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Styles, Strategies, and Issues of Women Leaders at the Border

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9 Styles, Strategies, and Issues of Women Leaders at the Border

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My first recollection of a social activist was a petite woman from Nogales, Sonora, dressed in perpetual black, who wore a crucifix and made the rounds of bars and restaurants to collect money for her life's mission: taking in abandoned and orphaned girls. She was known as Madre Conchita, mother of all the girl orphans in the community. Madre Conchita died in 1952, but her legacy and memory still live on. El Asilo de la Madre Conchita (Madre Conchita's Orphanage) in *colonia* Buenos Aires has become an institution in the community, providing shelter and love to many children. In Mexico's northern border cities, many women have followed the same path as Madre Conchita, serving as social activists to make their communities better places to live and to help the less fortunate.

This chapter focuses on the activist roles women have played in cities along Mexico's northern border. Like women in other parts of Latin America, Mexico, and the United States, women became the principal organizers, activists, leaders, and the movers and shakers who attracted the attention of government officials to meet their needs and to deliver basic services (V. Bennett 1995; Lind 1992; Pardo 1990). During the course of my research in northern Mexico, I found more women than men work as community activists and agents of change. Inadequate urban infrastructure (such as water, sewer systems, and electricity) adversely affects and increases household work. Because women usually are in charge of the home, they are the ones most affected by the lack of basic services and are thus motivated to resolve or address these infrastructural deficiencies (V. Bennett 1995, 106). This chapter highlights women's motivations for community activism and presents three ways they work to make their communities better places to live: functioning within existing governmental and political structures, creating *asociaciones civiles* (civil associa-

tions; ACs), and working independently. Although the motives for activism transcend class differences, women's class position determines how they engage in activism.

The Setting: La Frontera Norte

Since the inception of the Mexico's Programa de Industrialización Fronteriza (Border Industrialization Program; PIF) in 1965, tens of thousands of workers from the country's interior have found their way into northern border cities. They seek the employment opportunities that accompanied the arrival of the maquiladoras: foreign-owned assembly plants that take advantage of Mexico's cheap labor. While workers drawn to these border cities usually found jobs in the maquiladoras, they were left to their own devices to find or build housing for themselves and their families. *Colonias populares*¹ emerged on the outskirts of cities because workers had limited housing options in these areas where houses were scarce, and those that were available were not affordable. Access to mortgage loans or credit in Mexico is essentially non-existent, especially for the poor.

In Mexico, the inability of local, state, and federal governments to provide basic services led to the mobilization of residents in colonias populares. People organized to make demands on the local, state, and federal governments in order to force politicians to provide basic services to the *colonia popular*. The newly arrived are called *paracaidistas*, meaning literally parachutists, or squatters. They are individuals who, from one day to the next, helped set up the infrastructure for their own particular colonia popular. This experience of daily border life magnified particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s as workers and their families attempted to avail themselves of the basic necessities they expected from local governments. In Nogales, Sonora, long-term residents complained vehemently about the proliferation of colonias populares and accompanying negative externalities associated with the maquiladoras (Coronado 1998). Consequently, daily experience has become a harsher reality as these workers and their families, having moved north in search of better employment opportunities, frequently find themselves living in either the same or worse conditions than those they had hoped to escape. Under these conditions, female leadership has emerged.

Methodology and Research Questions

Feminist-research methodologies and an activist anthropological approach guide this work, based on the premise that feminist scholarship employs a variety of strategies for creating knowledge about women and their social worlds, often hidden from mainstream society (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004, 3). By definition, feminist research is change-oriented; all feminist research has action components (Reinharz 1992, 196), a commitment to political activism and social justice (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004, 3), and greater access to privileged sources of information than non-feminist ethnography. June Nash, in her foreword to *Women in Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope*, claims that the activist approach permits greater access to privileged sources of information than does non-feminist ethnography (2003, x).

For this work, I have drawn on my interactions with a large number of women activists on Mexico's northern border. Participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and casual conversations were part of the methodology employed over a fifteen-year period. Successful women activists along the border are highlighted for achieving certain goals. They worked to bring basic services to their colonias populares, raise awareness regarding violence against women, and engage policymakers to address environmental or health concerns.

In the past, the voices of activist women in the political arena have been denied, ignored, and even silenced in mainstream academic literature. Only a handful of studies have focused on women activists on Mexico's northern border (López Estrada, this vol.; Peña 1997; Staudt and Coronado 2002). Much border research on women focuses on the maquiladora sector (Cravey 1998; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Iglesias Prieto 1997; V. Ruiz and Tiano 1987). Scholars have also examined cross-border cooperation generally (Coronado and Padilla 2003) and specifically in the case of labor (Schmidt Camacho 1999). A recent surge in attention to violence against women in Ciudad Juárez has led to research on that topic (Portillo 2001, 2003) and on sex workers and their struggle for public space (Portillo 2003; Wright 2003), demands for justice by mothers of victims (Bejarano 2002), evolution of related women's organizations (Perez 2004), and the culture of femicide (Monarrez 2000). Other research has focused on women in political life in Latin America (Chaney 1979; Caske 1999) and

in Mexico (Barrera Bassols and Massolo 1998; Rodríguez 2003; Staudt 1998) and specifically on women in the city council in Ciudad Juárez (Hernandez 2001, 2004).

Women and Activism

Elsa Chaney's (1979) seminal work on women in Latin American politics set forth the notion that women viewed public service as an extension of household management, becoming *supermothers* (supermothers) of the nation by caring for and nurturing the citizenry as they would their own families. Women who delved into public service did so at lower levels of involvement and for limited amounts of time.

Still, women make connections between the private sphere of family and home and the public sphere of public politics. In her research with twenty-nine Latinas in Boston politics, Carol Hardy-Fanta (1997) reported that some women reported entering political activism as a slow-growing process of political consciousness; for others it was a quick *chispita* (spark) of recognition that a change was needed. She also found that Latinas drew upon family and cultural traditions and listed "helping others" as a major motivating force for their political activity. Hardy-Fanta concluded that, overall, the process of political consciousness for these Latinas is one of "making connections—between their own lives and those of others, between issues affecting them and their families in the neighborhood or community and those that affect them in the workplace" (Hardy-Fanta 1997, 233).

According to Thomas and Wilcox (1998), in the United States women are more likely than men to have entered politics from community volunteerism or women's groups. In her study of the Mothers of East Los Angeles, Mary Pardo contends that Latinas are able to transform traditional networks and resources based on family and culture into political assets (Pardo 1990). Other research has indicated that Latinas' participation in politics is due to both traditional motivations and commitment to their community (S. García and Márquez 2001).

Women report that pain, anger, and fear have served as mobilizing agents. For example, the tragic plight of the Mothers of the Disappeared demonstrates how in the midst of grief mothers organized to raise international awareness of the repressive government in Argentina (Fisher

1989). Ernesto Cortés (1993), in his Industrial Areas Foundation work in San Antonio, Texas, noted that activists usually become angry because of an injustice and then are motivated to become involved politically. In her work in Chiapas in the 1990s, Shannon Speed describes how indigenous women explained that fear of the Mexican military (which had murdered, pillaged, raped, and plundered) led them to take bold actions, blocking military incursions into their communities with their bodies, in some cases with children in their arms, in order to protect their families, their men, and crops (Speed 2003). This select body of literature uses various methodologies (including interviews, political meetings and workshops, participant observation, and testimonies of women) to demonstrate how diverse women become motivated to become involved in political activism at the border.

The following section is divided into two parts. First, I discuss women's motivations for entering the activist arena, drawing on the voices of women who participated in interviews (all of whom are identified with pseudonyms). Second, I focus on the three ways women tend to operationalize their activist work: through the existing political system, through the creation of an AC, or as independent activists.

Motivations for Activism

Border women's motivations are similar to those of activists elsewhere. The supermatrè phenomenon was a shared motivating factor among women. Several of the activists stated that they felt they were the mothers of the community; they said their maternal instincts of caring and nurturing and providing for their families transcended into the community. Like the women involved in politics in other parts of Latin America, some of these border women expressed they felt like the community caretakers. "Se nos ve como la mamá de todos" (We are seen as everyone's mother), asserted Fidelina, who was indeed a grandmotherly type.

Pain, Anger, and Fear-Based Activism

Another parallel can be drawn between border women activists and the experiences of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, the anger that Cortés (1993) describes, and the fear reported by women in Chiapas.

Leticia reported she became involved and active when she was consumed with anger over a house fire in a colonia popular that killed an entire family. "Something happened; the little house started to burn in the middle of the night, some of us awoke and tried to help with buckets of water, but it was of no help. The entire family died. I realized that lack of water, fire engines, and hydrants killed those poor people." She concluded, "Por eso me movilizé" (Because of that I mobilized).

Lamentably, many parallels can be drawn with the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, especially in Ciudad Juárez, where women became activists when their daughters disappeared or were found raped, mutilated, and murdered. The resultant pain, anger, and desperation led them to become activists seeking justice for their daughters. This was particularly true in response to the high number of cases (over 370) of murdered and disappeared women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City (Monarrez 2000, 2002; Sautt and Coronado 2002).

Need-Based Activism — La Chiapa

Women on the border also had similar experiences with women in Boston (Hardy-Fanta 1997) who recognized the need for social change. Clara, a self-described paracaidista, declared she became involved and politically active because people in her colonia did not have *tenencia de la tierra* (title to the land). Obtaining land is a particular problem for people who have journeyed to a border city, becoming squatters along with other low-income people and others seeking better lives. Squatters are usually careful to take over land that is federal government property; it is then generally easier to obtain title than if the land is privately owned. Private-land owners will not easily yield title to their land and sometimes demand compensation from the government. The title process requires involvement with a political party or lobbying a city council member. When the title is granted, a symbolic but important ceremony takes place in which government officials give the title to the family.

Without clear land title, it is unwise to demand public services because families and even entire colonias can be dislocated. Therefore, the first step is to obtain legal title and later demand basic local government services. Clara was successful obtaining title not only for her land, but also for that of thirty other paracaidista families.

Invited Activists

Entry into political activism occurred for Paula when, in the process of buying a small plot of land, paracaidistas took over her lot. She and her husband were very upset when they confronted the paracaidistas. During the course of the argument the paracaidistas, who were members of a political party, were so impressed they ended up yielding the land to Paula because she fought justly. In turn they invited her to work with their party. Although many of these activists are not part of the economic or political elite, they become part of the status quo economically, socially, culturally, and politically, finding ways to promote their causes in spite of their lack of social standing. Several Mexican politicians and activists cite "being invited to participate" as a reason for their entry into the political arena (Coronado 1998; Rodríguez 1998, 2003). Others refer to this as a selective recruitment process and sponsorship (Camp 2003).

Paula explained that "soy servidora para la persona que me necesite, no servidora pública" (I am here to serve the person who needs it, but I am not a public servant). She does not consider herself a public servant but rather a "server" of any person who needs her services. Paula claims she did not think of running for public office until someone in the party "me ofreció la candidatura" (offered me the candidacy). She emphasized launching her campaign "por la posibilidad de ayudar y hacer tanto por la gente desprotegida, a través del ejercicio del poder" (because of the possibility of helping and doing so much for the disenfranchised through the exercise of power).

The following motivating factors for entering the activist arena, as described by northern border women, are not as well developed in the existing literature: spiritual and religious activists, work-based activists, and outsourced activists. The last two may be unique to the border.

Spiritual and Religious Activists

Women on the border expressed their profound spiritual need to help others. Some women reported they felt they had a calling to help the less fortunate in their communities and that their activism was a manifestation of a spiritual need to be of service to others. Spiritual activists do not necessarily have religious linkages, though some declared they became

aware of the needs in the colonias when teaching catechism to colonia children, exposing them to the community problems. Through religious work they provided medical services and food baskets to those in need. Catalina, from Ciudad Juárez, summarized her sentiments: "My mission became helping those who are in need."

One activist Catholic sister, Luz, who works with prostitutes "one at a time," explained she did not do this for recognition, or for political or economic reasons. "This is the hard work of society; we have helped women to learn to sew, sell dresses, and have provided assistance to women in jail. We also try to help mothers to better interact with their children," she noted.

Work-Based Activists

Working middle-class women, who tended to be in professional settings, became activists as they became concerned about a particular social need not being met. For example, Teresa started an organization to help people with children who are chronically ill with diseases such as leukemia or cancer. Her paid work as a hospital professional was not sufficient; she also wanted to help those who did not have access to medical care. Carmen, another professional employee of the government, said her work at the Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social (Mexican Institute of Social Security; IMSS) introduced her to the need for day-care centers. She stated, "Through my work, though it was not really part of my job, I was able to help to document the need and fund more community day-care centers." Cecilia, a state government employee, realized more work needed to be done with gang prevention, so she lobbied for community youth programs. Through their formal employment, these three activists found ways to help their communities by garnering resources, making the necessary connections, and providing services that improved conditions.

Outsourced Activists

Outsourced activism is when an established activist sends her children or other extended family members to help with community projects, and in turn, the outsourced relative becomes involved in activist work. One activist proudly reported that her entire family was involved in activism

throughout the colonia, including her children, nieces, nephews, and in-laws living with her. Her activism had a multiplier effect upon her family, a consequence in which she felt great pride. In turn, some of her family members subsequently became actively involved in their own activist campaigns. One outsourced activist, Susana, reported her involvement started only because she saw how tired and overcommitted her mother was. One day, Susana's mother had agreed to help with the organization of a *ferrións* (a fundraising bazaar), and needed help. Susana explained: "I really didn't want to go because I knew it was a lot of work setting up booths and tables, but I wanted to help my mother. She asked me so I went. In the end, I became involved."

Activist Strategies and Organizations

On the border, activists tend to gravitate toward three models of activism: working within the political system, creating asociaciones civiles, and independent activism. The following examples of how women throughout the border region have been agents of change through their work illustrate these three models.

Political System Activism

In colonias populares, various important factors lead to successful activism by women. One factor is that colonias populares are usually low-income and low-resource areas with great social and infrastructural needs, where people spend an inordinate amount of time commuting to work on public transportation and spend long hours at work. They have little energy or time left over in the day to meet and strategize or to organize politically. The tremendous self-help and mutual support in colonias populares leads to community solidarity. When illness or death affects a community, people combine their resources to help afflicted families. Likewise, when building their own homes, people exchange labor and know-how among neighbors. Limited resources, energy, and time, along with limited access to telephone service and lack of awareness of public institutions, all preclude people from seeking government services on their own, creating opportunities for women to emerge as leaders in colonias populares.

Alicia, who taught catechism in her colonia, became an activist through her quest for social justice. Her parents and siblings all enjoy a sense of

social esteem because of Alicia's efforts. People seek her out when they have questions regarding a government office or a neighborhood concern, or when someone is ill or dies. Alicia's knowledge of, and access to, community resources and services are highly valued. Though her family at times feels that neighbors overburden Alicia with their problems and concerns, they are proud she can help others with social services or conduct *tramites con el gobierno* (government business) because of her education and activism.

Many of the activists who work in colonias discussed how one of the first tasks that they undertake is to *crear equipo* (create a team). They begin by organizing their neighbors, taking their demand (usually only one at the beginning) to the city council, and continuing to make demands until they have been recognized and their petition or demand has been met. Eventually, these small neighborhood organizations become *comites de vecinos* (neighborhood committees) that local governments support and encourage.

The delivery of basic infrastructure to a colonia is perhaps one of the most important issues in these activists' work. For example, Carmen described her evolution into activism: "First we had water delivered in *pipas* (water pipes), then we asked for garbage pickup, and next we demanded a school. Afterwards, we pushed for public transportation and, finally, for water and sewer infrastructure." Small successes in turn allow activists to work for bigger achievements over time. Some of the reported gains include natural gas connections, public telephones, construction of a bridge, and installation of sidewalks. *Gestionar* (to diligently pursue actions that will lead one to achieve a goal), an expression used by activists, is also the ability to discern how to work and which person to approach to achieve the desired goal. In this context, *gestionar* means much more: knowing how to make a demand, to whom to present the demand, and how to ask for government assistance or support.

Activism through Asociaciones Civiles

By the mid 1990s, over 5,000 non-governmental organizations, including asociaciones civiles (ACs), were registered in Mexico, mostly in urban centers (Camp 2003). The rise of ACs can be attributed in part to the role women played after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. On the northern border, environmental and labor ACs flourished prior to the ratification of

TABLE 9.1 Woman-Headed *asociaciones civiles*

Name	Place	Issues	Work
Amas de Casa de Playas de Tijuana, A.C.	Tijuana, Baja California	Environment, social, cultural	Legislative direct action, legislative education
Casa Amiga, A.C.	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	Women and violence	Advocacy, legal representation
Centro de Apoyo Contra la Violencia, A.C.	Nogales, Sonora	Women and violence	Counseling, advocacy
Centro de Investigación y Solidaridad Obrera, A.C.	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	Labor issues	Advocacy, worker education
Federación Mexicana de Asociaciones Privadas, FEMAP, A.C.	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	Health	Delivery of health services
Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, A.C.	Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	Women and violence	Advocacy, family support
Organización de Comunidades Pro-Vida Digna, A.C.	Matamoros, Tamaulipas	Health, <i>colonias</i> issues	Education, delivery of health services
Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental, A.C.	Tijuana, Baja California	Environmental	Legislative policy changes

the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in part because of financial and moral support from U.S.-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were opposed to NAFTA. Creating an AC requires knowledge, because it is a rather bureaucratic process, and money, because the services of an attorney are required. Northern border activists, either from the upper-middle class or with help from U.S.-based NGOs, are able to create their own ACs. These ACs, while affording more independence from the government, at the same time present greater challenges, especially in the state of Chihuahua, as shown in the example below (see also López Estrada, this vol.). Some ACs have been able to garner recognition and form alliances with international organizations and in some instances have been able to circumvent the government and address important issues such as labor rights, women's reproductive health concerns, and violence against women. Table 9.1 includes a list of a few of the ACs on the border headed by women.

According to television and newspaper accounts, international support of ACs, especially from women's rights organizations, is becoming an increasing problem for government officials in the state of Chihuahua, especially those working on cases of the murdered and mutilated women in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere. State government officials have called for an investigation into the source of such funding for certain groups with AC status, especially if it comes from foreign sources. Like 501(c)3s (non-profit organizations in the United States), ACs enjoy certain privileges; they also have responsibilities in terms of reporting their financial statements and their ability to lobby government officials is limited. The state of Chihuahua is scrutinizing local ACs that receive outside funding and recognition, which prevents the government from co-opting them, resulting in less government control of their words and actions. This is of serious concern to these ACs and their members; they fear their independence and autonomy are being challenged, especially when the government calls for audits of their books, demanding to see if they have received financial support from foreign sources.

Independent Activism

Independent activists tend to work directly with people and emulate the U.S. version of volunteerism to some extent. Olga is an independent

activist who spends time at the Casa del Migrante helping people who have been deported. She translates for deported Mexicans who have lived in the United States most of their lives and now find themselves in Mexico because they have committed a deportable federal crime. These deportees speak limited Spanish, are not socialized in Mexican culture, and are forced to find employment and negotiate new legal and political systems that are alien to them. Olga does this work because she feels that it is important to help others, but she does not receive any remuneration.

Teresa can be described as an independent activist who refuses to succumb to the government or to the conditions set forth by having an AC status. She works directly with people in need, as a volunteer if necessary. She will make demands of government officials for health care, organize rallies to protest violence against women, write letters to editors of newspapers to raise awareness of water contamination, or participate in radio shows to condemn political corruption, all without compromising her independence. Financially she survives on donations. Through her actions and deeds, people on both sides of the border feel comfortable giving her money because they know that she will make good use of it. One day I witnessed her immediately take a donation to a pharmacy to buy medicine for a ten-year-old boy who was ill.

A subset of independent activists are academics who become active because of their research interests in environmental issues, human rights and immigration, indigenous communities, and other areas. Academic activists tend to serve as advocates and consultants to individual community members who need technical assistance or guidance or to emerging leaders in organizations that deal with environmental issues. Academic activists present their findings to various government officials, write articles about their causes for newspapers, help move political agendas, and make public policy recommendations. Academic activists tend to work independently of political parties and to shy away from creating ACs. They may serve as volunteer consultants to both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Liliana, an academic who researches indigenous communities that have moved to the northern border, also gives time, money, and expertise to the same group she studies. Without compromising her academic integrity, she works directly with the community, lobbies policymakers who are in a position to help the community, and through her research hopes

to inform public policy. Independent activists are effective, though their radius of operation is seen by some as narrow and limited.

The Role of Class

Activists come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some activists are very low income; nonetheless, they are able to obtain services for their colonias. Low-income activists usually depend on public transportation, a time-consuming mode of transportation. They also rely on public telephones and use cyber cafés for e-mail. Activists who work at the grassroots in colonias populares tend to come from poor families. Since many of them work, mostly in maquiladoras or in the informal sector, and at the same time care for their families, they do not have much time to organize politically or create their own organizations. It is amazing to see how many activists are able to achieve their community-based goals in spite of their limited resources.

Activists tend to demand basic services that meet immediate and practical needs. They generally do not have time to fully develop a political strategy, unlike those who create asociaciones civiles. In the Mexican political context, it is not easy to obtain AC status because it requires money, an inordinate amount of paperwork, and legal expertise to facilitate the process. Therefore, for activists who cannot formally organize, it is important to maintain links to elected officials. Activists who have not formally organized and who have had some level of success are better able to work in their communities because of their ties to politicians who in turn facilitate the delivery of basic community services and resources. It would be virtually impossible to arrange garbage collection, water and sewer infrastructure, electricity, and so forth without collaboration between activists and government officials.

These activist experiences, either through the political party structure or through the creation of asociaciones civiles, give these women confidence, experience, and connections that later serve to move their political agendas in another way. Thus, experienced and seasoned activists are able to deliver to their communities, improving the quality of life on the northern border.

Middle-class activists usually have access to private transportation. They have resources such as home telephone service and computer access.

Wealthy activists are the exception and not the rule; however, these women are able to use their own private resources to finance and create their own AOs because they have the financial resources and also are able to garner more resources to create an infrastructure for service delivery. Wealthy activists are able to earn support for their causes because they provide services to the poor, work with women, and challenge the political and economic establishment only enough to get necessary support. Health-care delivery, services to women, and helping children are relatively safe political areas where upper-class activists can engage with the support of the political and economic elite. Non-governmental organizations, such as Federación Mexicana de Asociaciones Privadas (Mexican Federation of Private Associations; FEMAP) in Ciudad Juárez, subsidize the government by providing medical services to a large segment of the population.

Class differences have determined how activists interact with others. The low-income activists take great pride in knowing how to ask and whom to ask when requesting services for their colonias. As the saying goes: *el buen pedir para el buen recibir* (knowing how to ask well allows you in turn to receive well). Many of them carefully detailed how they approached members of the city council or the mayor, and described how they presented themselves as *bien arreglada* (well-dressed) when they submitted their petition or letter. They took pride in respecting public officials and felt they were accorded greater respect when they presented themselves in a similar manner. They tended to address each other and public officials with respect, using the formal *usted* (you) rather than the familiar *tú* (you) reserved for family members and friends. They felt their demands would more likely be met if they used greater formality when presenting requests.

Not all activists use such subtleties, regardless of economic class. Some activists have used different tactics, reporting they had reverted to protests; made vocal and in some cases outrageous demands; leveraged their demands by taking press members along; and finally, *hacer un escándalo* (made a scandalous scene) as the only way authorities would ever pay attention to them. In Ciudad Juárez, low-income people who wanted title to their land camped out in front of the *presidencia municipal* (city hall) until they received the titles.

Conclusion

Mexican women on the border are like Mexican, United States, and Latin American women in general in terms of activism. Rodriguez (2003, 6) declares that "women have invariably formed the backbone of social movements and other organized forms of protest aimed at articulating demands for basic services for their neighborhoods . . . in many cases for equality and fairness from the state in the delivery of goods and services. All this political activism, both formal and informal, has transformed the role of women in the political process during the last fifteen years." It is certain that women will continue their activism for years to come.

Activists come from different backgrounds, educational levels, and different family situations and economic circumstances; however, one thing they have in common is their commitment to social justice. By *haciendo actos, mostrando los logros* (doing things and showing achievements), they show society how women, those with limited resources but possessing serious conviction, can help contribute to the evolution of democracy and social justice. These women have achieved political goals, delivered services, met demands, raised awareness, and promoted social changes. A long-time committed activist stated that her goals are achieved with *constancia, sinceridad, y amor* (consistency, sincerity, and love).

As the border industrialization program that helped develop colonias and women activists is now changing direction, women activists will likewise change gears to meet new demands. With the recent closures of many maquiladoras, workers are being laid off, hired temporarily without benefits, or are permanently losing their jobs. Community activists are responding to these changes by developing strategies to help people find work or create their own employment opportunities. Ciudad Juárez in 2002 hosted 400 maquiladoras. One year later, over 100 of the factories had closed, leaving more than 85,000 people unemployed (Coronado Moreno 2003). Clearly, activists will need to put their energies in this area as formal jobs become more scarce and uncertain. Economic needs will increase and social demands will compound. Women like Madre Conchita and the other activists must continue their political activism in the border region and beyond.

Over time, I have met countless women who have made a difference in

a variety of ways, by helping members of the colonia populares gain title to land, compelling the city government to pick up the trash and provide other basic services, and addressing issues of violence against women and immigrants. Some activists work alone, others join forces with other women or organizations working on similar issues. Border women are not unlike their sisters in Latin America, other parts of Mexico, or the United States, but what sometimes sets them apart is their distance and alienation from each other.

Activists working in the region need more opportunities for collaborative work. They must unify their energies and resources in order to maximize their efficiency and efforts. The activist community on the border lacks horizontal integration. Activists in Matamoros could learn from their counterparts in Tijuana, and those in Nogales could share their experiences with those in Reynosa. What is also lamentable is that most research about community activism in northern Mexico is in English only, including my own work. More publications should be translated into Spanish and made available to community activists and residents. An effort must be made to foster unity, to strategize, and to share best practices that capitalize on the experiences of the seasoned activists on the border who have contributed so much.

10 Border Women's NGOs and Political Participation in Baja California

Silvia Lopez Estrada

The main goal of this chapter is the analysis of female political participation through the study of the social movement of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Mexican state of Baja California. I address the interaction of NGOs with their counterparts in the U.S. state of California, and I focus particularly on NGOs' influence on policymaking in the border city of Tijuana.

During the 1990s, the creation of NGOs institutionalized some aspects of the feminist agenda in Latin American countries, but in the context of global feminism, it is fundamental to emphasize local differences and to interpret feminisms in light of prevalent sociohistorical and political conditions (Dietz 1990; Jelin 1994).

In this chapter, I propose that in Baja California, women's ways of doing politics are changing in response to new local geopolitics, which in part are determined by the state reform¹ that currently is in process. Because much research has focused attention on the feminist movement in Mexico City, this chapter is intended to fill the void about regional spaces using the northern border as an example. This analysis is based on empirical data from interviews with women members of NGOs and is supported by the sociological literature on women's political participation in Latin America.

The chapter begins with an overview of theoretical debates concerning feminism, non-governmental organizations, and women's political participation. I then present the methodological issues that guided this study. After offering a profile of women's NGOs in Baja California, I analyze their interaction with similar organizations in California. In the next section, I examine NGOs' influence in policymaking, using as an example the case of Tijuana's Subcommittee of Women's Affairs. In the conclusions, I discuss some of the problems and challenges that feminist NGOs included in this study face as participants in local politics.