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Essays in Economic & Business History (EEBH)

Provided in Cooperation with:
Economic and Business History Society (EBHS)

Suggested Citation: Porter, Susie S. (2023) : Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, 1920s Mexico City, Essays in Economic & Business History (EEBH), ISSN 2376-9459, Economic and Business History Society (EBHS), Rockford, MI, Vol. 41, Iss. 1, pp. 148-162

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/330480

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Essays in Economic & Business History
2023, 41 (1): 148-162
Published August 11, 2023

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, 1920s Mexico City

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Abstract

This essay, delivered as a keynote address for the 2022 Economic and Business History Society Conference in Salt Lake City, seeks to open a conversation on the history of sexual harassment at work in Mexico. Because of the shame attached to sexual harassment, it is a difficult topic to identify in the archives. Mexican scholars emphasize the ways gender inequality in the workforce lays the ground for sexual harassment. Drawing on this scholarship, I begin by describing the occupational segregation that characterized women's workforce participation. Inequalities in the workforce shaped women's entrance into office work and new industries like telephone service. The essay goes on to discuss the depiction of working women in the mainstream press and literature in ways that sexualized women. I then turn to examine the tools women might have had at their disposal to denounce sexual harassment. Law and institutional spaces shaped, and often limited, the space within which women could speak out against sexual harassment. The essay concludes with a discussion of two different media—the anarchist press and the feminist press—where women spoke out against violence in the workplace. In 1920s Mexico City women found ways to denounce sexual harassment as a generalized phenomenon while at the same time distancing themselves personally from association with incidences of sexual harassment in ways that might have jeopardized their personal, professional, and work-based honor.

Keywords: sexual harassment; work; feminism; Mexico.

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ISSN 2376-9459 (online) LCC 79-91616 HC12.E2
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Introduction

In contemporary Mexico, almost twenty-seven percent of women who work outside of the home have experienced "some type of violent act, primarily sexual in nature and gender discrimination, including due to pregnancy". Men sexually harass women across the workforce. Women employed in factories and maquiladoras are the most likely to suffer discrimination (24.75 percent), followed by public sector employees (15 percent) (Sonia M. Frías 2011). Single women are more likely to experience sexual harassment, though married women do as well. The majority of women do not report their aggressors, stating in a national survey that they "didn't think it was a big deal", didn't expect justice would be served, or feared retaliation. Indeed, of those who did report an incidence of sexual harassment, a minimal number found justice (México, Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía e Informática 2006 and 2017). Mexico is not unique: 41 percent of women who work outside of the home in the United States have experienced sexual harassment at work (Rose L. Siuta and Mindy E. Bergman 2019).

Workplace sexual harassment is one of several types of harassment and gender violence that Mexican feminists have protested and organized to combat. Feminists have taken to the streets, graffitied statues and public walls, and they have organized for change. Mexican scholars emphasize the ways gender inequality in the workforce lays the ground for sexual harassment. Less is known about the history of sexual harassment in Mexico, especially in the workplace. Drawing on scholarship that examines the causes and current manifestations of sexual harassment, I begin by describing the history of occupational segregation that characterized women's workforce participation in the early twentieth century. Inequalities in the workforce shaped women's entrance into office work and new service industries like telephony. The essay goes on to discuss the sexualization of women who worked outside of the home in cultural representation. I then turn to the tools women might have had at their disposal to denounce sexual harassment: law and institutional spaces shaped, and often limited, the space within which women could speak out against sexual harassment. The essay concludes with a discussion of two different media—the anarchist press and the feminist press—where women spoke out against violence in the workplace.

Women's Workforce Participation

Sociologists and legal scholars point to the fundamental role that social and workplace inequality play in the exercise of power at work, one manifestation of which is sexual harassment (Frías 2011; Patricia Kurczyn Villalobos 2013; Velázquez Narváez and Díaz Cabrera 2020, 428). Unequal workforce participation, hiring, promotion, and wages, for example, lay the basis for devaluing women, the gendered exercise of power, and sexual harassment, which scholars of Mexico refer to in broad terms as workplace violence. In Mexico, as in many countries, as women entered into the paid labor force, they did so along lines of gendered segmentation of the workforce, occupational segregation, and gendered wage differentials. Furthermore, discrimination reinforced barriers to women's advancement (Susie Porter 2018, 130-138). At the turn of the century, somewhere around a third of women in Mexico City worked in domestic service. Women's participation in artisanal production and early manufactory was restricted. Having been excluded from the privileges and protections offered by guilds, women participated in artisanal production through family membership or on their own in occupations that fell outside of guild regulations. These patterns informed hiring as the manufactory sector expanded. An 1879 study found women constituted 37 percent of the Mexico City industrial workforce, 70 percent of them in just two industries: the ready-made clothing industry (100 percent female) and cigarette manufactory (85 percent female). Women also worked in mixed-sex settings. They were 31 percent of the Mexico City cotton textile industry, as compared to 22 percent of the adult cotton and wool textile workforce nationwide.

Women also worked in the production of consumer goods such as matches and paper (50 percent of that workforce); chocolate (24 percent); shoes (23 percent); and hats (16 percent). On average women earned 55 percent of men's wages (Porter 2003 28-45).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class gender norms associated women with the private sphere in such a way that when they took work outside of the home, they were understood to have entered a masculine space where they were sexually vulnerable. When Indian and Mestiza women worked in the public sphere, marketing goods or carrying laundry to and from clients, despite such class-based norms, middle- and upper-class observers associated them with licentious sexuality (Silvia Arrom 1992, 154-158, 161, 165). In speaking about women's entrance into factories and workshops, politicians, employers, and journalists fretted over the impact of "mixing the sexes". Newspapers described women facing a workplace as filled with "sarcasm", a reference to crude male language that could include sexual harassment (Porter 2003 106). The writer, diplomat, and government employee, Federico Gamboa, for example, expressed his concern over changes in the moral fabric of Mexican society, when women began working in government offices in the 1880s. He wrote:

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

Gamboa's concerns were not those of one individual, nor fleeting. In 1910 Horacio Barreda, trained in philosophy and concerned with social issues, expressed similar concerns. Barreda published a series of essays titled "Study of feminism" in *Revista Positiva*, a journal for discussion of positivist ideas, including the dissemination of the ideas of Auguste Comte. In contemplating women's employment in offices and the professions, Barreda warned his readers about the sexual dangers women encountered. He described such women suffering anguish, "turning their eyes towards the lost home life, sullying their ears with the coarse masculine conversations, [and] enduring the impertinence, gallantries or the brusque reprimands of superiors or employers" (Lourdes Alvarado 1991, 117).

Despite such concerns, as the Federal government rapidly expanded, it opened its doors to women. By 1910 women were just under 13 percent of public employees in Mexico City. Once the violent phase of the Mexican Revolution ended, Presidents Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928) committed themselves to the institutionalization of the revolution. Specifically, institutionalization meant that politicians and statesmen began to work on the approval of laws and the opening of offices to carry out the reforms promised by revolutionary leaders and in the Constitution of 1917. Their objective was to create a strong state to support economic growth, mediate class conflict, and create political consensus. These initiatives required an enormous amount of paperwork. According to Mercedes Blanco, between 1920 and 1924, the Federal employee workforce grew at an annual rate of 11.5 percent (Blanco 1995, 125). The demand for employees was met, to a large degree, by women. As a result, during the 1920s the female workforce in government offices was young, single, and new to the workplace (Porter 2020, 55).

The explosion in the number of female public employees provoked public commentary. Observers expressed concern about the sexual vulnerability of women in the paid workforce. During the 1920s, cultural critics, journalists, and legislators, all drew on the legal concept of *atentado al pudor* (acts against modesty) (Kathryn A. Sloan 2008, 2017). Cultural critic Rodrigo Cifuentes, for example, in "El desastre moral de México. La bancarrota del pudor", lamented what he considered a recent decline in female modesty. For Cifuentes, women's entrance into the workforce figured centrally in this process. "Bureaucratic employment has

devoured young girls. Poverty is notoriously corrupting, and political instability worsened conditions, further contributing to the problem. Over the course of fifteen years, Mexico has broken with all its traditions and completely transformed its way of life" (Cifuentes 1924, XXVII). In effect, Cifuentes and other observers like him reified conceptions of the workplace as sexually dangerous for women.

Typist, stenographer, clerk, or executive secretary—all were referred to as *señorita*, regardless of age, marital status, or position. Historians have used the term *señorita* as a description of a woman's civil status, but it has also played a role in women's work identity. In the Mexico City offices in the 1920s, *señorita* was used in daily interactions, official documents, and the press, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies at work. It was used not only to address a woman but also to refer to job categories of clerks, such as *señorita taquígrafa*, for example. The identity as *señorita* marked women as respectable, but also as available, not a *señora*. The word *muchacha* was also used to refer to women in the workplace, thus reinforcing their femininity, youth, and novice status.

From the time a woman interviewed for a job to her departure from the workforce, she might face sexual harassment. Newspaper want-ads announced open positions for *señorita de buena presencia* (presentable young lady), thus communicating the importance of attractiveness for employment. Perhaps hoping to ward off problems, women who published their own services for hire described themselves as *señorita decente* (respectable young lady).[1] Newspaper reports surfaced incidents of men objectifying women, as when secretaries in federal offices were paid to pose as models for calendar girls (Villalba 2006). Minister of Public Education José Vasconcelos (1982, 630) referred to two office workers as trembling, silky doves when he "penetrated an interior office of a Private Secretary". They were, he wrote, "no exaggeration, gorgeous". The emphasis on women's appearances as integral to the job contributed to a work culture that objectified women. In "Crónicas de Loreley", journalist María Luisa Garza addressed the case of a young woman who interviewed with a "gentleman from a well-known office". The man told her that he would give her a job, but that he needed "elegant ladies" so that the office would make a good impression. "Show me your garters", he asked, "and then I will know how you will dress when you are my secretary".[2]

As they arrived at work, women removed the hat and overcoat that, like men, they wore while going to and from work. In the office, men wore suits that identified them as professionals. Secretaries, typists, telephone operators, and office assistants wore dresses and shoes that emphasized femininity as integral to their work identity. Some had the luxury of wearing silk stockings and a well-fitted dress, while others were content with a homemade dress made thanks to sewing skills learned in school. Shortly before starting work, a typist might stop by the restroom to powder her face and touch up her lipstick. Attractiveness was, in effect, part of the uniform. Magazines encouraged women to exercise to maintain a slim body and clear skin.[3] The self-identified feminist magazine *Mujer* published articles with beauty and fashion tips.[4] A plethora of work-place beauty pageants and casting calls for film productions reinforced the primacy of physical beauty for the office worker (Porter, 2018, 66). It is likely that some who dreamed of acting responded to the newspaper's calls, and some even starred in films, as was the case with the office workers Adela Sequeyro and Otilia Zambrano (Elissa Rashkin 2001, 41; Porter 2018, 78).

[1] *El País*. 1916. July 4, 6; *El Nacional*. 1918. April 6, 7.

[2] Loreley. 1938. "¿Quieres ser empleada? Tribuna de la mujer. Crónicas de Loreley." *El Nacional*, February 23, 8.

[3] Departamento de Salubridad Pública de México. 1928. "Higiene y salud: Ejercicio para conservar la esbeltez." *Mujer*, December 1, 4.

[4] María Ríos Cárdenas. 1929. "El Código Federal del Trabajo y la mujer." *Mujer*, December 1, 13-14.

Women's psychological orientation to the needs of men was also a part of the job. The journalist Arlette (pseudonym for María Aurelia Reyes de Govea) praised the office worker who oriented herself to the needs of her male employer. Arlette joyfully discussed the increased efficiency and personal pleasure of the male employee whose secretary was always one step ahead of him, providing him with the appropriate papers for his meetings. According to the article, such efficiency on the part of his secretary would allow him time for personal pleasures like going to the movies. Women's columns gave advice to typists and secretaries on how to dress, what exercises to do to maintain an attractive body, and how to discipline "feminine traits", such as being chatty, to the demands of the workplace. Women were also counseled to be discreet, and to foresee when they should absent themselves from the room instead of eavesdropping to pick up tidbits of gossip. And while at work, secretaries should never, ever cry.[5]

Cultural representations of office workers reinforced the objectification of women even when also pushing back against stereotypes. Arqueles Vela's "Señorita Etcetera" (1922) and "El café de nadie" [Nobody's Café] (1924), which featured office worker "Mabelina"; and Salvador Novo's "Señorita Remington" [Miss Remington] (1924) represented the modern woman as an office worker.[6] In all three stories, the women are associated with the titillation of new technology and female sexuality. Vela refers to Señorita Etcetera as "an automaton ... her gestures moving in straight lines, her words as if produced by a delicate phonograph needle ... her breasts, trembling amperes" (Vela 1990, 67). Sexual desire and modern technology supersede the woman. Novo's protagonist, a writer, discusses his book with a typist. The writer, having no fixed employment, seeks affirmation of his ego, literary work, and place in a world where women seem to be snatching up jobs left and right. Miss Remington, despite her seeming disinterest in work, has a secure job. As with "Mabelina", Miss Remington is depicted as much as a consumer as a productive laborer. Miss Remington avoids supplying the existential affirmation the writer seeks. The writer impugns her intelligence, commenting that "Remi" does not understand Einstein's concept of relativity, though she "completely rules out time and space ... when she powders her face". Remi engages such objectification of women; however, Novo allows her to shift the conversation: "There is no one like us to celebrate the latest fashion. When journalists ... organize competitions for the best secretary, or conduct polls, they find we spend our paycheck on Mme. Combe, Able, and Guerlain … concluding that we work solely for *mise en scene*. But nothing is farther from the truth".[7] Women are responsible, she continues, for making the Federal government function and their priority is the vote. Thus, Novo allows Remi to shift the conversation away from characterizations of secretaries as frivolous to highlight their crucial contribution to the workplace and demands for equal rights.

Contours of Reports of Sexual Harassment

Historically, women have been reluctant to report incidences of sexual harassment, making discussion of rates of incidents difficult (Julie Berebetsky 2012; Mary Bularzik 1983). We can, nevertheless, trace the contours of the phenomenon in Mexico. Some of the earliest mentions of the mistreatment women faced at work was expressed in ambiguous language. Women who worked in factories, at telephone companies, and in other sectors of the workforce complained about "sarcasm" and "poor treatment" (*malos tratos*). For example, just four years after Ericsson began offering telephone service in Mexico City (1907), operators went on

[5] Arlette. 1937. "Crónicas de Arlette—Continuación." *Gráfico*, October 26, 12.

[6] Vela's "La Señorita Etcétera" was published December 14, 1922, and "El café de nadie" on April 17, 1924, both in *El Universal Ilustrado* (reprinted as Vela 1990); Salvador Novo. 1924. "La Señorita Remington." *El Universal Ilustrado*, May 15.

[7] Novo 1924, 27, 61.

strike. The 1911 strike lasted only a few minutes. When the press reported that the operators were "only kidding" about going on strike, a group of women marched down to the local newspaper to tell their story.[8] They insisted that they were not kidding, that they demanded a wage increase, and an end to the "the poor treatment" of coworkers and clients alike. In 1914 operators joined electricians and linemen to stage one of three strikes that led to the establishment of the Mexican Electricians Union (Porter 2015). Their demands were similar to those made in 1911—increased wages and respectful treatment by their employer, but now the operators explicitly denounced sexual harassment perpetrated by both clients and management. They reported to a city newspaper *El Monitor*, that they sought reforms "of a moral nature".[9]

Journalists also used the word "*atenciones*" (attentions) in a way that suggested romantic or sexual sentiments that, in the workplace, constituted sexual harassment. The newspaper *El Demócrata* reported in 1919, for example, that the Chamber of Deputies found itself forced to close the doors of the telephone offices that served the Chamber, to prevent deputies from constantly interrupting the operators' work with their *atenciones*. The journalist, while lamenting such behavior, contributed to the objectification of women and relegated them to secondary actors in a drama of male honor. Referring to the operators, one journalist wrote that "in addition to being pretty, they are friendly and engage in pleasant conversation".[10] Deputy Espinosa (Chiapas) could not resist such temptation and constantly sought their company. One day, when he found the doors closed and a sign prohibiting entry, he knocked on the door. In response, "the telephone operators, blondes and brunettes—because there was something for all tastes—curvaceous or svelte and languorous, like women from tales of romantic love, refused to open the door". Deputy Lorandi (Veracruz) intervened to defend the women and by that afternoon the two deputies found themselves on the outskirts of Mexico City, engaged in a duel. Lorandi's pistol did not fire and, since he was not injured, they agreed to a second round. Both deputies were such a lousy shot, with bullets flying over their heads, they decided to reconsider the whole affair. After consulting with each other and with the spectators gathered there, they agreed that they had sufficiently demonstrated their bravery and there was no need to continue. The duel was canceled, and everyone made it home before six that evening. This tale of male honor serves as both a description of the type of harassment women endured at work and the way the press not only romanticized it but centered male honor in how the incident played out.

The press also reported on incidents of quid pro quo, understood historically and in contemporary Mexican law as demands of a sexual nature made within the context of hierarchical relations. As the following report suggests, the very conditions of women's workforce participation laid the foundation for male bosses and coworkers to make demands of a sexual nature, using their position of power and authority as leverage. According to the newspaper *El Demócrata,* stenographer *señorita* Barba Guichard employed in the fifth civil court reported how her boss, Judge José María Rincón, had favored her at work.[11] Then one day, as all the office workers headed home, Rincón asked her to stay behind. He called her into his office, not uncommon for one who employs a woman to take dictation. Rincón then

[8] *El Imparcial*. 1911. "Un mohin de las señoritas de la Ericsson; decían que estaban de huelga y sólo estaban … de broma." December 8, 1; *Diario del Hogar*. 1911. "La huelga de las telefonistas." December 8, 1.

[9] *El Monitor*. 1915. "Los electricistas elevan un memorial a la Compañía Telefónica Mexicana." January 6, 7.

[10] *El Demócrata*. 1919. "Luis Espinosa no se bate nunca! Y no se batió …," July 13, 2; and *El Demócrata*. 1919. "Dos diputados se batieron ayer a pistola, en el pueblo de San Bartolo Naucalpan." July 18, 1, 6.

[11] *El Demócrata*. 1924. "La taquígrafa que afirmaba haber estado a punto de ser víctima del Juez Rincón ha desaparecido." July 16, 1, 12.

invited her to sit on the couch. He began talking about how much he loved her, and then hugged her aggressively. “The girl (*muchacha*) then stood up, protesting such abusive behavior”. The judge held her down, covering her mouth so she wouldn't scream. Seeing that there were still employees in a neighboring office, *señorita* Barba threatened to call their attention, and the judge released her. The next day, when *señorita* Barba returned to work, the judge fired her. Another stenographer, Emma Montiel, affirmed that on one occasion the judge had attempted the same sorts of behavior with her. As in the case of the telephone operators mentioned above, the journalistic report that described the secretary as *muchacha* reinforced a workplace identity for women anchored in their femininity and subordinate status.

Women who experienced sexual harassment at work would have had to weigh the relative costs and benefits of speaking up. Long-standing codes of shame and honor laid a disproportionate burden on women (Sonya Lipsett-Rivera 1998; Muriel Nazzari 1998). A woman who worked outside of the home could be seen as accepting her association with a sexualized space. The onus of responsibility for sexual harassment fell on the woman, not only in terms of her individual sexual honor but also the status of her employment as an office worker, a job closely identified with middle-class identity. For example, shame and a lack of recourse may have motivated Angelina Ruiz, a ticket seller at Salón Rojo movie theater, who was deceived by her employer to commit suicide. Her mother believed so, and letters found among her effects suggested as much. Ruiz climbed the stairs of the Cathedral and then leapt to her death. In another case, Sara Ramos, also deceived by a coworker at the Post Office, chose the very place they were both employed to throw herself from a second-story window and end her life (Sloan 2017, 24, 171, 185-189, 192).

Legislative Frameworks

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

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

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

> public woman or a person, due to age or social condition, who has no concept of modesty.[12]

By including indecent gestures and touching, Ferrer opened room for a wide range of behaviors to be included in the legal definition of *atentado al pudor*. At the same time, the ambiguous characterizations of those gestures and touch as "more or less indecent or offensive", meant that context was essential to interpreting the law. In particular, the respectability of the woman in question determined whether such acts could be considered criminal. A woman's reputation and occupation were both relevant. While factory workers and office employees were by no means considered "public women" (prostitutes), women's recent entrance into new public spaces blurred the boundaries of their respectability—recall the comments of Federico Gamboa and journalists regarding the "mixing of the sexes" and the "sarcasm" that characterized the workplace into which those women had chosen to enter. The organization of the workplace meant that a woman who was held back to take dictation in her bosses' office after hours, for example, might have been clear that her boss had crossed a line, but not confident that she could defend her own reputation in a court of law or of public opinion. Further increasing the stakes, article 86 of the *Código de Procedimientos Penales del Distrito Federal y Territorios* stated that an investigation into accusations of *atentado al pudor* could include a medical examination, something many women likely would have considered revictimization.[13]

Between the Penal Code of 1872 and that of 1931, only minor changes were made to articles related to *atentado al pudor*. A study to revise the 1872 Penal Code was conducted in 1913, but was later dismissed when, in late 1925, the President charged a committee to revise the Penal Code. The committee included Ignacio Ramírez Arriaga and Antonio Ramos Pedrueza y Castaneda, the latter replaced by José Almaráz. They were soon joined by Enrique C. Gudiño and Manuel Ramos Estrada. Their work led to the 1929 Penal Code which, upon facing criticism for being overly positivistic, was again revised in 1931 (Almaráz 1931; Martha Santillán Esqueda 2016, 140). The 1931 Penal Code retained the requirement that "the crime of *atentado contra el pudor* can only be punished if the attempt has in fact been accomplished" (article 261); and that "the offended woman, her parents, or in the absence of those, her legal representative", must file a complaint for a case to be pursued (article 263). Whereas the 1872 Penal Code made explicit reference to a criminal act "regardless of the sex" (article 789), in 1929 *atentado contra el pudor* was more narrowly construed as a crime committed against women. The 1931 Penal Code retained the language from 1929, with the notable exception of specifying *atentado contra el pudor* as "an erotic-sexual act" that does not result in copulation (Mexico, Secretaría de Gobernación 1931, 59)

Mexican labor law did not contemplate sexual harassment. The Constitution of 1857 acknowledge the right of all Mexicans to an honest means of making a living but said little more about workers' rights. Mexican labor law shifted significantly after the Revolution. Worker mobilization, strikes, and demands informed the Constitution of 1917 that identified social groups such as workers. Article 123 used the word *obreros* to specifically to identify workers. During the 1920s workers and the courts debated who, precisely was a "worker". After a series of cases that resulted in contradicting findings, the Supreme Court determined that public employees were not workers and so while Article 123 might serve as a guide, it did not pertain to public employees. Subsequently, Section A of Article 123 referred to workers and Section B to employees. The Constitution made specific provisions for working women (*obreras*).

[12] Licenciado Don Salvador J. Ferrer. 1904. "Estudios Jurídicos, proyectos de reformas al Código Penal." *Diario de Jurisprudencia del Distrito y Territorios*, August 5, 639.

[13] *El Asesor Jurídico*. 1908. "Práctica penal. Comprobación del cuerpo del delito en los casos de estupro, violación, aborto é infanticidio." May 31, 90.

Article 123, Section V guaranteed working women who become pregnant shall have access to paid maternity leave before and after giving birth. Once having returned to work, a new mother had a right to her job and any contractual rights associated with it. She also had the right to nurse her newborn child. Constitutional articles addressing women's rights as workers did not include acknowledgement of sexual harassment.

Making Themselves Heard

Women and men who wrote for the anarchist press opened a space to speak out against sexual harassment in the workplace. The rise of anarcho-syndicalism in Mexico dates to the last third of the nineteenth century and recent studies have focused on the role of women in the intellectual and organizational history of the movement. María Teresa Fernández Aceves and Sonia Hernández approach women's role in anarchist thought as both intellectual and organizational history. Writing from a transnational perspective Fernández Aceves documents the circulation of anarchist thought in the works of women intellectuals and activists, in Spain and throughout Latin America (Fernández Aceves, 2014). Sonia Hernández, focusing on 1920s US-Mexico borderlands, brings to life the words and actions of working women who countered characterizations of working women as of ill-repute and proposed what were for the time radical maternalism (Hernández 2021, 98-110).

Scholars have emphasized the importance of anarchist thought as it informed feminism across Latin America while also noting the ways the anarchist labor movement limited women's opportunities (Maxine Molyneux 1986). Anarchist critique of the exercise of power identified a parallel between capital's exploitation of workers, as well as of men's exploitation of women. This allowed for a reconceptualization of women's labor within and outside of the domestic sphere; women's reproductive rights; sexuality; and individual bodily autonomy. The relationship between theory and practice could be incomplete and full of contradictions. Nevertheless, the anarchist critique of male power served as a powerful metaphor that working women could draw on to speak to the issue of sexual harassment at work. Telephone operators Josefina Sotomayor and María Bustos were two such women, who were also considered "highly regarded public speakers in socialist circles".[14]

At an event organized by the Shop Employees Union held at the Colón Theater, Josefina Sotomayor spoke with a fiery oratory denouncing exploitative working conditions women faced. That exploitation included sexual exploitation. She told the crowd of workers gathered there that "many poor girls have been thrown into a life of vice due to the infamy of their boss".[15] While Sotomayor's accusations may seem veiled, newspapers reported similar concerns about sexual harassment. One journalist explained the poor service at Ericsson Telephone Company as due to "the shameful vexations of which *empleadas* are victim due to the behavior of the directors and employees, and even the public".[16]

Certainly, denunciations of sexual assault of working women served the rhetorical purpose of inciting anger and sympathy (Elizabeth Quay Hutchison 2001, 81-84). At the same time, as the examples add up, and are voiced by women, they take on new meaning, and these denunciations also read like descriptions of actual events. An article by María López, published in *Luz y Vida*, serves as an example. López painted a vivid image of the exploitation of working women as economic, social, and sexual beings:

> We women are nothing more than flowers, faded by the sickening habits of the all-consuming den of iniquity that we call work. How many of our sisters—no longer

[14] *The Mexican Herald*. 1915. "La reunión de hoy en el teatro Colón." June 27, 4.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Acción Mundial*. 1916. "Porque es deficiente el servicio en la Cia. de Teléfonos Ericsson?" May 15, 1.

> having sufficient energy to continue this sad life of the salaried woman, beleaguered by the horrendous vision of the shack in which a poor old woman and malnourished children wait for a crust of bread—throw themselves into the abyss where society's filth waits for her, thirsting with vile desire for the waste that the factory spits out.[17]

Office workers also spoke out against sexual harassment in feminist press that emerged in the 1920s. As Ana Lau shows, women from different walks of life came together under a capacious set of concerns during the 1920s (Lau Jaiven 2011). Many hundreds of women shared their experiences at work and attended conferences; some wrote or spoke to the newspapers; occasionally they took to the streets or showed up on the doorsteps of government offices. Indeed, the women's movement of the 1920s and 1930 was, in no small part, a labor movement. Working women brought issues to the table such as equal pay for equal work, the right of mothers and married women to work outside of the home, and the vote. A few women raised the subject of sexual harassment at work. When they did, however, it was not in the first person. By speaking in the third person, like López in the example above, a woman was able to protect her personal reputation while denouncing a form of discrimination and violence of which she may or may not have experience in part or whole. Thus, in the 1920s, the first complaints of sexual harassment at work were not made about personal experience, rather the author positioned herself as an advocate for others (Carolyn Steedman 1992, 82).

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

Ríos Cardenas then published the self-proclaimed feminist newspaper *Mujer* (1926-1929) that gave women a venue to discuss culture, politics, and work-related issues. In 1927, Ríos Cárdenas wrote of the trials women faced as they entered a new workspace: "The feminine soul hardened in the difficult and sarcastic struggle of human suffering". A front-page article in 1929 was more explicit in its denunciation of sexual harassment. Ríos Cárdenas recounted the story of a young office worker—referred to alternatively as *empleada*, *jóven*, and *chica*, whose boss invited her to take a walk with him.[18] "The modern-day tenorio tried to call a taxi, and the girl (*chica*) refused, asking:

> "—Where are we going?"
> "—I would like to spend some time with you, and, if you would allow it, have dinner together," the man answered.

Ríos Cárdenas followed the two to a restaurant and, like a detective, hid behind a plant to continue her observation. The man ordered a glass of wine. Shortly thereafter he tried to kiss the young woman. When she resisted, he threatened to fire her. While she continued to protest, the man aggressively kissed her on the neck. Ríos Cárdenas described the kiss as "loud", a description meant to invoke in the reader the shame the young woman felt at being

[17] María López. 1923. "Tribuna Feminista. ¡A formar consciencia, compañera!" *Luz y Vida*. July 21, 3, 4.

[18] María Ríos Cárdenas. 1929. "En las gradas del deshonor." *Mujer*. May 1, 1.

the object of such behavior. The girl then fled. Reflecting on the incident, Ríos Cárdenas lamented: "The office employee, the worker, and the campesina, should she be obliged to take on the double role of worker and lover? It seems so, given the behavior of most bosses with the women who report to them".[19] Dramatic details aside, Ríos Cárdenas' report was grounded in the types of behavior she had observed as characteristic of the "modern-day tenorio"—not a harmless flirtation but as part of a strategy of abuse made possible due to women's vulnerability within the workplace.

The feminist paper *Mujer* drew on a wide network of professional women for its columns, some of them also willing to share their perspective on workplace harassment. María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, for example, understood equality in the workplace as essential to combatting sexual harassment. García Sánchez Facio was a professional music composer, singing instructor, and active in the women's movement. She had, for example, represented Mexico at the Pan-American Conference of Women (1929). García Sánchez Facio had also won the contest "The Most Intelligent Woman in Mexico" carried out by *Mujer* magazine. In her article titled "Our Feminism", García Sánchez Facio held that "what is lacking is bosses with morality, that don't seek to shorten distances, that are respectful and demand morality and competency of their employees, not the latest fashion in dresses, not a willingness to go out on dates or outings".[20] García Sánchez Facio called for working conditions that centered on professional skills, not being available for one's boss. While she implied that some women were not professional, she also held that there were those who were. Equal pay for equal work would empower competent female employees. She wrote, "The only solution is to hire competent women willing to work, and to pay them the same wages that men receive".[21] Like Ríos Cárdenas, she did not write about her own experience but rather about a general phenomenon. And it is noteworthy that García Sánchez Facio wrote this article after she had left the workforce. For many, to denounce sexual harassment was more possible once they had distanced themselves from the space where such behavior occurred.

In response to reports of sexual harassment at work, the 1920s saw multiple efforts to control female bodies newly in public spaces and the workplace. The 1920s were years of rapid changes in the social role, labor force participation, and physical appearance of women. Conflicts arose over women's clothing, haircuts, or other physical aspects of the female body, conflicts that served as a mechanism to delimit the autonomy of women over their own bodies and selves. In 1924, for example, a group of male students attacked some women who had cut their hair *à la garçonne* or, as they were referred to in México, *las pelonas* (Anne Rubenstein 2010, 91-126). The men who attacked *las pelonas* not only wanted to express their distaste for the latest haircut, but to punish women's incursion into public spaces. In a similar effort to control women's bodies, in 1929 Congressman Sotelo, proposed that women working in government offices wear uniforms so as to counter widespread "indiscretions" (Porter 2018, 95). The debate over the use of uniforms filled the pages of newspapers.

While their reasons varied, women resisted control of their bodies as a means to respond to sexual harassment. Important newspapers, such as *Rotafolio,* joined in the debate with articles like "Las empleadas dicen …" by Juan Zaravé.[22] Most of the women interviewed for the article felt the initiative was misguided. Otilia Zambrano, who worked in the Ministry of Public Education, opined that men would always be tempted by women and that male government employees would have to get used to the presence of beautiful young women in the halls of government. She asserted that women had the right to act autonomously and that

[19] Ibid.

[20] María Elena de García Sánchez Facio. 1927. "Nuestro Feminismo." *Mujer*, April 1, 8.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Juan Zaravé. "Las empleadas dicen." Rotafolio, AGN, OZ, Correspondencia, caja 4, exp. 1, 1924-1932.

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

In their fight for control over their own bodies, empleadas continued to seek openings to expand their legal rights in the workplace. What legislation applied to public employees, however, was not clear. Throughout the decade of the 1920s, public employees had sought clarification as to whether they could claim rights as "workers" or, as the courts sometimes argued, as employees of the state they could not claim workers' rights. In 1929, as Congress debated a Federal Labor Law proposal, María Ríos Cárdenas reported in *Mujer* that she herself had typed a draft of article 90 of the proposed legislation. She also reported that the Minister of the Interior was an ally and noted that he had requested several modifications to the law to benefit not only workers and peasants, but public employees as well. Several articles in the proposed law were reported to reaffirm the constitutional right to maternity leave for female workers. Women who worked in the public sector wanted the same rights. In addition, Ríos Cárdenas stated, the law declared that "when a woman, due to an *atentado al pudor*, is forced to leave her job, she will have the right to three months wages".[23] The proposal left the perpetrator of sexual harassment unpunished, and the person who was the object of such behavior without a job. Concerned about the obvious victim-blaming, Ríos Cárdenas responded to the proposal with "no comment". Consistent with her belief in equality between men and women, her silence implied a questioning of why a woman would lose her job if a man was the aggressor. If in fact there was a discussion about whether to address sexual harassment in the proposed law, it did not make it either into the 1929 published version of the proposal or the final version of the Federal Labor Law published in 1931 (Mexico, Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo 1929). The Federal Labor Law (1931) simply stated "Workers shall be paid for lost time when they are unable to work as a result of their employers' actions".[24] There was no consideration, however, of the specific ways women may have found themselves in such a situation.

Conclusion

Working women in 1920s Mexico City had to navigate how to denounce sexual harassment in the workplace while protecting their personal and professional honor. Prior to the 1910s, although longstanding discussions of *atentado al pudor* infiltrated public discussions of harassment, the high stakes of a legal case led many observers, women and men alike, to refer to sexual harassment in other terms. Thus, references to "sarcasm", "temptations", "indiscretions", and "mixing the sexes" allowed women to raise awareness without using explicit descriptions. Women writing for the anarchist press drew from anarchist rhetoric of the exploitation of workers by capital, to denounce men's sexual harassment of working-class women. As examples accumulated, and women themselves spoke of sexual harassment at work, their denunciations became more concrete. Middle-class office workers also spoke out

[23] María Ríos Cárdenas. 1929. "Falta una cláusula en el Código Federal del Trabajo." *Mujer*, August 1, 5; and "El Código Federal del Trabajo y la mujer." *Mujer*, December 1, 13-14.

[24] *Diario Oficial de la Federación*. 1931. "Ley Federal del Trabajo." August 28, tomo LXIII, núm. 21-20.

against sexual harassment. By the 1920s, some Mexican feminists shifted to more explicit descriptions of sexual harassment, as was the case for María Ríos Cárdenas. Others, like María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, continued to shy away from direct language. When in the 1920s women like María Ríos Cárdenas, Otilia Zambrano, María Elena de García Sánchez Facio, and others spoke of sexual harassment, they spoke not of personal experience but that of others. Speaking in the third person allowed them to distance themselves as individuals from association with specific instances of sexual harassment. It also allowed them to disassociate such behavior from the middle-class status of their occupation.

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

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Economic and Business History Society for the invitation to make the keynote address for the 2022 conference and to publish in the Society's journal. I appreciate the warm reception and lively conversation.

The Author

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