

Vendors, Mothers, and Revolutionaries: Street Vendors and Union Activism in 1970s Puebla, Mexico¹

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Using oral history interviews, this article explores the different types of work that female street vendors carried out in one of Mexico's largest cities during the 1970s. It shows that downtown streets were hybrid spaces where female vendors sold merchandise, cared for their children, and built communities among themselves and other members of society. In the early 1970s, local authorities increasingly harassed vendors and sought to remove them from public spaces by employing police repression. Under these circumstances, vending and caregiving became more difficult and dangerous. In the face of such opposition, vendors decided to form an independent street vendors' union, the Unión Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes (UPVA). The union's creation rested on support networks that women built over time. Female vendors used the union to solve their problems as vendors and as mothers.

At 1 A.M. on 28 October 1973, hordes of police arrived at one of Puebla's makeshift, open air street markets. In an effort to expel hundreds of vendors from downtown streets, officers tore down and torched dozens of stalls. Over the course of a few hours, the police destroyed merchandise and beat sellers, forcing men, women, and children to run for their lives. From the street vendors' perspective, the timing of the raid could not have been worse. The Day of the Dead, one of Mexico's most sacred religious holidays, was approaching, and vendors had anticipated many busy days of selling flowers, incense, bread, fruits, and candles. Sellers, eager to greet large numbers of consumers, had slept on the streets with their families to secure the best spots to sell their merchandise. Yet city authorities did not care about vendors' needs. According to witnesses, officers drove their cars on sidewalks, injuring many and even killing some. The most disturbing casualty was a vendor's baby who burned to death after police set merchandise and stalls on fire.² The baby was one of the many street vendors'

¹ I would like to thank Elizabeth Q. Hutchison, Nara Milanich, and Jocelyn Olcott for their insightful suggestions on a previous version of this article. I am also grateful to Robert Alegre, Molly Johnson, Chad Pearson, and Gregory Swedberg for their thoughtful comments.

² Interview with Yolanda Bejarano, Puebla, México, 17 March 2007.; interview with Paula Javier, Puebla, México, 25 January 2007, and Walter K. Vanderbush, "Independent Organizing in

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children who slept on the streets with their mothers. For female vendors who simultaneously sold products and took care of young children on the streets, police violence was particularly vexing.

At the end of the fall of 1973, after years of facing numerous problems on the streets, including the October raid, vendors formed the *Unión Popular de Vendedores Ambulantes* (UPVA).³ Like many of the unions that emerged in the early 1970s during President Luis Echeverría's administration, the UPVA operated independently from the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).⁴ Unlike most unions of that time, the UPVA was made up of workers from the informal sector.⁵ These vendors were self-employed, lacked a guaranteed income and selling spots, did not enjoy state benefits, and had no laws protecting their work. More important, female vendors were active members of this union. Indeed, women helped build the UPVA and occupied leading positions in it, a point overlooked by scholars who have studied this street vendors' organization.⁶

Puebla, Mexico, 1961-1992: Social Movements, the Struggle for Autonomy, and Democratization" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1993), 234.

³ Years later, vendors named the union the *UPVA-28 de Octubre* in remembrance of that violent police raid. In the mid-1980s, the union reached its peak with 10,000 members. The UPVA continues to exist to this day as an independent union. According to Gareth Jones and Ann Varley, by the mid-1980s, the UPVA was the largest street vendors' union outside the country's capital and became the main organization that represented vendors in Puebla. Gareth Jones and Ann Varley, "The Contest for the City Centre: Street Traders versus Buildings," *Bulletin of Latin American Research Review* 13.1(1994): 32.

⁴ According to Ian Roxborough, in the 1970s there were more than a hundred new independent unions in the country. For a discussion of their extent and limitations see Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico: The Case of the Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); for a study of three independent unions in Puebla see Vanderbush, "Independent Organizing"; for steelworkers and the limits of Echeverría's democratic opening see Michael Snodgrass, "How can We Speak of Democracy in Mexico? Workers and Organized Labor in the Cárdenas and Echeverría Years," in *Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría*, ed. Amelia M. Kiddle and María L.O. Muñoz (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2010), 159-173. After his participation in the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City, Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) tried to clean up his image by promoting the so-called democratic opening, which included the creation and support of independent unions from the PRI.

⁵ Street vendors are part of the informal economy, which is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world. According to official data, in the first months of 2012, the informal sector represents over 29 per cent of the Mexican economic active population. Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *Población Ocupada en el Sector Informal*, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/inegi/contenidos/espanol/prensa/comunicados/estrucbol.pdf>

⁶ Several scholars have written about the UPVA but have downplayed or ignored the roles of women in the union. For an institutional history of the UPVA to the mid-1980s see Jaime Castillo Palma, "El movimiento urbano popular en Puebla," in *Los Movimientos Sociales en Puebla*, ed.

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In the 1970s, Puebla's streets were filled with female vendors. Official archival sources indicate that, during the 1970s, women represented approximately half of the street vending population.⁷ Visual evidence, especially photographs located at Puebla's historical municipal archive and pictures published in the city's most widely-circulated newspaper, *El Sol de Puebla*, show the ubiquity of female vendors and their children.⁸

Oral history is essential to properly understand female vendors' economic and political roles on Puebla's streets. Interviewing is necessary because traditional archival sources minimize women's working lives and their participation in union organizing. Local archival documents mainly consist of letters from vendors to authorities in which they petitioned to obtain temporary permits to sell on the streets, requested fee waivers, and complained about abusive officials.⁹ Unable to sign and print their names, groups of male and female vendors sent letters which consisted only of inked digital print or shaky

Jaime Castillo (Puebla: DIAU, ICAUP, 1986), 219-261. For the 1986 removal of vendors from downtown, see Jones and Varley, "The Contest for the City Centre," 27-44. For an assessment of UPVA's internal democracy see Vanderbush, "Independent Organizing," 223-265.

⁷ A unique 1969 census taken by the Mexican Labor Ministry showed that out of 228 street vendors listed in downtown Puebla, 51 per cent were women. *Census, Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, Depto. de Registro de Asociaciones*, box 42, file 319, 1969, *Archivo Histórico Municipal de Puebla* (hereafter AHMP). A 1979 city government report noted that less than 45 per cent were women. Raúl Iragorri, *Diagnóstico del ambulante y sus posibles soluciones* (Puebla: H. Ayuntamiento), 55.

⁸ Neither set of photographs was intended to record vendors' presence. Instead, photographs were commissioned by city officials to keep a visual record of certain streets, scenes of markets, and of mayors' political activities. The municipality published some of these pictures in "Informes de Gobierno," the mayors' yearly reports. AHMP.

⁹ See "Expedientes de Mercados" at the AHMP. For other cities and periods, petitions became the main sources that scholars have used to study female vendors and marketers. See Judith E. Marti, "Nineteenth-Century Views of Women's Participation in Mexico's Markets," in *Women Traders in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Linda Seligmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 27-44 and her "Breadwinners and Decision Makers: Nineteenth Century Mexican Women Vendors," in *The Other Fifty Percent: Multicultural Perspectives on Gender Relations*, ed. Mari Womack and Judith E. Marti (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1993), 218-24; Christina M. Jiménez, "Making the City Their Own: Popular Groups and Political Culture in Morelia, Mexico, 1880 to 1930" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2001) and "Performing their right to the city: political uses of public space in a Mexican city, 1880-1910s," *Urban History* 33.3 (2006): 435-56; Pablo Piccato, "Urbanistas, Ambulantes and Mendigos: The Dispute for Urban Space in Mexico City, 1890-1930," in *Reconstructing Criminality in Latin America*, ed. Carlos A. Aguirre and Robert Buffington (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 113-48; and Susie S. Porter, *Working Women of Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003) and "And that it is custom makes it law": Class Conflict and Gender Ideology in the Public Sphere, Mexico City, 1880-1910," *Social Science History* 24,1 (Spring 2000): 111-148.

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signatures. Federal archival documents also have their limitations. These sources consist of secret police reports that trace the activities of the UPVA.¹⁰ Focusing on the top leadership and its relationship with other organizations, undercover agents seemed oblivious to women and hardly ever mentioned them in reports. And when they did, agents immediately pointed to their relationships to men.¹¹ The minimization of female vendors in Mexican official documents requires scholars to document their lives through women's own voices.

Drawing mainly on oral interviews, this article shows that female vendors and their families turned streets into hybrid spaces, which served as their workplaces, their homes, and their communities. In addition to selling, vendors used streets to perform work traditionally associated with the private sphere; the streets became sites where they fed, entertained, and cared for their children for long hours. And as children grew older, the same streets were places where they worked alongside their mothers, taking care of stalls and younger siblings, allowing their mothers to participate in union activities. Additionally, the streets also constituted communities where they socialized with each other and established political connections with the larger society, particularly with left-wing students in the early 1970s.

The streets were also sites of conflict. On occasion, vendors fought among themselves over prices and over space. Paula Javier remembers tensions she had with other vendors: "*When I began selling, I sold oranges. I didn't know how to work. I didn't know how much to charge and I sold them for cheap. The other women got mad because I sold cheap.*"¹² These internal conflicts were overshadowed by problems with city authorities. On a daily basis, street vendors faced abusive and corrupt municipal employees who collected multiple fees from vendors for the use of public space. But vendors' most problematic interaction on the streets was with police officers. Following the orders of politicians, the police beat, arrested, and removed vendors and their families from public spaces in violent ways. The 1973 raid was the sharpest expression of this repression.

This article argues that daily sociability on the streets, increasing police repression, and vendors' political links with students facilitated the organization

¹⁰ In 1975, the federal government through the *Secretaría de Gobernación* began infiltrating the UPVA. The file can be consulted as "*Mercado 28 de Octubre*," *Departamento Federal de Seguridad (DFS)*, *Archivo General de la Nación (AGN)*. Many organizations, individuals, and guerrilla groups were infiltrated by the government.

¹¹ On one report, a police agent referred to a female vendor and organizer as "the lover of Bulmaro Vega." "*Mercado Popular 28 de Octubre*," *DFS*, File 100-19-1-77, legajo 59, page 42, September 20, 1977, *AGN*.

¹² Interview with Paula Javier.

of an independent street vendors' union.¹³ It also demonstrates that, once organized, women merged work-based demands with 'home-based' struggles. After vendors created the union, women demanded that authorities build enclosed markets with all the basic services in downtown Puebla, the most lucrative commercial location in the city. In these markets, they could enjoy fixed stalls that would help them secure their livelihoods and facilitate their work as vendors and as mothers. Such a location also promised protection from police violence.

The historical presence of vendors in Mexico has attracted considerable attention from scholars of Mexico. Such scholars have taught us much about Mexico City's vendors and their relationship to authorities over the use and regulation of public space from the *Porfiriato* (1876-1910) to the immediate post-revolutionary period (ca. 1930s). This scholarship has demonstrated the early difficulties faced by vendors. During these years, vendors tried to make a living by selling their wares in streets, plazas, and markets while political and economic elites attempted to control the use of public space by enacting a series of rules that forbid vendors from selling in public areas. Pablo Piccato, Christina Jiménez and, more recently, Mario Barbosa Cruz have studied how vendors resisted and negotiated such regulations with authorities.¹⁴ Focusing on women and gender, Susie Porter and Judith E. Martí have analyzed elite discourses that targeted female vendors, as well as women's strategies to counteract these attacks.¹⁵

Other scholars have focused on Mexico City's vendors during the second half of the 20th century. Such scholars have explored street vendors' political roles. In a pioneering work, sociologist John Cross studied street vendors' unions

¹³ Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, scholars tended to downplay street vendors' political activities. In a classic work on street vendors in Lima, Peru, Ximena Bunster noted that female street vendors did not have the time to get involved in political activities or develop ties with coworkers due to the fact that they worked in isolation. Ximena Bunster and Elsa M. Chaney, *Sellers and Servants: Working Women in Lima, Peru* (New York : Praeger, 1985), 117. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto stated that street vendors were incipient and pragmatic business owners who preferred to act individually rather than as a collectivity; see *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 69-86. For Puebla, political scientist Walter K. Vanderbush, suggested that unlike factory workers and university employees, street vendors had "very few of the resources [a long tradition of union organizing and formal education] that are assumed to contribute to effective popular opposition [against political and economic elites]"; see his "Independent Organizing," 227.

¹⁴ Piccato, "Urbanistas, Ambulantes and Mendigos"; Jiménez, "Making the City Their Own," and her "Performing their right to the city"; and Mario Barbosa Cruz, *El trabajo en las calles: subsistencia y negociación política en la ciudad de México a comienzos del siglo XX* (México: El Colegio de México, 2008) and "Trabajadores en las calles de la ciudad de México: subsistencia, negociación y pobreza urbana en tiempos de la Revolución," *Historia Mexicana* LX.2 (Octubre-diciembre 2010): 1077-1118.

¹⁵ Porter, *Working Women*; Martí, "Nineteenth-Century Views."

and their ability to negotiate and even influence certain urban policies.¹⁶ Most of these unions were, however, official unions co-opted by the PRI. In practice, co-optation meant that the party chose union leaders, and unions did not enjoy internal democracy. Moreover, in federal and state elections, the PRI forced union members to vote for its own candidates. In 1977, for instance, the leader of a PRI-affiliated street vendors' union, Luz María Lara, openly admitted that the members of her organization always had to vote for PRI candidates.¹⁷

While these studies contributed tremendously to our understanding of vendors' political activities, we know very little about the participation of rank-and-file female sellers. Responding to this omission, my study places female street vendors at the centre, not only of economic activities, but also of the process of independent union organizing. Moving away from Mexico City and the early decades of the 20th century, my work explores women's different labours on the streets and studies women's participation in organizing a street vendors' union, which remained independent of PRI.

My work relies on oral history interviews with rank-and-file women and those who helped establish the UPVA.¹⁸ I use oral interviews to capture the nature and intricacies of female vendors' work and experiences on the streets. Historians of Latin America, especially those who have written on labour, have used this approach since at least the mid-1980s. Indeed, historians have taught us a great deal about workers' experiences on and off the shop floor, including their involvement in political activities.¹⁹ A decade later, labour historians of Latin America not only incorporated oral histories, but also placed women and gender at the forefront of their narratives. These historians have also explored working-class men's and women's collective and individual identities in the textile industry, meat packing, mining, and agricultural sectors. A growing number of historians of Mexico have joined their counterparts in other parts of Latin America by using oral history methodologies to describe the labour and everyday

¹⁶ John C. Cross, *Informal Politics: Street Vendors and the State in Mexico City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Gary I. Gordon, "Peddlers, Pesos, and Power: The Political Economy of Street Vending in Mexico City," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1997).

¹⁷ "Mercado Popular 28 de Octubre," *DFS*, file 100-19-1-77, legajo 59, page 268, October 28, 1977, AGN.

¹⁸ The scholars who have written about the UPVA interviewed male vendors exclusively. This is probably explained by the fact that by the early 1990s, when they completed their research, male leaders were most visible in the UPVA. Jones and Varley, "The Contest for the City Centre," and Vanderbush, "Independent Organizing."

¹⁹ See for example, Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

life of people in the textile, railroad, and agricultural sectors.²⁰ For the most part, historians who have conducted oral history interviews have focused on the formal sector, and yet, we still need to know more about workers' voices in the informal economy, including their roles in organizing.²¹ This remains an especially important area of study for women's history, since women play important roles in the informal sector.

Oral interviews also provide insights into female vendors' various identities. Women identified themselves, above all, as workers, mothers, and union activists. Although they enjoyed some autonomy and control over their time, vendors did not identify themselves as small-sized entrepreneurs. They struggled economically and their work was laborious, offering few material rewards. For vendors, selling was not simply tending to their merchandise and waiting for consumers to buy it. The process consisted of choosing merchandise, sorting it, carrying it, peeling vegetables, and preparing food for sale. Moreover, female vendors made the politically conscious choice of identifying themselves as "workers" as opposed to "owners." Women I met had participated in the union for many years, had been involved in local political activities, and had maintained close relationships with former left-wing students. Many, like Paula Javier, became politicized. Javier, for instance, remembered an encounter that she had with one of Puebla's mayors in which she told him: "*We've come to see you because we want markets. We are citizens, workers, and, as mothers, we have to support our children. Men have no jobs. What are we supposed to do? We need a market.*"²²

Finally, it is clear that women's union involvement was a strong component to their identity. Their participation in the UPVA gave them greater confidence. The Poblana vendors in this study positioned themselves as important actors in the economic survival of their children, in organizing, and in sustaining

²⁰ Greg Crider, "Material Struggles: Workers' Strategies During the 'Institutionalization of the Revolution' in Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico, 1930-1942," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996); Gabriela Soto Laveaga, *Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and Robert Alegre, *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory*, University of Nebraska Press (forthcoming).

²¹ Two important contributions to this topic include Elizabeth Quay Hutchison, "Shifting Solidarities: The Politics of Household Workers in Cold War Chile," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 91.1 (February 2011): 129-162, and Kate Hardy, "Incorporating Sex Workers into the Argentine Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77.01 (March 2010): 89-108.

²² Interview with Paula Javier.

the union.²³ Reflecting upon her life, Yolanda Bejarano, a street vendor, single mother, and former UPVA leader, said, “we, women, were vendors, mothers, housewives, and revolutionaries.”²⁴ Bejarano was right. Poblana vendors were revolutionaries because they helped build the UPVA, the largest independent union of street vendors outside the country’s capital, which challenged the PRI’s co-optation of unions. And they did so in a period of time when despite an official rhetoric of a democratic opening, the state fiercely repressed those who threatened the status quo.²⁵



Street vendors in downtown, Administración Cué Merlo, 1975-1978, Fototeca, Archivo Histórico Municipal de Puebla.

²³ In interviews, other Mexican women have downplayed their roles in social movements and have been limited by their husbands to talk about their lives. See for example two important works that use oral histories to place women at the centre of activism in modern Mexico: Alegre, *Railroad Radicals* and Lessie Jo Frazier and Deborah Cohen, “Mexico ‘68: Defining the Space of the Movement, Heroic Masculinity in the Prison, and ‘Women’ in the Streets,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 83.4 (November 2003): 617-660.

²⁴ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano.

²⁵ For the brutality of the Mexican state from the 1960s to the 1980s, see Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo, ed. *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War* (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Alexander Aviña, “‘We have returned to Porfirian Times’: Neopopulism, Counterinsurgency, and the Dirty War in Guerrero, Mexico, 1969-1976,” in *Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría*, ed. Amelia M. Kiddle and Maria L.O. Muñoz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 106-134.

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Female vendors: a collective portrait

In oral interviews, we learn that female vendors were poor, *de facto* single mothers of several children, heads of households, and providers of childcare. Most faced many struggles. Gabina Rodríguez was born in 1937 near the town of Cholula in the state of Puebla: “*My grandparents raised me. I used to work the land with my husband. We grew everything we could. But he got diabetes. He used to beat me a lot. Then he abandoned me. I had four children and no employer was going to accept me with four kids. That is why I decided to become a street vendor. I carried my youngest child on my back with my rebozo. I didn’t tie him too tight, just enough to hold him securely.*”²⁶ Rodríguez’s case was typical. While some had husbands or partners, men were hardly involved in the children’s upbringing and economic survival. For example, Paula Javier maintained that her husband was hands-off when it came to providing for the family: “*The truth is that my husband was very dejado (lazy) and I had to do everything. When one didn’t have anyone to take care of children at home, children grew up on the streets by one’s side. I used to take five kids (chamacos) to the streets. I was constantly counting them to make sure they were all with me: one, two, three, four, five. And even if they got all dirty and looked unkept (mugrosos), I always kept an eye on them. Sometimes, in high commercial season, we even slept on the streets. Their home was the street.*”²⁷ Juana Sánchez, another vendor, got divorced in the mid-1960s; her ex-husband who was also a vendor was a chronic alcoholic, and did not provide a single penny to support their children.²⁸ Female vendors carried out household responsibilities and worked continuously to sustain themselves and their families.

Like Rodríguez, many of these female vendors were recent migrants from the countryside who sought to improve their economic conditions by moving to regional capital cities such as Puebla in search of work. Poverty, combined with a lack of employment and educational options in rural areas, pushed thousands to migrate.²⁹ Women’s experiences in the countryside before migrating were

²⁶ Interview with Paula Javier; interview with Gabina Rodríguez, Puebla, México, 20 January 2007.

²⁷ Interview with Paula Javier.

²⁸ Interview with Juana Sánchez, Puebla, México, 30 August 2007.

²⁹ At the end of the 1960s, migrants from the Puebla-Oaxaca-Guerrero Mixteca, one of the most impoverished areas in Mexico, even ventured to the US-Mexican border to work as vendors. Carmen Martínez Novo, “The ‘Culture’ of Exclusion: Representations of Indigenous Women Street Vendors in Tijuana, Mexico,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22.3 (2003): 251. By the early 1970s approximately 800,000 *campesinos* were looking for jobs in Mexico’s urban areas. Vanderbush, “Independent Organizing,” 234.

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diverse. Paula Javier migrated as a young woman from the town of Santa Inés in the impoverished Mixteca Poblana where she had no chances to survive. She left her first husband and children and never returned. Gloria Reyes (pseudonym) arrived in Puebla from Oaxaca as a child. Her parents thought that she would have better economic and educational opportunities in Puebla. They sent her to live with her grandmother and together they sold corn on the cob on the streets.³⁰ Many people believed that they had better chances to support themselves in urban areas. They were partially right.

Toward the end of the so-called Mexican Miracle, Puebla was a magnet for those seeking to make a living in the formal and informal sectors.³¹ Since the mid-1960s, Puebla, a traditionally cotton-textile industrial city, had welcomed the arrival of heavy industries such as *Hojalata y Lámina (Hylsa) de México*, Volkswagen, Alumex, and *Cementos Atoyac*.³² These new industries boosted Puebla's economy. Volkswagen employed over 7,000 people, and in 1971, Hylsa employed 1,500 people.³³ A vibrant construction industry followed. In the mid-1960s and 70s, developers constructed thousands of homes and *unidades habitacionales* (housing projects). Between 1973 and 1979, for example, about 8,701 working-class homes were built.³⁴

But the women who arrived in Puebla and became street vendors were not looking for jobs in these industries, which for the most part employed men exclusively.³⁵ Instead, they sought to tap into the informal opportunities set in motion by rapid urbanization and economic development. Domestic service was one option, but for mothers of young children, this job was hard to obtain and keep. Usually employers preferred women without children.³⁶ Street vending,

³⁰ Interview with Gloria Reyes, Puebla, México, 28 January 2007.

³¹ The Mexican Miracle refers to the sustained economic growth that the country experienced from approximately 1940 to the end of the 1960s.

³² Rosalina Estrada Urroz, *Del telar a la cadena de montaje: la condición obrera en Puebla, 1940-1976* (Puebla, BUAP, 1997), 39. The literature on Puebla's textile industry is extensive. For two relatively recent works that address the industry from a labour and business perspective respectively, see Jeffrey Bortz, *Revolution Within the Revolution: Cotton Textile Workers and the Labor Regime 1910-1923* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) and Susan Gauss, *Made in Mexico: Regions, Nation, and the State in the Rise of Mexican Industrialism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

³³ Estrada Urroz, *Del telar a la cadena*, 36-37.

³⁴ Estrada Urroz, *Del telar a la cadena*, 236-238.

³⁵ In 1965 only 3 per cent of the textile workers were women. Susan Gauss, "Masculine Bonds and Modern Mothers: The Rationalization of Gender in the Textile Industry in Puebla," *International Labor and Working Class History* 63 (Spring 2003): 64.

³⁶ Historian Ann S. Blum noted that employers preferred childless women to work as domestics; see "Cleaning the Revolutionary Household: Domestic Servants and Public Welfare in Mexico City, 1900-1935," *Journal of Women's History* 15.4 (Winter 2004): 70-73, 78. For Chile, Nara Milanich has noted that historically some employers preferred to hire adult women and their

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however, offered flexibility and thus allowed mothers of young children to earn a living while engaging in childcare.

Streets as workplaces

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, vendors sold on the streets and sidewalks of downtown Puebla, especially surrounding two enclosed large markets, the *Mercado Cinco de Mayo* and *Mercado La Victoria*. At that time, most commercial activity was concentrated in this area. Besides markets, the city centre contained small shops, department stores, restaurants, bars, and bus stations. Poblanos established their businesses, went to their jobs, and shopped in the heart of the city. Blue-collar workers, construction laborers, and their families bought all sorts of products from street vendors. Indeed, street vendors provided an important service to working-class people. Vendors offered inexpensive goods that customers bought at all hours.

Most vendors maintained very modest stalls, which consisted of burlap, cardboard, and plastic mats on the ground, and empty fruit boxes upside down where they set up their merchandise.³⁷ Their stalls were also easy to move. In cases of police raids, which were frequent, vendors were ready to flee with their merchandise. Yolanda Bejarano remembers that on the eve of the 1973 raid, “*I was selling sugar canes. I placed the canes on an opened burlap bag. If inspectors came, I could grab the four corners, pick my canes, and run.*”³⁸ Like Bejarano, most vendors found creative ways to protect their merchandise and safeguard it from officials.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the vast majority of vendors sold fruits, vegetables, flowers, notions, clothes, and prepared food, but the specific kind of merchandise changed seasonally.³⁹ At the end of the fall, in preparation for the Day of the Dead, sellers sold incense, candles, bread, sugar cane, and *cempasuchitl* flowers. In December, the same sellers sold peanuts,

children to serve as domestics. Nara Milanich, “Women, Children, and the Social Organization of Domestic Labor in Chile,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 91. 1 (2011): 41.

³⁷ Most of the vendors who later organized into the UPVA, even if they had very modest stalls, were independent sellers; they owned their stalls and merchandise and did not labour for wholesalers, established market sellers in public markets, or shopkeepers.

³⁸ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano.

³⁹ For fascinating works on the kinds of products that vendors sell in contemporary Mexico see Carlos Alba Vega, “Local Politics and Globalization from Below: The Peddler Leaders of Mexico City’s Historic Center Streets” in *Globalization From Below: The World’s Other Economy*, ed. Gordon Mathews et al., Routledge (forthcoming), and John Cross, “Pirates on the high streets: the street as a site of local resistance to globalization” in *Street Entrepreneurs: People, Place, and Politics in Local and Global Perspective*, ed. Alfonso Morales and John Cross (London: Routledge, 2007), 125-143.

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fruits, and piñatas for *posadas*.⁴⁰ Vendors were constantly seeking ways to diversify their merchandise in order to attract clients.

On the streets, vendors spent long hours not only vending, but also preparing their goods for sale. Most vendors bought products in bulk from wholesalers or producers. In many instances, spoiled products got mixed with fresh ones, forcing vendors to sort them out before displaying them. A typical vendor spent hours peeling dozens of onions, removing needles from cacti (*nopales*), making bunches of radishes, beets, cilantro, parsley, and other herbs while standing or sitting behind her stall waiting for customers.⁴¹ Street vendors also chopped various vegetables, such as carrots, then mixed them in equal quantities with peas, green beans, and corn, and placed them in plastic bags. This extra work added monetary value to their merchandise.

This apparently simple task also simplified the domestic work that female consumers performed at their homes. Busy women preferred to buy fresh and ready-to-cook vegetables, which saved them a considerable amount of time, while cooked food benefited working-class people who had no kitchens in their impoverished homes.⁴² In the 1960s and 1970s, Puebla's downtown tenements still lacked some of the basic services such as the availability of running water, and kitchens.⁴³ Street vendors' work contributed to the social reproduction of a mainly working-class clientele.

Most female street vendors worked collectively. Their older children helped them fulfill different tasks.⁴⁴ While infants and toddlers often burdened their mothers, older children played an instrumental role in their family's economic survival by working for their mothers' stalls. Beginning roughly at age six, children carried products, pushed dollies, cleaned the vending sites, and learned the basics of the trade.⁴⁵ Gabina Rodríguez, a single mother of four was

⁴⁰ Interview with Paula Javier; interview with Teresa Rosales, Puebla, México, 16 July 2010.

⁴¹ Interview with Paula Maldonado, Puebla, México, 25 April 2007. Anthropologist Florence Babb has pointed out that market women's work should be considered as productive labour. On top of cleaning, sorting, and preserving merchandise, they also add value to the goods they sell, especially prepared food. Florence Babb, *Between the Field and the Cooking Pot: The Political Economy of Marketwomen in Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 180.

⁴² Jeffrey Pilcher, "Was the Taco Invented in Southern California?" *Gastronomica* 8.1 (Winter 2008): 26-38.

⁴³ Estrada Urroz, *Del telar a la cadena*, 232-3.

⁴⁴ Bunster and Chaney were among the first scholars who devoted a lot of attention to the sellers' and domestics' children's work noting the critical role they played among the urban poor in Peru; see their *Sellers and Servants*, 117-118 and 170-207.

⁴⁵ All the vendors that I interviewed have at least one child who continues working as a street vendor. All women were extremely proud that they raised their children by themselves and taught their children how to trade. None of them perceived their children's labour as an exploitative relationship despite the fact that these children did not receive any monetary compensation for

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especially thankful for this work. Early in the morning, Rodríguez bought the produce from a wholesaler, and her eldest son helped carry the merchandise. Another son typically worked on the street, swept the ground, and set the plastic mats on the sidewalk. When Rodríguez arrived to her downtown stall, her son had it ready for her. All of Rodríguez's children attended school, but each out of necessity provided critical labour to their mother. As Rodríguez pointed out proudly, "my children and their mom worked together."⁴⁶ Like Rodríguez, female vendors' commercial success relied in large part on their children's labour.

As children became teenagers, their mothers encouraged them to open up their own stalls, which helped sustain the family's economic needs. In a 1969 census of street vendors, 10.5 per cent of the vendors were under the age of eighteen. The youngest ones were two sisters, Cristina and Marcela Guzmán, twelve and thirteen years old respectively.⁴⁷ The same year, Juana Sánchez had two of her children as owners of their stalls.⁴⁸ For vendors, having children in different locations of downtown streets meant that together they could increase their earnings and survive as a family.

All sources of income were necessary because in addition to covering their expenses and investing in merchandise, vendors had to pay fees and bribes to municipal authorities. According to municipal regulations, the *Reglamento de Mercados*, vendors had to pay one daily fee to market authorities (*administración de mercados*) for the use of public space.⁴⁹ Even if vendors did not have stalls inside markets, they paid the fee for setting up their stalls on sidewalks. But paying this fee did not guarantee peace of mind because high-ranking authorities could remove them at will and officials could charge them extra (illegal) fees and bribes. According to dozens of letters from vendors to authorities, fee collectors were known for their corrupt practices, charging multiple fees beyond the daily one that the *Reglamento de Mercados* stipulated, and typically pocketing the extra money.⁵⁰

their work. As historian Ann S. Blum has noted for the earlier decades of the 20th century, Mexican working-class family members "shared the assumption that children should work and they understood that work to represent respect and affection." Blum, "Speaking of Work and Family: Reciprocity, Child Labor, and Social Reproduction, Mexico City, 1920–1940," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 91. 1 (February 2011): 67.

⁴⁶ Interview with Gabina Rodríguez.

⁴⁷ Census, *Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, Depto. de Registro de Asociaciones*, box 42, file 319, 1969, AHMP.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Street vending fees were regulated by the *Reglamento de Mercados* of 1936, which authorities continued using until the mid-1980s. *Expediente de Mercados*, AHMP.

⁵⁰ The *Archivo Histórico Municipal de Puebla* holds letters written by sellers in which they complained about fee collectors' abuses. Sometimes desperate vendors even wrote to Mexico's presidents. See for example letter to President Luis Echeverría Álvarez from vendors of Mercado

Sandra C. Mendiola García, "Vendors, Mothers, and Revolutionaries: Street Vendors and Union Activism in 1970s Puebla, Mexico." *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 33 (2013) "Working Lives: Special Issue on Oral History and Working-Class History"

If vendors refused or were unable to pay fees and bribes, fee collectors violently seized their merchandise or any personal objects, such as shawls, blankets, and money. According to Gloria Reyes, before the UPVA was organized, municipal employees always kept the best or most expensive merchandise for themselves. She bitterly noted that “*one day fee collectors dragged me on the ground when I was pregnant, they took my merchandise, they stole it. Officials’ wives always had fruits and vegetables in their kitchens because their husbands stole them from us, the vendors! It didn’t even make any sense to try to recover it because it was all gone.*”⁵¹ These kinds of actions had a tremendously negative effect on women who were heads of households and who were barely surviving economically. A bad day of sales or losing their merchandise meant that vendors’ families did not eat on that day. These kinds of situations provoked frustration among vendors. Sometimes, individually or in groups, sellers tried to retrieve their merchandise but authorities usually refused to return it.

Streets as homes

Streets were also the spaces where women carried out reproductive labour. Here women nursed their infants, changed cloth diapers, put babies to sleep, followed their first steps, and prepared food for their families. Indeed the baby who died on that 1973 October night was one of many infants who spent their early years alongside their mothers, latching to their breasts, sleeping on their laps, riding on their backs in *rebozos*, and taking naps in empty fruit boxes while their mothers tended their stalls, negotiated with fee collectors, and confronted police officers.

The streets, as hybrid spaces, lacked basic infrastructure and services. The absence of roofs, bathrooms, and running water made childcare quite challenging, forcing vendors to find creative ways to protect themselves, their offspring, and their merchandise. Many found ways to make the most of their difficulties. During hot and rainy days, they set up rudimentary umbrellas and roofs made out of fabric or plastic sheets, which they tied up to wood or metal rods.⁵² In addition to the weather, vendors worried about dangers on the streets. In a city where the population reached over half a million in 1971, and where the number of automobiles increased rapidly, the possibility of getting hit by vehicles was high,

Popular Emiliano Zapata, 7 May 1973, box 46, file 1, AHMP. The *Mercado Popular Emiliano Zapata* was a makeshift street market where some street vendors sold their merchandise.

⁵¹ Interview with Gloria Reyes.

⁵² *El Sol de Puebla*, an enemy of street vendors, published dozens of pictures depicting vendors’ practices and labeling them as backward. For an example of a woman with her children under a self-made umbrella see *El Sol de Puebla*, 24 May 1974, p. 1. For vendors’ “anti-modern” practices see *El Sol de Puebla*, 12 Sept. 1973, 1 June 1974, p. 1 and 16 July 1974, HJN.

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particularly because all local and long-distance buses' depots were located near markets.⁵³ Reflecting upon the dangers of selling with her five kids, Paula Javier recounted that: "*I used to tie the walker to the stall with a cord. I also engaged in fights with bus drivers who drove very close to the stalls; they could destroy them and children could get injured. Sometimes, I carried one of my children on my back.*"⁵⁴

Depending on their age, children became consumers and producers of reproductive labour.⁵⁵ While infants required a lot of attention from their mothers, as they grew older, children entertained, played, carried, and fed their younger siblings while their mothers were busy. Gabina Rodríguez mentioned how, at home and in the stall, her daughter cared for the youngest child.⁵⁶ Teresa Rosales' older kids took care of her toddler.⁵⁷ Children took on reproductive labour while their mothers were busy vending and, later on, involved in union activities.

⁵³ In 1971, Puebla was the fourth largest city in Mexico with 532,774 people. Miguel Villa and Jorge Rodríguez, "Demographic Trends in Latin America's Metropolises, 1950-1990," in *The Mega-City in Latin America*, ed. Gilbert Alan (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1996), 31.

⁵⁴ Interview with Paula Javier.

⁵⁵ Olcott, "Introduction: Research and Rethinking the Labors of Love," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 91.1 (2011): 6.

⁵⁶ Interview with Gabina Rodríguez.

⁵⁷ Interview with Teresa Rosales, Puebla, México, 8 March 2007.

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Archival photographs show children and teenagers caring for younger children. Vendors in “el corralón.” Fototeca, Administración Cué Merlo (1975-1978), Archivo Histórico Municipal de Puebla.

Streets as communities

In addition to vending and caring for their children, women socialized daily with other vendors. Stalls were mere inches from one another, allowing vendors to establish friendships, mentorship relations, and affectionate links. They used these relationships to ease their work-related burdens. Women helped each other with selling and childcare-related activities. In interviews, vendors mentioned the crucial assistance that they received from fellow vendors when they needed to attend family affairs, school meetings, or look after their sick children. Despite the pressures of life, vendors could not afford to close their stalls. According to Paula Javier, “*we, the señoras, helped each other, leaving the stalls with others while our children were sick. Among vendors, it was easy to do so. Women who were domestics had a hard time; they didn’t have other women to rely on. Even for lunch, we shared tacos or any other thing. Sometimes we, the compañeras borrowed money from each other.*”⁵⁸ Help with work, food, and occasionally

⁵⁸ Interview with Paula Javier.

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money was the result of shared experiences as vendors and as mothers. Female vendors witnessed each other's problems and in the absence of state support, they relied on a community of female vendors. They did so for years, and when the time was ripe to organize, women tapped into these support networks.

On the streets, mentorship relationships also emerged. Women remembered that they learned their trade from each other. A number of street vendors explained that they had little knowledge about the intricacies of selling when they first began; they had no idea what types of merchandise to buy or how much. They did not know how to weigh, how to place their products on their stands, or even how much money they should charge customers.⁵⁹ They learned from watching other vendors, listening from experienced family members, and from others who were willing to share their expertise. Gabina Rodríguez learned from a fellow female vendor; Paula Maldonado, a flower-seller, from her mother-in-law, and Paula Javier from her future husband.⁶⁰

The interactions that vendors developed went beyond work-related issues. Some women established affectionate relationships with other vendors. The streets were places where vendors flirted, ate together, talked, and gossiped, and where their children played together. Paula Javier met her second husband, another vendor, on the street.⁶¹ Some women even become *comadres* (godmothers) of fellow vendors' children. Friendships and trust had to develop before women became *comadres*.

Streets as political communities

Street vendors also established connections with other people who shared the same downtown spaces, namely political alliances with students at the state university. Puebla's city centre was home to the campus of the state university, the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (UAP). Hundreds of students walked on the same streets where vendors sold their products and many witnessed vendors' problems. The more empathetic students assisted vendors. For example, groups of students helped them retrieve merchandise from authorities by accompanying them to negotiate with officials.⁶²

This interaction increased when vendors began participating in the student movement from 1971 to 1973. During these two years, progressive students demanded the university carry out some democratic reforms that included an

⁵⁹ Interview with Paula Maldonado.

⁶⁰ Interview with Gabina Rodríguez; interview with Paula Maldonado; and interview with Paula Javier.

⁶¹ Interview with Paula Maldonado.

⁶² Interview with Juana Sánchez; interview with Paula Javier.

increase in the enrolment of working-class youths and improvements to the curriculum. When the institution ignored their demands, radical students took over buildings and organized protests in an effort to force administrators to accept their demands. As a response, conservative administrators turned to the police to repress students and left-wing professors.⁶³ In this context, students sought support from popular groups, independent unions, parents, and progressive organizations. Vendors were among those who responded to students' plights.

In 1971, groups of street vendors supported the student movement and it was precisely this participation that led vendors' into further trouble with local authorities. In February of 1971, when students took over the UAP's main building, *El Carolino*, street vendors participated, bringing food for students who had occupied buildings. According to those who participated in building takeovers, vendors were able to sneak in small boxes of fruits and female vendors prepared tortas (sandwiches) and tacos for the students.⁶⁴ One vendor recalls how her mother, who was also a seller, used to give students cigarettes and coffee to cheer and warm them up. She was such a thoughtful and caring woman that students nicknamed her *la abuelita*, the affectionate Spanish term for grandmother. Everyone knew not only *la abuelita*, but also *la casa de la abuelita* because she also gave shelter to those students who suffered attacks.⁶⁵ On July 26, 1972, street vendors joined the students in a 12,000-people march to protest the murder of Joel Arriaga, a Mexican Communist Party (PCM) member and director of a high school. Vendors were also present in the 1973, May 1st march in support of the students. From the conservative authorities' perspective, the alliance between vendors and students was a dangerous one because it threatened local elites who sought control, not only over public spaces, but also over the university. Authorities sought to destroy this alliance by trying to expel vendors from the streets.

⁶³ For overviews of the student movement in Puebla see Humberto Sotelo, "Movimiento Universitario: La Reforma Universitaria y el Movimiento Popular de 1973," in *Los Movimientos Sociales en Puebla*, ed. Jaime Castillo (Puebla: DIAU, ICAUP, 1984), 125-258; Wil Pansters, *Politics and Power in Puebla: The Political History of a Mexican State, 1937-1987* (Amsterdam: Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation, 1990); Jesús Márquez Carrillo and Paz Diéguez Delgadillo, "Política, Universidad y Sociedad en Puebla, el Ascenso del Partido Comunista Mexicano en la UAP, 1970-1972," *Revista Historia de la Educación Latinoamericana* 11 (2008): 111-130.

⁶⁴ Interview with Berguiss, Marucha, Omar et.al., Puebla, México, August 2007.

⁶⁵ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano. Conversely, when vendors were chased by the police, they hid at the university.

Streets as sites of violence

In this context, the police became the biggest obstacle to the commercial and parental activities of street vendors. In addition to the old practice of collecting bribes, in the early 70s, police officers, following the orders of authorities, beat and arrested vendors, and seized or destroyed vendors' merchandise.⁶⁶ For mothers with young children, police raids and violence were especially troubling. On several occasions, women and infants ended up in police stations for several hours, and young children confronted repression, including tear gas, beatings, and even death as a result of incidents such as the destruction of stalls on October 28, 1973. Teresa Rosales, a mother of five, remembers that police not only seized her merchandise, but they also arrested her. One time, she was pregnant, and on a second occasion, she was imprisoned with two of her children.⁶⁷ Authorities showed little mercy for these mothers and their children. Blanca Pastrana, a psychologist who left her profession to sell on the streets, remembers that the most difficult experience she had was with tear gas when she was a little girl. In the early 1970s, her mother was a vendor and after school Blanca went selling with her mom. One day, on her way to the stall, she saw police everywhere. She felt something strange and fell down. She believes it was the effect of tear gas and was grateful that a woman took her inside her home to avoid being injured.⁶⁸

Collective action

Police repression impeded vendors' ability to sell goods and support themselves and their children. As a result, vendors developed a collective hatred of police, which intensified following years of harassment, and climaxed in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 raid. Such anger and frustration helped motivate them to organize and fight back. Instead of leaving the streets in defeat, on October 29, 1973, vendors struck back violently. In an unprecedented act of resistance, female and male vendors armed themselves with sticks and Molotov cocktails. They destroyed and set police cars on fire and beat police officers. In the hours following the confrontation, vendors began setting up their stalls on sidewalks.

⁶⁶ For an insightful overview of police corruption in Mexico City, see Diane E. Davis, "Policing and Populism in the Cárdenas and Echeverría Administrations," in *Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría*, ed. Amelia M. Kiddle and Maria L.O. Muñoz (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 135-158.

⁶⁷ Interview with Teresa Rosales. A number of vendors who were removed by authorities from the streets defended themselves legally through *amparos*. Unfortunately it was common that vendors lost their cases against authorities. "Niegan más amparos a ambulantes," *El Sol de Puebla*, 2 February 1971.

⁶⁸ Interview with Blanca Pastrana, Puebla, México, 12 April 2007..

They were determined to re-occupy their vending spaces, and they were ultimately successful. Vendors continued vending on the streets for the next thirteen years, from 1973 to 1986, without facing removals.

But how were they able to regain their spaces? Right after the police had set vendors' stalls on fire on October 28, street vendors literally ran to seek the aid of students at the UAP, located only a few blocks away. Students, seasoned activists in their own struggles against the state and the police, came to the vendors' aid. According to Yolanda Bejarano, it was the students who brought the weapons: "*I saw the students bringing oil, glasses. I didn't know the students were coming with Molotov cocktails. We, the women, only had sticks. But we all beat the hell out of the police and set two police trucks on fire.*"⁶⁹

Vendors, however, could not afford to engage in prolonged acts of violence. Instead, they had to find ways to defend themselves systematically and efficiently in the long term. For this reason, sellers did not think twice when left-wing students encouraged them to form a union to defend themselves collectively against local politicians, the police, and abusive fee collectors. The leaders of the organizing campaign, which included female and male vendors and a group of students, sought to further politicize the majority of downtown vendors. Organizing the union was not an extraordinary difficult task because vendors had spent years developing relationships with one another and confronting similar problems together.

In the aftermath of October 28, vendors organized meetings among themselves and with their student-supporters in order to convey the idea that the vendors' best option was to organize a union. Women spent hours talking to fellow vendors about unionizing and holding meetings with students about the best ways to proceed. A few days later, around 400 vendors decided to form the union with the ideological and practical support of students.⁷⁰

Both vendors and students wanted to create an organization that, unlike official street vendors' unions affiliated with the PRI, had internal democracy. Vendors were aware that these official unions did not do much for vendors. Instead, vendors wanted to participate and shape their union. Vendors decided that each street where vendors sold had a representative (*representante de calle*). In turn, street representatives had to elect someone to represent them in general assemblies. General assemblies were grassroots forums where vendors reported their problems and proposed solutions. Members had to elect union leadership every six months, because they wanted to avoid one vendor or a group of vendors holding too much power. Additionally, vendors and students divided union-related activities among vendors by creating several commissions. Positions in

⁶⁹ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano.

⁷⁰ DFS, file 100-19-1-79, legajo 71, p. 19, AGN.

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commissions were also rotated so that vendors had experience in all of the union's responsibilities.⁷¹

From oral interviews we learn that since the beginning of the UPVA's organization, female vendors held positions as street representatives, attending and speaking at general assemblies, and participating in all of the UPVA commissions. Female vendors engaged in negotiations with authorities, held meetings with other vendors and student-supporters, and organized marches.⁷² Yolanda Bejarano, a union member from 1973 to 1986, proudly stated that she "*occupied positions in all of the union's commissions. I was even part of the UPVA's directive body several times for periods of six months.*"⁷³ Teresa Rosales, one of the few literate vendors, participated by making flyers for the propaganda commission. She fondly remembers how her fingers had spots of ink after making leaflets in the printing press. Rosales and other vendors distributed union propaganda on the streets.⁷⁴ Paula Javier, an articulate and charismatic vendor, held meetings with Puebla's mayors and spoke on behalf of her fellow vendors to demand the construction of markets. She also participated in the UPVA's cultural commission. In this commission, a group of vendors formed a theatre group in which they represented street vendors' problems in order to gain sympathy from the general public about the problems that vendors faced on the street, especially police harassment.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Interview with Luis Díaz Miñon, Puebla, México, 16 January, 2007.

⁷² Interview with Yolanda Bejarano; interview with Teresa Rosales, 8 March 2007.

⁷³ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano.

⁷⁴ Interview with Teresa Rosales, 8 March 2007.

⁷⁵ Interview with Paula Javier.



Paula Javier negotiating with Puebla's mayor Eduardo Cué Merlo, ca. 1975-1978. Photographic Collection, Archivo Histórico Municipal de Puebla.

Only through oral interviews do we learn that the UPVA, at least during its first years, was a democratic union in which members felt part of a political community where they could directly express and solve many of their problems. Female vendors played an important part in shaping the union. Women recruited vendors to participate in the UPVA. They spoke with politicians and officials, and they conveyed messages to a general audience. Paula Javier was proud of spontaneously taking the microphone and speaking in meetings and marches, and also acting in the theatre group. The group did not have a written script, so vendors were constantly improvising and conveying new messages.⁷⁶ In meetings women also could decide who should be expelled from the union. María de los Angeles (aka María Quesos), a cheese vendor, said that “*we could freely decide who wasn't a good comrade. We held meetings among the rank-and-file, voted, and kicked out several students from the union.*”⁷⁷ Vendors expelled students who abused their supposedly higher status and who harassed women. The participation of women in different UPVA activities, not only in the election of union

⁷⁶ Interview with Paula Javier.

⁷⁷ Interview with María de los Angeles, Puebla, México, 30 July 2010.

directives, contributed to the construction of a vibrant democracy within the union.

Union-related activities, however, required much work that was not necessarily compatible with female street vendors' productive and reproductive responsibilities. When women carried out union work, they tapped into the informal arrangements with one another and they heavily relied on their children's labour. Indeed, vendor Juana Sánchez, after a meeting she held with students, sent her teenage children to go to all downtown streets to gather other vendors for meetings. Everyone remembers Sánchez's daughter, the articulate and smart Olga Corona, speaking in corners to other vendors. When Teresa Rosales printed flyers for the propaganda commission and when she attended marches to carry out her political work for the union in the mid-1970s, she remembers leaving her two-and-a-half-year toddler and her stall under the care of her eight-year-old son.⁷⁸

Merging home-based demands and work-related plights

Once the UPVA was formed at the end of 1973, street vendors had three immediate goals. Vendors demanded that local authorities allow vendors to keep stalls for UPVA members in downtown streets without authorities' and police crackdowns. Members also sought to stop paying fees and bribes to local authorities. And last, women wanted authorities to build well-located, enclosed markets in which vendors could acquire fixed stalls.

Women fought for stalls in enclosed markets because these sites would allow them to secure their economic well-being. An enclosed downtown market potentially attracted hundreds of customers and a stall in one of them meant that they could earn a living without police harassment. A fixed stall also meant that vendors could safeguard their merchandise at night. Most importantly, vendors saw it as an investment and as property that they could pass on to their children.⁷⁹ As Paula Javier, one of the first leaders of the UPVA, stated, "*our fight consisted of having a stall because it was a patrimonio for our children.*"⁸⁰ After all, many women were heads of households and worked to support their families.

Owning a fixed stall also meant that female vendors had a place where they could take care of their children safely. Women despised the harassment they

⁷⁸ Interview with Teresa Rosales, 8 March 2007.

⁷⁹ Some scholars who have studied the UPVA have stated that after 1986, when UPVA street vendors finally achieved stalls in markets, the organization declined. See Jones and Varley, "The Contest for the City Centre" and Vanderbush, "Independent Organizing," 245. It could have been a failure in the sense that the markets were not in downtown. In interviews, however, vendors said that they had illusions and hope that they finally had access to stalls in markets.

⁸⁰ Interview with Paula Javier.

and their families faced on streets. Having a stall in a market brought peace of mind. Most importantly, basic infrastructure and services could simplify their daily childcare activities. Roofs, running water, electricity, and bathrooms could make caring for their kids less laborious and improve children's well-being. For the poorest women, stalls in markets were better places than their own tenement dwellings and houses at the outskirts of the city where they lacked all basic services. Many lived on dirt roads, without access to water and electricity. Several women talked about this difficulty. Some, like Gloria Reyes (pseudonym), a long-time street vendor and mother of six children, squatted on an unused lot of land that belonged to her well-off *comadre*. When Reyes and her children arrived at the lot, she began building a room to inhabit, using a few bricks, recyclables, and plastics. Reyes also had to carry water from a long distance. Among her modest belongings, she had an old stove to cook, which turned all her pots completely black. When she left to sell on the streets, she hid the pots in holes on the ground as she had no furniture or shelves. Furthermore, her house was unsafe; anyone could get in, and she felt fearful that someone would steal her kitchen utensils while she was working.⁸¹ A stall in a market was much better than her housing arrangements in the lot.

Female vendors, however, fought a difficult battle. Local authorities did not take women's demands seriously. During the first half of 1974, the municipality responded to organized vendors' demands and granted them a market.⁸² The so-called "market," however, was an empty lot, which was located only three blocks away from the La Victoria Market in an empty space that was once a junk yard. Vendors called their new market "el corralón" because of its previous use. Unfortunately, the market infrastructure consisted of four walls around the lot, one of which was collapsing. Vendors demanded that authorities finish the construction of the market and also insisted that it have basic services, but authorities did not care about bathrooms, running water, and suitable floors.⁸³

Organized female vendors, however, tried to make the best out of these places and attempted to organize an informal daycare-school. Women kept their children inside the lot while they were busy in marches or negotiations with authorities. The women and older children who stayed in the stalls in the lot were in charge of supervising the younger kids. Childcare was organized informally and nobody received any monetary compensation for this work. But this project did not work out because vendors and city authorities continued to have problems

⁸¹ Interview with Gloria Reyes.

⁸² "600 ambulantes serán acomodados en el corralón de Santa Rosa," *El Sol de Puebla*, 3 May 1974.

⁸³ "Información de Puebla," Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, 17 October 1974, box 1510-A, file 1, p. 3, AGN.

with one another, and vendors feared for the safety of the children. On one occasion, a small Molotov cocktail was thrown into the market where the children were. Nobody was injured but it caused fear among the vendors.⁸⁴

Municipal authorities were not the only ones who ignored female vendors' demands. Male vendors and the student organizers, who held notions of social justice and equality, were far less committed to women's concerns. While women were valued among their male counterparts for their courage, determination, and dedication to the union, hardly anyone recognized the value of their reproductive labour. Indeed women continued to struggle without support. Although most vendors knew that female vendors brought their children with them to work, few raised the question of facilitating that kind of work. In 1976, one of the male leaders thought of creating a classroom for the children of vendors. While a good idea, the project did not materialize.⁸⁵ Because these demands were not taken into account, female vendors especially mothers of young children, continued to face the challenges that reproductive labour entailed.

Mixed gains

The market that city authorities granted in 1974 was a failure and vendors continued to sell on the streets. The union, however, was able to secure its members the right to sell on the streets. Members also stopped paying fees and bribes to city officials. Instead, organized vendors paid one weekly fee to the union. The UPVA provided a political space where women raised their economic problems and found some solutions together. It also organized a *grupo de choque*, a defense group, which forced the police to think twice about dragging women on the ground or dispossessing vendors of their merchandise.

While neither authorities nor the union solved many of the problems that women faced as caregivers, in interviews women reflected upon their gains. By participating in daily union activities, women of the rank-and-file gained confidence in themselves, learned skills, and explored spheres beyond the limited ones that their backgrounds had imposed on them. Rosa Martínez (pseudonym), a vendor who joined fellow UPVA members to marches in Mexico City, was able to see parts of the country's capital. Rosa Martínez, who was born and raised in a small town next to Cholula, Puebla, had never seen an escalator and did not know how to use it. In the interview, she laughed at herself but was proud that she learned how to ride it. Above all, Martínez learned how to speak in public and

⁸⁴ Interview with Yolanda Bejarano; interview with Lorenzo Hernández, Puebla, México, 1 February 2007.

⁸⁵ "Mercado Popular 28 de Octubre," file 100-19-1-76, legajo 50, page 107, 21 February 1976, AGN.

acquired negotiation skills that allowed her to sit at the negotiation table with one of Puebla's governors and defend a fellow vendor. Paula Javier also learned to talk in public thanks to her involvement in the union.⁸⁶

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the streets constituted unique sites where women simultaneously carried out commercial and reproductive labour. As oral histories so vividly reveal, for female street vendors, home, work, and community were not distinct spaces. Sellers worked close to one another, confronted similar problems as vendors and as mothers, and developed support networks. Streets were also sites of conflict. Local authorities constantly tried to remove vendors from the streets, but in the early 1970s, city officials increasingly used police violence. In 1973, local politicians sought to get rid of vendors in order to destroy the political alliance that sellers had built with university students.

In the face of these challenges, vendors organized the UPVA at the end of 1973. The networks that female vendors built over time facilitated the organization of the street vendors' union. Once organized, women demanded authorities build markets with basic services where they could sell merchandise and care for their children without facing the problems that working on sidewalks entails. While women did not achieve all their demands, they were successful in challenging the PRI. Female vendors helped build an independent union that, to this day, remains independent from the ruling party.

Official archival sources, however, tend to downplay the participation of women in economic and political activities, and to a great extent, obscure women's critical role in social reproduction. Oral history is essential if we are to understand the difficulties that women faced on the streets, and the multiple strategies they used to negotiate and resist the difficult conditions of their daily labour. Interviews also shed new light on the specific roles that they played in organizing a street vendors' union. Finally, it is only through women's voices that we can explore the different kinds of work, and the interconnections between these forms of labour, that women carried out on the streets in one of Mexico's largest urban areas.

⁸⁶ Interview with Rosa Martínez, Puebla, México, 14 January 2007; interview with Paula Javier.

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