

Women teachers of post-revolutionary Mexico: feminisation and everyday resistance

Oresta López

To cite this article: Oresta López (2013) Women teachers of post-revolutionary Mexico: feminisation and everyday resistance, Paedagogica Historica, 49:1, 56-69, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2012.746714](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2012.746714)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2012.746714>



Published online: 13 Dec 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 389



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Women teachers of post-revolutionary Mexico: feminisation and everyday resistance

Oresta López*

Department of History, El Colegio de San Luis, México

(Received 31 August 2012; final version received 1 November 2012)

The reflections presented in this article include the process of incorporating women teachers into schools during the post-revolutionary period in Mexico. From one standpoint, women teachers lived in a state of ambiguity throughout this period because they were seen as symbols of national reconstruction following a war that left more than one million people dead. From another standpoint, they were victims of political and gender violence in a country that had not yet been pacified and was experiencing deep divisions between the armed Catholic groups that fought against the government. The process of the feminisation of Mexican teaching is approached through an analysis of the socio-professional conditions of rural teachers around the period of 1924 to 1945. There are a range of sources that were used for this research, including oral and documental. The collection of records of rural teachers from the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública are important in terms of a regional study that was done in the Valle del Mezquital as well as in a current national study. After reviewing over three thousand teacher files, I have been able to verify that many of these women were empowered and conscious of their significance in the national identity. They took advantage of the situation to obtain gender work benefits, which included equal wages to men, pregnancy leave regardless of marital status or age and uninterrupted contracts. This mobilisation by women teachers throughout the entire country was unprecedented in the professional history of Mexican women workers. These teachers fought many daily battles, both individually and collectively, to maintain their jobs, by writing letters to the head of the Rural School Department, sharing their stories and the injustices they experienced in their daily lives. Nonetheless, it is notable that for the first time, a collection of female voices can be found in the teacher files; these women did not want to keep quiet, and they reflect a desire to participate in social change for themselves and their communities.

Keywords: feminisation; women teachers; gender; everyday resistance; rural education

Introduction

In the following article, I present results and reflections based on the research I have done on Mexican women teachers. During an initial study I conducted towards the end of the 1990s, when gender studies were barely starting in Mexico, I recognised that with the founding of the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, or SEP) in 1921, the majority of teachers were women, while at the

*Email: lopez.oresta@gmail.com

same time their presence was nearly invisible. Through the study I conducted in Valle del Mezquital, in the state of Hidalgo, I was able to give ample evidence of the contributions women rural teachers made to the educational development in rural and indigenous education in Mexico.¹

Subsequently, I continued working on two related aspects of women teachers in education: the process of feminisation of primary teaching, and the response of the state in the face of this phenomenon. I posed questions regarding the state's arguments to promote the feminisation of primary teaching on the one hand and its policy of maintaining the labour and salary asymmetries in relation to male professors on the other. In 2001, I had the opportunity to organise an international conference along with my colleagues Luz Elena Galván and Sonsoles San Román to bring together scholars from around the world and analyse the phenomenon of the feminisation of teaching.² Thanks to this gathering, many answers were provided regarding the historical moment and the pedagogical and educational arguments used by the state to establish policies favouring the feminisation of elementary teaching up until it turned into a generalised phenomenon and grew throughout the world from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day.

It is important to mention that the processes of feminisation have been articulated in different studies, yet there have been few lines of continued and solid research regarding these processes.³ It is still necessary to deepen our understanding of the particularities, historical contexts and relationships that gave life and continuity to the feminisation of teaching.⁴ (See Table 1).

Over the last two decades of studying these processes and Mexican women teachers, I have shifted my focus from identifying the structural conditions that favour and permit the feminisation of teaching (based on a sexual policy of the state that is implicit in educational policies) to my current, central interest in the voices of the women who confronted the conditions that were imposed on them. This has been possible due to new forms of observing and studying the state. The contributions of authors such as James Scott and Daniel Nugent,⁵ and more specifically, the studies conducted by Elsie Rockwell for the Mexican case, have shown that educational participants (communities, teachers, parents and authorities) are involved in the everyday process of state formation. According to Rockwell:

¹Oresta López, *Alfabeto y enseñanzas domésticas, el arte de ser maestra rural en el Valle del Mezquital*, o, Colec. Antropologías (San Luis, México: CIESAS-CECAH, 2001).

²Luz Elena Galván, Oresta López, and Sonsoles San Román, *Primer Congreso Internacional sobre los procesos de Feminización del Magisterio, February 21–23, San Luis Potosí, México* (El Colegio de San Luis, CIESAS and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2001, compact disc).

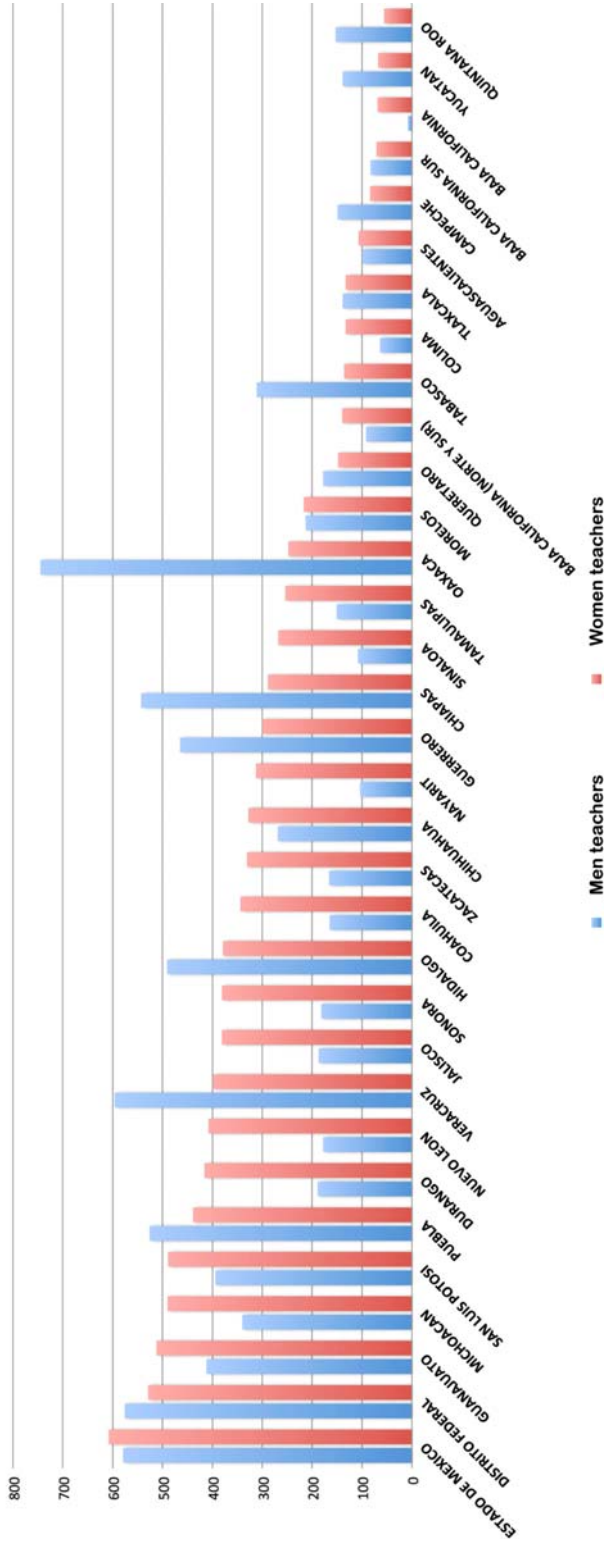
³Luz Elena Galván and Oresta López, *Entre imaginarios y utopías: Historias de maestras* (San Luis, México: CIESAS, El Colegio de San Luis [COLSAN], PUEG-UNAM, 2008).

⁴For data on scholars who have conducted studies on feminisation or the history of women teachers in Mexico, see Oresta López, "Las maestras en la historia de la educación en México: contribuciones para hacerlas visibles, en México," *Sinectica*, February–July 2000, no. 28.

⁵James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Elsie Rockwell, "Schools of the Revolution," in Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*, 170–208; and Elsie Rockwell, *La Escuela cotidiana* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995).

Table 1.

Mexican rural teachers during 1924-1945 by gender and location



Sources: Information of Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, inventories: Fund of rural teachers (men and women) 1924-1945.

In recent years, education has become the preferred theme to demonstrate that post-revolutionary states have almost never achieved what they promised. It has been easy to point out the inconsistency between explicit educational policies and school practices, such as documenting the persistence of educational routines and beliefs after the radical reforms.⁶

Rockwell states that studies have generally privileged the state and the main political actors, while giving little regard to the complex social and political formation that other actors construct from the bottom up. In fact, she argues, local constructions can also be controlled or destroyed by a central power.⁷ It is from this perspective, by decentralising attention away from the state as sole actor, as well as from the gender perspective, which likewise decentres attention away from male actors as the only active and revolutionary agents, that I oriented my research towards finding the voices of women and the forms of everyday resistance through which they transformed the teaching vocation and in the process, transformed themselves.⁸

By everyday resistance, I mean the multiple forms through which women themselves opposed the masculine monopoly of power and the ways in which they negotiated and proposed changes in the conditions in which they worked.⁹ During the period marked by an expansion of rural education in Mexico from 1924 to 1940, many young women were entering and leaving careers in teaching. They were hired as assistants to male professors and paid lower salaries, even though they had equal or greater training than men. Women were also controlled through regulations that prohibited them from marrying and having children while they were employed by the government. Thousands of letters and documents stored in the historical archives of the Ministry of Public Education offer evidence of the discrete but constant struggles women teachers endured trying to attain equality with their male colleagues. At the same time, these women were also trying to gain reproductive rights.

We can now clearly identify two historical moments marked by particular struggles: (1) during the second half of the nineteenth century, women achieved a segregated inclusion in the formal school system as a result of their demand for the right to education and to a career in teaching, and (2) during the second half of the twentieth century, the struggle shifted towards equality in working conditions and for paid maternity leave.

⁶Elsie Rockwell, *Hacer escuela hacer estado. La educación posrevolucionaria vista desde Tlaxcala* (Michoacán, México: El Colegio de Michoacán, CIESAS, CINVESTAV, 2007), 11.

⁷*Ibid.*, 18.

⁸Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (accessed December 10, 2004):1053–75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1864376>. This suggests that gender categories contribute to the focus or perspective in historical and social studies, as long as they are used as tools not only to distinguish women, but also to understand different structural, relational, symbolic, linguistic and social aspects associated with the relationships between men and women, not as individual forms, but as a group.

⁹Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*. When I speak of the resistance of women teachers who worked for the state, I refer to the multiple ways in which they opposed unequal work benefits, which in this case were visibly asymmetric in terms of gender. I refer to the complex and daily ways that established women teachers as subordinates in the eyes of the state, which wielded hegemonic power with a patriarchic ideology.

Women's struggles for space in teaching

The first period to consider, preceding the process of feminisation, was from 1867 to 1917. During this period, under President Benito Juárez, the feminist struggle centred on legislative measures that would grant women the opportunity to receive and provide education through the framework of liberal educational laws. It was characteristic that the regulations allowing the inclusion of women in schools, either as normal school students or as teachers, did not recognise basic reproductive rights for women working in education. This policy confirmed the model of a single, unmarried woman teacher, considered incompatible with the status of married women teachers.

The predominantly liberal discourse in educational policies of this 50-year period commonly tended to “naturalise” the asymmetries between genders in education in such a way that no one argued against the “natural” separation of the sexes and of the contents of education for boys and for girls. Nor was it common to question the “natural” disposition of women to teach young children or the “natural” difference in salaries and workloads between men and women. The policies for education of women were in harmony with the naturalist discourses of the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi,¹⁰ whose theory was in fashion towards the end of the nineteenth century and favoured the increased presence of Mexican women in urban and rural schools. The most notable part of the feminisation of teaching during this period was experienced in Normal schools, which were literally invaded by women while men pursued other options. In this liberal/sexist discourse, a socially accepted norm made it impossible for women to reconcile marriage and teaching. Teachers who married quit their jobs or were sure to be fired since it was considered *natural* that when they had a man to support them, they would dedicate their whole selves to their duties as wives.

Significantly, this was the period in which public discourse reinforced the naturalisation of the education of children by women. The theory that women were biologically more intuitive, less authoritarian and therefore better disposed to work with the poor and with young children was popularised and argued by Pestalozzi. The naturalisation of the woman teacher became a strong stereotype that was strengthened throughout the twentieth century.

Initially, I sought particular explanations in the documents regarding the participation of women in both public and private fields, and the positions they occupied in the school system. However, history led us towards a fundamental fact: the primary polemical point concerning the existence of women teachers in public spaces was their own female body. With the development of the theory of gender, it became clear that hegemonic discourses have exercised social control over the female body. The body was seen in different ways, including, historically, as a depository of purity and virtue for women. In the case of women teachers, it functioned as a pedagogic and moral instrument for educating children and the whole community.

Gender theory has made visible these consequences; they are the same ones that can be found in the successive policies and initiatives for the control of female bodies

¹⁰Pestalozzi (1746–1827) wrote an important educational treatise, continuing the naturalist method of Rousseau. In Mexico, two of his most important works were translated and published: *Cómo Gertrude enseña a sus hijos* (1801) and *Libro de las madres* (1803). He contributed a method based on the observation of children, where the educator's intuition was very important to help the development of children. He proposed educating the poor and creating rural schools. He also proposed non-authoritative education.

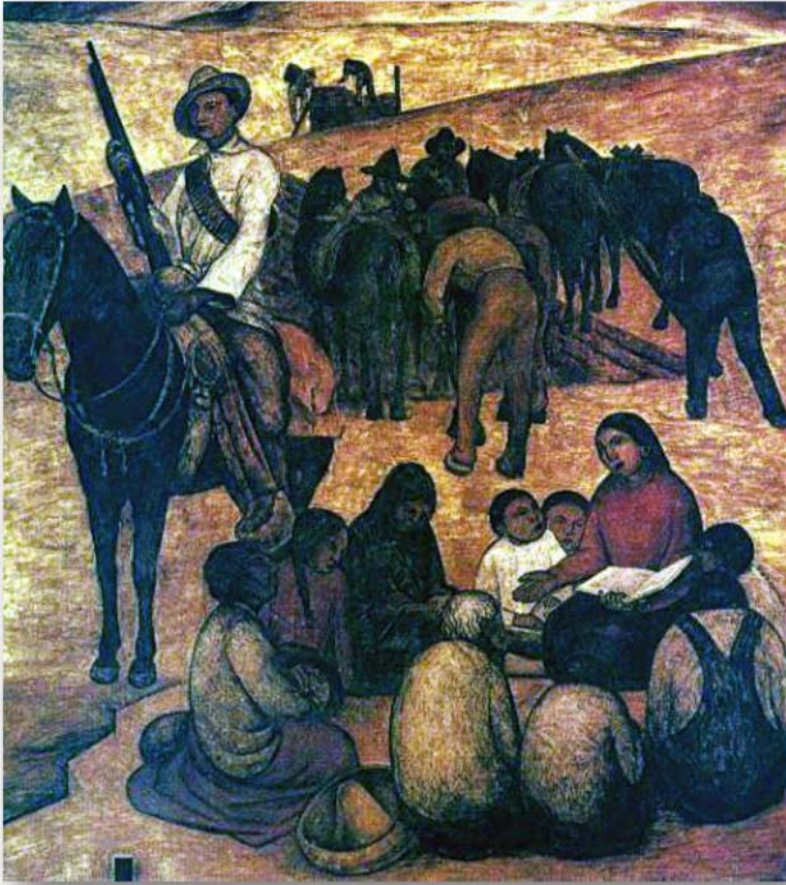


Figure 1. The rural teacher, represented in the Mural of the Department of Public Education in Mexico, was created by Diego Rivera in the post-revolutionary period. Note: Image of the original paint.

in the teaching profession. These policies were generally translated into a series of unwritten cultural practices, which were nevertheless widely recognised and assumed even by women teachers. Barred from having boyfriends, becoming pregnant or bearing children, women teachers tended to hide their civil status and their pregnancies, although a significant number of them chose celibacy or late marriage.

Michel Foucault situated the body as an object of knowledge and power. The human body was no longer seen as only skin and organs, but also as a social construct that above all must fit into a social order. The body became subjected to social discipline in relation to its biological sex. However, the body, in its sexual materiality, does not produce any specific subjectivity on its own; rather, social conditioning – that is prevailing sexual policy – forces the person to respond in a certain manner, through situated sexual policies.¹¹

¹¹Foucault, *Historia de la sexualidad, I: La Voluntad de Saber*, trans. (México: Siglo XXI, 1997).



Figure 2. Revolutionary education for rural women.

Source: Photographic Library of the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública de México, “Internados, actividades de internados Mtra. Gruvet,” 1929 approximately, Box 8, Envelope 12.

The liberal laws did not produce many changes until society was shaken by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. It was then that the political system under the long-term government of President Porfirio Díaz entered into a profound crisis in which customs and social order were also revolutionised. Despite the transformations, a patriarchal vision prevailed in the representation of women:

The revolution was not just an attack on property, social hierarchy, and exclusion; it assaulted Victorian morality and rules of sexual repression, and brought women into the public space in unprecedented ways. Artist and intellectuals who felt threatened turned women into traditional archetypes they could control. [...] Diego Rivera painted the nation drawing on a patriarchal narrative and relying on another tired trope: women represented fertility and nature; men were the rational conquerors of nature, the makers of politics, science, technology, finished goods.¹² (See Figure 1.)

The new cultural politics of the triumphant revolution (1921–1934) produced initial changes in the gendered condition of women. Urban and rural women teachers took an active part in these reforms. Additionally, the model for rural, revolutionary women teachers was officially promoted by the Ministry of Education as well as through the discourses and representations of intellectuals who had sided with the revolution. We now face the challenge of recovering the political and social actions of women teachers, from the perspective of gender, by searching beyond the idealised

¹²Mary Kay Vaughan, “Introduction, Pancho Villa, the Daughters of Mary, and the Modern Woman: Gender in the Long Mexican Revolution,” in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico*, ed. Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25.

and patriarchal forms in which women were congealed and therefore erased from graphic and literary memory.

During an initial case study, I was able to substantiate the way in which women teachers of the Valle del Mezquital in the state of Hidalgo undertook the increasingly diversified educational duties in the Ñañú communities during the years following the Mexican Revolution. In the small rural towns, they extended their role by acting as community leaders, hygienists and union organisers and by defending the interests of women peasants. They promoted matrimony, taught literacy to children and also to adult women and men; they intervened in the improvement of the everyday lives of peasants and organised cooperatives and unions, as well as musical, cultural and civic groups.

I also identified women teachers who used theatre to promote the socialist discourse of educational policies of the 1930s, even in indigenous communities. They did this directly, confronting criticism from conservatives and resisting patriarchal stereotypes. Some would write, sing and enact the socialist ideology on their own. Many of these women turned the space of education into a space for political realisation. In the archives of Ministry of education, ample evidence is found regarding their political and militant commitments (see Figure 2).

Similarly, I confirmed through documentary records the voices of those women teachers who protested the inequities that the transitional educational system had subjected them to and the series of implicit sexual policies related to the teaching profession. According to Sandra Acker, as teaching became a woman's work, it contributed to the expansion of public education. After considering the possibility of granting equal working conditions, the educational system adopted new ways to evaluate male and female labour differently; men were provided with more opportunities for development than those offered to women. An attempt was even made to revert the feminisation of teaching by regulating the number of men and women being hired, but the gender shift was not stopped. The female majority was never considered beneficial for education; on the contrary, it has been one of the reasons to qualify teaching as a semi-profession.¹³

Even after the revolution in Mexico, the salaries for women were lower than those of men (women qualified as assistants), even though they were exposed to the same or even greater dangers than men were in rural towns. The Ministry of Education acted with many ambiguities and contradictions. On the one hand, it favoured coeducation and combated segregation of sexes in schools with a discourse on equality. On the other hand, it did not value women in their new educational roles and maintained lower salaries for them. Women teachers fought constantly for equal conditions, writing letters to the president and the secretary of education. In 1933, women finally saw changes in the national pay scale with the removal of all clauses that differentiated employment and promotion categories and salaries by gender. Likewise, women teachers obtained legal permission to maternity leave.

From the normative angle, for the first time, men and women in rural teaching achieved equality at work. The salary was low for everyone; earnings averaged

¹³Sandra Acker, *Gendered Education: Sociological Reflections on Women, Teaching and Feminism*. (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1994). Her other studies include: Acker, *Teachers, Gender, and Careers* (New York: Palmer Press, 1989); and Acker, "Gender and Teacher's Work," *Review of Research in Education* 21 (1996).

around 80 Mexican pesos a month in 1939.¹⁴ Nevertheless, inequality continued to prevail within everyday working conditions. In other words, although there were no differences in salary, there were differences in the tasks women performed at schools. In general, women were assigned different lower-category tasks. This meant they were subjected to the *naturalisation of the profession of teaching* as woman's work; as they were thought to possess "maternal instincts", they were asked to tend to younger children at schools. In regions such as the Valle del Mezquital, populated by Nāñú people, the first grades were most numerous, and children often spoke only the indigenous language. Male teachers, in contrast, generally had the higher grades, with students who already spoke Spanish and knew how to read and write. They worked with smaller groups, with students that were already integrated into the school discipline. Work with higher grades also received greater recognition from an intellectual standpoint, whereas working with the younger children was seen as necessary but simple and merited little pedagogic recognition. Since the early stages of teaching, this institutional configuration of gendered school tasks has had considerable force throughout the twentieth century.

Maternity rights for women teachers

The debates surrounding the issue of teachers' maternity date from many years prior to the foundation of the Ministry of Public Education in 1921 and continued up to 1933, when with the consent of Secretary Narciso Bassols, the awaited maternity benefits were authorised. These benefits granted teachers a maternity leave of 90 days with full pay, regardless of their marital status. As a result of the social demands of the Mexican Revolution, the post-revolutionary state had intervened to guarantee maternity leave for women factory workers, as stipulated in the 1917 Constitutional clause that accorded the following rights to women workers:

V.- Las mujeres durante el embarazo no realizarán trabajos que exijan un esfuerzo considerable y signifiquen un peligro para su salud en relación con la gestación; gozarán forzosamente de un descanso de seis semanas anteriores a la fecha fijada aproximadamente para el parto y seis semanas posteriores al mismo, debiendo percibir su salario íntegro y conservar su empleo y los derechos que hubieren adquirido por la relación de trabajo. En el período de lactancia tendrán dos descansos extraordinarios por día, de media hora cada uno para alimentar a sus hijos.¹⁵

Scholars who have studied the history of women workers in the post-revolutionary period have observed that there was substantial resistance from employers to cover these benefits; many preferred not to hire women. The post-revolutionary period also witnessed an increase in the organisation of trade unions that brought about the regulation of minimal labour rights for both men and women. Brachet and Olivera have shown that between 1917 and 1942, the social policies of the post-revolutionary state

¹⁴Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública [AHSEP], DGEPEP, box 2992, IV/82.

¹⁵Women throughout pregnancy will not perform work that demands a considerable amount of force and places their health at risk in relation to childbirth; they will forcibly enjoy a period of rest for six weeks prior to their approximate due date and six weeks after the same, receiving their full salary and conserving their employment. Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, 2005, <http://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/fuentes/documentos/Libreria/constit/ed10.pdf>.

established the basic conditions for industrial employment, beginning with structural measures similar to those put in practice in other countries.¹⁶ One of these measures was the formation of a regulated and disciplined workforce, organised to collaborate with the government and participate in the official party. Besides minimum wages, other workers' rights were legislated, such as paid vacations, annual bonuses (of at least six weeks pay) and layoff compensation for full-time employees (of three months pay, plus 20 additional days for each year worked). Laws prohibited child labour and mandated the eight-hour workday; these regulations were effectively supervised and controlled. According to labour legislation, women were not allowed to perform dangerous or unhealthy duties, and they could have maternity leave for up to three months with full wages without losing their employment. This regulation was clearly designed for women factory workers. Historians of Mexican women face the challenge of discovering how these employment laws were actually carried out and how women teachers acquired professional identities, as well as benefitting from workers' rights.

Men and women serving the state in different functions were not the most advanced group in the struggle to obtain workers' rights. As both employer and arbitrator, the state was no better than the private sector. Many of the benefits that state employees obtained were conditioned, and the state held greater control over the organisation of unions among its own workers. During the twentieth century, two national institutions were finally created as a result of advanced social policies: the Mexican Institute for Social Security (IMSS) in 1943 and the Institute for Security and Social Services for State Workers (ISSSTE) in 1959.

In Mexico, teachers hired by the federal Ministry of Education (considered as "apostles" of a civilising mission) fought for the improvement of the conditions of workers in both the cities and the countryside during the years following the revolution. However, within their own profession, organisation was initially fragmented in a large number of small trade unions, which were later unified nationally under the control of powerful union leaders who developed corporate mediating practices in relation to the state. In the cities, governors and municipal presidents determined the working conditions for women teachers. They provided special permissions, following their own criteria, as they lacked special regulations and provisions for women. They also used their own discretion in awarding salaries and promotions for women teachers, depending on the authorities' evaluation of their work and morality. The situation of rural women teachers was more complicated, even during the post-revolutionary period when there was a significant increase in the budget for rural education.

The struggle for reproductive rights was undertaken first in the Federal District (D.F.), where between 1914 and 1932 a strong debate ensued among the bureaucrats of the Medical Department of the Ministry of Education, some of whom still defended compulsory celibacy for women teachers. It was a step towards the conquest of women's rights and was important insofar as women were able to conquer new public and political spaces for their struggles. Direct participation of women teachers in political struggles grew during the 1930s, particularly beginning with the highly significant United Front for Women's Rights (FUPDM). This organisa-

¹⁶Viviane Brachet-Márquez and Orlandina de Oliveira, "Mujer y Legislación social Mexicana," *Estudios Sociológicos* 20, no. 60 (September–December 2002): 537–81.

tion supported women's demands and prepared the way for the conquest of women's suffrage in the following decade.¹⁷

Authorisation for maternity leave for teachers (as still respected today) was finally won in 1933. It consists of a 90-day period with full salary and the suspension of all inquiries regarding the marital status of women teachers. Women workers were even authorised to interrupt their workday twice to breastfeed their babies. Although federal authorities modified the regulations, the process of achieving full maternity rights was slower for rural women teachers.

Through the interviews, I communicated directly with women teachers.¹⁸ I was able to document the difficulties pregnant teachers had faced to actually obtain their leave. Almost all informants who had been mothers in that period (1933–1940) had to negotiate arrangements with the municipal presidents so that their salaries would not be affected and so that they would be permitted to continue working (even though it was uncomfortable for them) during the months when their pregnancy was evident. To obtain these benefits, they were usually subjected to increased work requirements. These stories led to reflections on the role women occupied in schools and the ways they obtained new rights and benefits. It is noteworthy, for example, that even during the 1940s women would state that they were single and hide their marital status. Subsequently, they learned to exercise their maternity rights, regardless of whether or not they were married. It is thus possible to identify a generation of women teachers who became increasingly conscious of their reproductive and labour rights.

My studies on rural teachers during the years following the revolution have shown how they lived through a time of change, in a space where they faced many different stereotypes associated with being a woman teacher. Although the feminisation of teaching was mainly an urban phenomenon, it also occurred in poorer, inhospitable rural areas of the country. In this context, the duties were multiplied for women teachers, and it was difficult for them to obtain better positions or working conditions. However, women had discovered new potential of social participation and their commitment to important causes; they entered the profession of teaching, where they were integrated into union organisations that provided them with formal mechanisms of resistance. Once organised, they no longer allowed the physicians of the Ministry of Education to decide about their bodies and sexuality through regulations that called for recruiting celibate or sterile women as teachers.

Although women teachers after the revolution performed the same work as men and there was no evident distance between their salaries, there were inequalities within the schools. Women were assigned tasks that were considered "appropriate for their sex", and were subordinated in new ways. The right to enjoy full pay during three months before and after childbirth, regardless of their marital status, and the experience of social and political participation acquired during those years, signalled a new opportunity for Mexican women. It gave them the confidence to be able to articulate a socially valued profession and also fully exercise their maternity rights.

¹⁷Esperanza Tuñón, *Mujeres que se organizan. El Frente Unico Pro-derechos de la mujer 1935–1938*, (Mexico, Department of Humanities, UNAM- Grupo Ed. Miguel Angel Porrúa, 1992).

¹⁸I interviewed Dora Flores, Ciria Trejo Lara, Aurelia Pérez, Guadalupe Mejía and Sara Cornejo during 1996.

New voices and new challenges for research

In an effort to further understand the presence and actions of rural women teachers in Mexico, I began researching their history in the Ministry of Education archives, where there is a special collection labelled “rural women teachers” that contains all records of women who were teachers from the foundation of the SEP in 1921 to approximately 1950.

Pending a more detailed analysis, the ample documentation of the professional lives of these women teachers offers an inside view of the feminisation of teaching in Mexico. The evidence shows abundant traces of the vulnerability in the careers of women teachers; they began to work in rural communities with extremely fragile educational backgrounds and followed inconsistent patterns of employment throughout the years. They also faced permanent hostility from educational authorities, who pretended to discipline them and separate them from their social, sexual, categorical and religious conditions. Apparently, very few could fully dedicate themselves to the profession and have a successful career with promotions and salary increases. Rather, the majority of these teachers appear to have been very poor women, who asked for leaves throughout their lives and finally interrupted their careers.

A history of gender violence and precarious labour conditions are also documented in the records. Women teachers suffered sexual violence in communities or died of contagious illnesses without having received the protection or support of the state. The documentation still begs for a careful reading and further analysis, as we are interested in the voices of these women and the meanings they gave to their educational actions.

The identification of long-term processes, which have been naturalised in relation to gender, continues to be a major challenge in reading the documents, photographs, accounts and other archival evidence. The study of the processes of feminisation faces the theoretical challenge of *denaturalising* many aspects that are taken for granted, such as the idea that the education of young children should be a feminine profession and that women should value the care of others over their professional achievement. I have no doubt that new knowledge and understanding of gender (associated with the everyday specific ways in which women were linked to power and the state) will lead to a better comprehension of the history of this phenomenon and will eventually contribute to the understanding of what is currently taking place in education.

The relationship between women teachers and the post-revolutionary state remained unstable as women teachers continued to receive unequal treatment, although they had advanced considerably in the struggle for equal working conditions. For example, when Professor Rosa Guerra was told that she was to be demoted from her position as school principal and replaced by a male teacher who had lesser qualifications, she wrote in 1933:

it is not competition that should be valued, but the friendship among friends; although I am a woman, I consider myself as capable as any of my male colleagues. If I am being demoted because I am a woman, I send my strongest protest against the “incentives” women receive when fighting for a better Mexico.¹⁹

¹⁹ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública Fondo Dirección General de Educación Primaria en Estados y Territorios (AHSEP/DGEPET); Fondo Departamento de Educación Rural, Fondo, Maestras Rurales, Rosa Guerra Hernández San Luis Potosí, 1933. Box G2/Exp. 16.

Table 2. Topics of political and gender violence in letters from female teachers.

<i>Female teachers who wrote to the Department of Education (box and file)</i>	<i>State and file date</i>	<i>Complaints of political and gender violence</i>
Andrea González (G6/55)	Chihuahua (1930–1934)	The teacher injured a local man with the weapon with which he wanted to kidnap her. She is asking for protection of her life.
María Arias (A10/7), Margarita Calderón (C11/1), Ángela Castillo (C11/51) and Librada Contreras (C11/52)	Colima (1925–1929)	Sent to another school due to the uprisings of armed people in the area.
María de Jesús León (L6/15)	Colima (1926–1927)	Bandits tried to abuse her.
Isaura Llamas García (L11/8)	Colima (1934)	The teacher was run over by an army officer.
Consuelo Vda. de Bonifaz (B3/15)	Guanajuato (1928)	Rebels threatened the teacher, and they have asked her to leave town.
Flavia Cano (C6/59)	Guanajuato (1929–1931)	The teacher was run over by a neighbour, and her life is at risk.
Eloísa Guerrero (G8/85)	Guanajuato (1925–1929)	Her life was threatened by the head of the rebels in the area.
Sofía Martínez (M1/4)	Guanajuato (1926–1927)	She was threatened by the town tyrants.
Aurora Ortega (O3/65)	Guerrero	The teacher's mother reports that her daughter was raped by Arturo Gaona, with no justice from the authorities.
Lorenza Jiménez G. (J2/35)	Hidalgo (1924–1926)	Federal troops destroyed the school, and they threatened the teacher's life.
María Campos (C3/51)	Jalisco (1928)	Persecuted by the rebels who threatened to hang her if she did not give them some money.
Esther Hernández (H4/64)	Jalisco (1927)	Threatened by a group of rebels.
María Ochoa Félix (O34/)	Jalisco (1926–1928)	Threatened by the <i>Cristeros</i> groups of the area.
Rosa Castro (C1/26)	Michoacán (1924–1930)	Kidnapped, and her life was threatened.
González Esperanza (G1/9)	Michoacán (1927–1928)	Robbed and in a lamentable state.
Cecilia Cervantes (C1/027)	Nayarit (1924–1927)	Threatened by rebels, who closed the school.
Adelina Pérez (P1/32)	Nayarit (1929–1931)	The rebels prevented her entering her school since they took the town and burned the houses.
Enriqueta Heredia (H4/57)	Querétaro (1928–1929)	She is requesting permission to care for her health due to the robbery by the rebels in the area where she works.
Martina Huerta (H1/39)	Querétaro (1934–1937)	Threatened, and she fears for her safety.
Ma. Elena Molina Ávila (M4/42)	Querétaro (1934–1944)	Accosted, with her family, and their lives are at risk.

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

<i>Female teachers who wrote to the Department of Education (box and file)</i>	<i>State and file date</i>	<i>Complaints of political and gender violence</i>
Sara Arcos (A3/2)	San Luis Potosí (1925–1927)	Robbed at her home by townspeople.
Rosa Acuña Díaz (A5/27)	San Luis Potosí (1932–1938)	Robbed by townspeople.
Ramona Vda. De Corrella (C3/24)	Sonora	At great risk from uprisings by the rebels in the Yaqui region.
Elisa García Armenta (G9/15)	Sonora	The teacher reports an attack by the president of the agrarian community, who entered her home at night. She is asking for justice.
Esperanza Cerdán Muñoz (C8/35)	Veracruz	Threatened for establishing a kindergarten in the Huatusco region and for creating a campaign against fanaticism and imparting sexual education.
Ma. Mercedes Cárdenas (C8/51)	Michoacán (1924–1925)	In a letter, the teacher requests punishment for her kidnapper; the municipal president did not provide the necessary guarantees.

Source: Prepared by author with information from files at the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública de México, Fondo Maestras Rurales del Departamento de Educación Rural (approximately 1924–1940).

Notes on contributor

Oresta López is a historian and educational anthropologist. She holds a Doctorate in Social Sciences from the CIESAS Occidente, is a researcher at El Colegio de San Luis AC and a member of the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, level II. She was president of the Sociedad Mexicana de Historia de la Educación from 2004 to 2006 and is currently president of the Red de Investigadores Educativos de San Luis Potosí from 2011 to 2013. Since 2005, she has directed the *Seminario Permanente de Investigación: Educación, historia y diversidad cultural en el noreste de México*. She is author and/or coordinator of 10 books, 30 chapters and/or articles in social science magazines, and coordinator for 7 multimedia publications. Her recent books include: *Que nuestras vidas hablen: historias de vida de maestras y maestros indígenas tének y nahuas de San Luis Potosí* (México, El Colegio de San Luis, 2010); *Educación rural en Iberoamérica. Experiencia histórica y construcción de sentido*, in coordination with co-author Teresa González (Madrid: Anroart Editores, 2009); *Entre Imaginarios y utopías: historias de maestras*, co-edited with Luz Elena Galván (Mexico: CIESAS-PUEG UNAM, COLSAN, 2008).