instead in bodies, memories, and repertoires.

Erosion and Afterlives of Feminist Transformation

The transformations generated by the GWS did not consolidate. Feminist change in Union proved difficult to stabilize, harder to institutionalize, and nearly impossible to hand on across organizational transitions. Not because the movement's emancipatory project had no room for it, but because of the architecture standing in its way.
The first obstacle was homosocial leadership, and women's organizing worked around it without ever reaching it. Practice changed; formal authority did not. Men kept the leadership positions, and strategic decisions were framed in the idiom of confrontation, sacrifice, and visibility, even as, in Espinosa Damián's phrase, »the

backbone were mostly women« (2000 [1992], 39). Sorority gathered its force in practice and secured no institutional ground. As women's autonomy grew, so did male resistance: when women no longer needed male comrades to draft documents, make decisions, or open a trench without asking for permission, »men's interests were affected« (Sánchez Olvera 2002, 177).

The second obstacle wore the face of success. Community kitchens were progressively incorporated into Union's ordinary routines as mechanisms to sustain participation and mobilize the neighborhood. While they represented a concrete form of influence, they also meant that practices originating in women's organizing were absorbed into the movement without the political analysis that had produced them. These practices traveled beyond Union: Moctezuma Barragán grants that the GWS »grew and nucleated many other initiatives,« becoming »an inspiration for the Asamblea de Barrios – *Assembly of Neighborhoods* – and other movements outside Union« (interview with Moctezuma Barragán, April 2020). Even more concretely, tactics the women used were taken up elsewhere as recognized forms of struggle, among them the *chiles* carried to night guards to smoke officials out of occupied buildings (Moctezuma Barragán 2012, 227–228).

Then the ground moved. Housing, services, and property titles had largely been won by the late 1980s, and with them went the conditions that had held the movement together. Union turned toward party politics, recasting its demands as electoral claims and formal representation, and feminist initiatives built on informal collective practice were sidelined or reabsorbed into institutional agendas. Haber calls the wider shift the »migration of the UPM to party politics« (2009, 213), though the term risks flattening the tensions that continued to structure that relationship: parties incorporated the discourses and political learning of popular movements while operating from a position of structural advantage. With the emergence of the Party of Democratic Revolution,[18] Mexico's main left-opposition party founded in 1989, and the absence of generational leadership transitions in the UPM, popular organizing fragmented into smaller cells across the country as leaders integrated into party politics (Bolos 1995; Haber 2009).

The GWS did not dissolve through a single formal rupture but a gradual process of organizational exhaustion, *desgaste*, linked to the triple workload of women, the movement's electoral turn, and the broader decline of the UPM. Women whose politicization had been rooted in shared material conditions – the recognition, as Irais put it, that »not only some of us were in need, we all were« – found that reorientation narrowed the horizon within which that recognition had been collectively meaningful (interview with Irais, March 2020). Women whose lives were not organized around a strict sexual division of labor, as well as widows, divorced women, and single mothers, sustained higher levels of participation through the transition (Flores Hernández 1998), but for most, the compounding domestic, paid, and political labor made sustained engagement structurally impossible. The GWS's dissolution was produced by the very conditions it had sought to transform. Clara Brugada, who rose to prominence through the GWS and the Women's Regional Network of the NCBUPM[19] before becoming Mayor of Mexico City in 2024, embodies the coexistence and rearticulation this produced: the durable political formation that feminist organizing built, and the institutional frameworks that absorbed it.

18 *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* in Spanish.
19 *Regional de Mujeres de la CONAMUP* in Spanish.

The afterlives of the GWS illustrate this dynamic. The materials of women's work survived with community members and in occasional recent exhibitions, resurfacing decades after their initial circulation. Feminist labor persisted in oral history and in practice, left little trace in official records, and lost its political specificity as women's initiatives were folded into broader organizational narratives. Set against that, what the women changed was not subtle. They gained outspokenness, learned to negotiate directly with authorities, and moved from support base to leadership in the initiatives they had built. The language of *vida digna* worked its way into how Union stated its demands. The traces are partial and unevenly preserved; I read them as the record of political possibilities the organization's dominant memory could not process. Decades later, Luz – 82 years old at the time of our interview – insisted: »I am still in struggle, I want to keep fighting. I have the courage to keep working for my neighborhood, for Iztapalapa, for Mexico City« (interview with Luz, September 2020).
What lasted did so obliquely as embodied practices, organizational repertoires, and collective memories. It shaped what later generations took political action to be, and what they believed a movement could become. Resisting narratives of both linear progress and inevitable co-optation, the history of Union and the GWS reveals solidarity as a field of ongoing negotiation transformed through the politicization of reproductive labor and everyday life, constrained by the masculinist architecture it could fracture but not dismantle.

Rethinking Solidarity

Solidarity in Union was never a norm to be met or a state to be reached. It was made and unmade in a field of unequal power that decided who was legitimate, who had authority, and what anyone's work was worth. The friction between comradeship and sorority is where that decision becomes visible. Gendered friction did not interrupt the collective struggle. It gave the struggle its shape. In fact, it accounts for the feminist transformation that remained unfinished, and feminist practice that went on producing effects throughout its history, with no institutional recognition and under conditions that favored none of it. Feminist practice never stood outside the UPM, and it never overturned it; it worked from inside, on ground comradeship had already fenced.

I am not proposing Union and the GWS as a template for feminist success in mixed-gender social movements. What the case shows is how solidarity is enacted unevenly, and at a cost charged to the people – mostly women – holding it up. *Vida digna* was never only a demand made of the state. It was a demand made of the movement, one that comradeship could not take in and sorority kept alive. The lesson for movements now working across intersecting inequalities is not that the struggle must be shared. It is that legitimacy has gendered foundations that have to be confronted, that care and social reproduction belong at the center of collective life, and that feminist practice endures only where the organizational conditions let it endure. Friction between comradeship and sorority is not what stands in the way of emancipation. It is the ground on which emancipation is built.

ANABEL YAHUITL-GARCIA is a feminist anthropologist and Research Professor at the Center for Anthropological Studies at El Colegio de Michoacán, Mexico. Her work examines gender, labor, and violence in feminized urban occupations, particularly domestic work, as well as subjectivity and regimes of sexuality in contexts of prostitution and criminalization. Further areas of study include feminist economics and care work, feminist contestations within Mexico's urban popular movements, and feminicidal violence. She is a member of Yale University's Latin American Network for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acha, Omar et al. (2007): Reflexiones sobre el poder popular. Buenos Aires: Editorial El Colectivo.

Aviña, Alex/Benjamin T. Smith (2024): Mexico's Dirty War: A Reassessment. In: Bulletin of Latin American Research 43/3, 211-224. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13549.

Bennett, Vivienne/Julio Bracho (1993): Orígenes del Movimiento Urbano Popular Mexicano: pensamiento político y organizaciones políticas clandestinas, 1960-1980. In: Revista Mexicana de Sociología 55/3, 89-102. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3540923.

Biglia, Barbara (2020): Feminismo(s): hibridaciones frente a diferencialismos. In: Oñati Socio-legal Series 19/1S, 135S-159S. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl/0000-0000-0000-1115.

Boggs, Carl (1977): Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control. In: Radical America 11/6, 99-122.

Bolos, Silvia (ed.) (1995): Actores sociales y demandas urbanas. Mexico: Plaza y Valdés.

Brugada, Clara/Zenaida Ortega (1987): Regional de Mujeres del Valle de México de la Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular (CONAMUP). In: Alejandra Massolo/Martha Schteingart (eds): In Participación social, reconstrucción y mujer. El sismo de 1985. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 97-102.

Cahuich Campos, Martha Beatriz (2004): Formas no políticas de hacer política. In: Historia, antropología y fuentes orales 31, 143-175. DOI: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27753163.

Castañeda López, Eric Ismael et al. (2016): La construcción de otras mujeres y otros espacios: el caso de San Miguel Teotongo. In: Bitácora arquitectura 33, 32-39. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22201/FA.14058901P.2016.33.57257.

Casullo, María Esperanza (2019): Líder, héroe y villano. Los protagonistas del mito populista. In: Nueva sociedad. Democracia y política en América Latina 282, 57-68.

Chávez Galindo, Ana María (1998): La nueva dinámica de la migración interna en México, 1970-1990. Cuernavaca: UNAM.

Corona Martínez, Maria del Rocio (1984): El papel de los fraccionadores »clandestinos« en el proceso de urbanización de la Ciudad de México. El caso de San Miguel Teotongo (1972-1983). UNAM, Mexico (unpublished dissertation).

Document of unknown provenance displayed at »El derecho a la ciudad: Los Movimientos Urbano Populares,« Galería Ágora, Mexico City, 2021.

Dunezat, Xavier (2017): Dominación masculina y feminismo en los movimientos sociales. In: Política y Sociedad 54/2, 399-419. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5209/POSO.52740.

Eckstein, Susan Eva (1977): The Poverty of Revolution. The State and the Urban Poor in Mexico. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Espinosa Damián, Gisela (1994): Mujeres del Movimiento Urbano Popular: 1983-1985. In: Alejandra Massolo (ed.): In Mujeres y ciudades: Participación social, vivienda y vida cotidiana. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 39-58.

Espinosa Damián, Gisela 2000 [1992]: Las mujeres de San Miguel Teotongo a la hora de la lucha ciudadana. In: Dalia Barrera Bassols (ed.): In Mujeres, ciudadanía y poder. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 29-94. First published in: Comunicación 1992, 224.

Espinosa Damián, Gisela (2009): Cuatro vertientes del feminismo en México. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.

Eventos y Archivo de la UCSMT (2020): Evento especial. 46 aniversario de la UCSMT. Facebook Live, November 20, 2020.

Falquet, Jules-France (2002): Division sexuelle du travail révolutionnaire: réflexions à partir de l'expérience salvadorienne (1970-1994). In: Cahiers des Amériques latines 40, 109-128. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/cal.6912.

Federici, Silvia (2015): Sobre el trabajo de cuidado de los mayores y los límites del marxismo. In: Nueva Sociedad 256, 45-62.

Fillieule, Olivier/Patricia Roux (2009): Le sexe du militantisme. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.

Flores Hernández, Eugenia (1998): Las mujeres de los grupos de salud de las organizaciones urbanas populares. ENAH, Mexico (unpublished dissertation).

Gissi B., Nicolás (2009): Redes sociales y construcción de la colonia en Ciudad de México. El caso del enclave étnico chocholteco en San Miguel Teotongo. In: Cuicuilco 45, 211-228.

Guadarrama Olivera, María Eugenia (1994): Mujeres del Movimiento Urbano Popular. Actuaciones y discurso de género. In: Alejandra Massolo (ed.): In Los medios y los modos. Participación política y acción colectiva de las mujeres. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 187-212.

Haber, Paul Lawrence (2009): La migración del Movimiento Urbano Popular a la política de partido en el México contemporáneo. In: Revista Mexicana de Sociología 71/2, 213-45.

Harding, Sandra (1991): Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Irwin, Robert McKee (2003): Mexican Masculinities. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jelin, Elizabeth (2002): Los trabajos de la memoria. Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores.

Joseph, Gilbert M./Jürgen Buchenau (2013): Mexico's Once and Future Revolution. Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kergoat, Danièle (1978): Ouvriers = ouvrières. Propositions pour une articulation théorique de deux variables: sexe et classe sociale. In: Critiques de l'économie politique 5, 65-97.

Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela (2012): El feminismo en mi vida. Hitos, claves y topías. Mexico: Instituto de las Mujeres del Distrito Federal.

Late Iztapalapa (n.d.). [Brochure]

López Guerra, Elias/Eduardo Muciño Coleote (1983): San Miguel Teotongo. Una experiencia en la construcción de organizaciones autónomas de masas. [Brochure]

Mahmood, Saba (2005): Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Massolo, Alejandra (1983): Las mujeres en los movimientos sociales urbanos de la Ciudad de México. In: Iztapalapa Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades 9, 152-172.

Massolo, Alejandra (1995): Testimonio autobiográfico. Un camino de conocimiento de las mujeres y los movimientos urbanos en México. In: Revista de Estudios de Género. La Ventana 2, 62-85.

MEH: Mecanismo para la Verdad y el Esclarecimiento Histórico (2024): Fue el Estado (1965-1990). Volumen 2. Parte 3. Violaciones graves a derechos humanos en contra de disidencias político-partidistas y urbano-populares. Mexico.

Moctezuma Barragán, Pedro (1984): El movimiento urbano popular mexicano. In: Nueva Antropología 6/24, 62-87.

Moctezuma Barragán, Pedro (1999): Despertares. Comunidad y organización urbano popular en México 1970-1991. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana.

Moctezuma Barragán, Pedro (2012): La chispa. Orígenes del Movimiento urbano-popular en el Valle de México. Mexico: Para Leer en Libertad AC.

Mogrovejo, Norma (1994): Movimiento urbano y feminismo popular en la ciudad de México. In: Alejandra Massolo (ed.): In Mujeres y ciudades: Participación social, vivienda y vida cotidiana. Mexico: El Colegio de México, 59-96.

Mosse, George L. (1996): The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity. New York: Oxford University Press.

Njoh, Ambe (2009): Community-based and Non-governmental Organizations in Urban Development in Mexico City: The Case of San Miguel Teotongo. Global Report on Human Settlements (unpublished case study).

Pike, Jill (2005): Water by Truck in Mexico City. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (unpublished dissertation).

Ramírez Sáiz, Juan Manuel (1986): El movimiento urbano popular en México. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores.

Ramírez Sáiz, Juan Manuel (1992): Entre el cambio social y el político: Investigación urbana y movimiento urbano popular en México durante los ochenta. In: Sociológica 18, 1-15.

Rodríguez, Victoria E. (1998): Women's Participation in Mexican Political Life. Boulder: Westview Press.

Rolin, Kristina (2009): Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations. In: Hypatia 24/4, 218-226. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2009.01070.x.

Sánchez Olvera, Alma Rosa (2002): El feminismo mexicano ante el Movimiento Urbano Popular. Dos expresiones de lucha de género (1970-1985). Mexico: Plaza y Valdes.

Sangiovanni, Andrea/Juri Viehoff (2023): Solidarity in Social and Political Philosophy. In: Edward N. Zalta/ Uri Nodelman (eds): The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/solidarity/.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988): Can the Subaltern Speak? In: Cary Nelson/ Lawrence Grossberg (eds): Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 271-313.

Stephen, Lynn (1997): Women and Social Movements in Latin America. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Stoltz Chinchilla, Norma (1993): Gender and National Politics: Issues and Trends in Women's Participation in Latin American Movements. In: Edna Acosta-Belén/ Christine E. Bose (eds): Researching Women in Latin America and The Caribbean. New York: Routledge, 37-54.

Tamayo, Sergio (1999): Del movimiento urbano popular al movimiento ciudadano. In: Estudios Sociológicos 17/50, 499-518. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24201/es.1999v17n50.688.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2005): Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Yahuitl-Garcia, Anabel (2023): »Agitar, organizar, elevar«: Una historia de lo político en clave feminista de la lucha urbano-popular en San Miguel Teotongo, Iztapalapa. ICSyH-BUAP, Mexico (unpublished dissertation).

Yee, David (2024): Informal Metropolis. Life on the Edge of Mexico City, 1940-1976. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

ARCHIVE

NNA: National Newspaper Archive (1982): Fondo Hemerográfico, El Nacional, Jaime Pineda Fragroso, »Aceleran las obras colaterales a la Central de Abastos; siembran árboles; Meyehualco será un gran parque público,« August 12, p. 9.

NNA: National Newspaper Archive (1985): Fondo Hemerográfico, El Nacional, José Luis Aguilar V., »Cerca de 120 mil colonos de San Miguel Teotongo viven bajo la ley del CONAMUP,« September 18, p. 17.

NNA: National Newspaper Archive (1986): Fondo Hemerográfico, El Nacional, »Temen los vecinos más anomalías de la CONAMUP,« March 15.

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Irais, Union member, Mexico City, March 2020.

Interview with Luz, Union member, telephone communication, September 2020.

Interview with Pedro Moctezuma Barragán, telephone communication, April 2020.

Interview with Salvador, Union member, Mexico City, March 2020.

Berlin Universities Publishing

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s)