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Mexico, Factor 15: Human Rights

### **Mexico: Machismo Culture and Discrimination Against Women Prevents Food Security**

There is a Mexican proverb that says, “La casa no se reclina sobre la tierra, sino sobre una mujer.” In English, it translates to, “The house does not rest upon the ground, but upon a woman.” This proverb is a poetic truth, especially in Mexican culture. The typical Mexican woman is the backbone of the family. The average woman has 2 or 3 children, and she wakes up early to send them to school. Children of all genders generally attend pre-primary school and almost all of them then go on to primary school, but only about 68% of children go on to secondary school, and only about 29% of children enroll in some form of tertiary school after they graduate at the age of 15 (“Education in Mexico”). The mother prepares breakfast, which is usually “huevos” or “pan dulce” (eggs or sweet bread), packs lunch (the largest meal of the day), and cleans the home (“Mexican Eating Habits”). Usually she also works some sort of part-time job to provide income; sometimes in a restaurant, sometimes making crafts to sell to tourists, or sometimes farming or raising livestock. If she is home from work early, she cooks dinner. Dinner in Mexico is the smallest meal of the day, and it usually consists of some sort of soup or tacos (“Mexican Eating Habits”). At the end of the day, the woman puts the children to bed. This is one common lifestyle. For a lot of women, life is even more difficult. In many parts of Latin America, about 50% of households are headed by women (“Economic Status...”). In Mexico, about 25% of families are headed by a single mother, but in Mexico City this demographic is as high as 35% (“As Stigma Eases...”). For these families the main source of income is from a woman. Of course, women are capable of providing for their families. Women are reliable, hardworking, and strong. However, it is hard to be a woman in a culture that discriminates against them.

In many parts of Latin America, especially Mexico, a cultural belief called “machismo” is prominent. Machismo culture contradicts the aforementioned proverb. It is defined as, “a strong or exaggerated sense of manliness; an assumptive attitude that virility, courage, strength, and entitlement to dominate are attributes or concomitants of masculinity” (Dictionary.com). In its most basic form, it is the belief that men are superior to women. At its weakest, it is blatantly false. At its worst, it is an ignorant hatred that fuels rape and murder. This violence against women has become so common in Mexico that there is now a term for it- femicide. Each day, it is estimated that about six women are murdered because of their gender (“Six Women...”). Because of this outrageous violence, organizations such as the NCOF (National Citizen Observatory on Femicides) are formed to monitor the application of public policy to protect women’s rights. The NCOF has observed that many of the Mexican authorities are making little to no effort to apply these policies or prevent violence against women.

The police are yet another manifestation of machismo culture. In 2012 and 2013, only 24% of identified femicides were investigated by the authorities. Out of these femicides that were investigated, only 1.6% resulted in sentencing (“Six Women...”). Many cases are neglected because the police believe that the victim had brought the attack upon herself by refusing to have sex with her killer, dressing in provocative clothing, or refusing to accept a traditional gender role. These murders are often committed by male family members or sexual partners. This is because machismo culture instills in men a sense of entitlement and ownership. If these men perceive a woman to be out of line, they will usually use violence to ‘put her in her place.’ Because of this, 67% of women in Mexico suffer domestic violence (“Mexico”).

It is impossible to ignore these wrongdoings. Mexico has developed some laws and legislation to attempt to protect women. For example, in 2007 the “General Law of Women’s Access to a Life Free from Violence” was passed. Unfortunately the federal government has limited power in this case; in order for

this law to become a federal law, all 31 of Mexico's states must ratify it, define the specifics, and define the penalties for crimes against women ("Mexico"). Therefore only the states are capable of ending this gender violence.

State and local governments are not enforcing these policies enough. Despite the new laws, femicide is as present as ever- and the authorities are doing even less. In 2014, 0 femicides were prosecuted ("Six Women..."). Instead of investigating and prosecuting cases of violence against women, many of the Mexican states are implementing short-term fixes. One blatant example of this is taking place in Mexico City. The city is offering sex-segregated transportation options as a response to complaints of sexual harassment and violence. The first three subway cars are reserved for women and children, and now there are 'grope-free' buses for women ("Mexico City..."). This is not a solution to the problem. Keeping women away from misogynistic men during a short bus ride will not protect these women once they get off the bus. Machismo culture warrants rape, violence, and blatant discrimination against the female gender in any and all environments. Luz Estrada Mendoza, director of the previously mentioned NCOF, explains:

In Mexico we have and we continue to reproduce a culture of discrimination where women are seen as second-class citizens and not as people who have rights. They are seen as objects to possess, to dominate, to control. So we live in a culture that is very macho, very misogynist, and that is reproduced in all the education, religious and community institutions. Where women are considered objects. Where they are considered to lack the capacity to decide over their own lives.

Even in the workplace, women are treated as second-class citizens. From the first moment a woman considers looking for a job she is discouraged. Sometimes, her husband will not allow her to get a full-time job. In this culture she alone is responsible for preparing food and doing housework. Men do not want women abandoning this gender role. Also, most full-time jobs are reserved for men. This is why most Mexican women only have part-time jobs. Higher-paying jobs are also reserved for men. One reason that employers do not hire women as often is because the woman could become pregnant, which employers think would limit their productivity. Also, women are rarely hired for more laborious jobs because of the cultural belief that they are weaker than men ("NAFTA..."). In Mexico, women are the last group that employers hire and they are the first group to be fired. This is becoming even more prevalent. In Mexico from 2010 to 2012, the unemployment rate fluctuated slightly but was the same for both genders. However, while the unemployment rate for men remained 4.9% from 2012 to 2013, the unemployment rate for women increased from 4.9% in 2012 to 5.0% in 2013 (The World Bank). This fraction of an increase equals tens of thousands more women without jobs.

Considering that about half of all households' main source of income comes from a woman, this seemingly slight change has had an enormous impact on the economy. The families who lost this source of income are more than likely struggling financially. In Mexico (which has a population of about 121 million) more than 58 million people are living below the poverty line, and about 11.7 million people are living in extreme poverty (The Hunger Project). This enormous chunk of the population is suffering from food insecurity due to their lack of financial stability. Due to gender discrimination in the job market, the majority of this part of the population are women and their children. Even when women are employed, they have a harder time affording food for their families. This is largely because Mexico is one of many countries in which a "wage gap" exists. A wage gap is a difference between the amount men and women are paid for performing the same job at the same level. In Mexico, there is a huge difference; women make only 68% of the amount that men make (International Labour Organization). Because of this, women need to work more than men to make just as much money as them. Sometimes women cannot put in enough hours to make up for this wage gap because they need to take care of their children. There is also another wage gap; mothers make 33% less than other women ("Labour Study"). This is one of many instances in which it becomes clear that machismo culture is not about tradition, but the oppression of women. Marta Llamas, anthropologist and editor of a feminist journal, said, "...If a woman is a mother,

even if she is a single mother, she is accomplishing what the culture believes is the best for a woman to be." ("As Stigma Eases..."). Although this culture values mothers over other women, mothers are paid much less. Machismo culture expects women to produce more than men and receive less in return. At the end of the work week these women go home with hardly any money in their pockets, certainly not enough to afford enough food for her family. The majority of the food that she can afford with her measly paycheck is greasy fast-food that is void of any nutrients. Despite all of a Mexican woman's hard work, she often has to scrape by on the bare minimum.

Because it is so difficult for women to find jobs, many desire to start their own businesses. Owning a business gives a woman many new opportunities. She can choose when she works, who she hires, what she pays her employees, how her business operates, and what she sells. Owning a business gives a woman much more independence and flexibility than most other jobs that are available to her. Unfortunately, no matter how well thought out her business plan is, it is extremely hard for a woman to get a loan to start it. Mexican women have limited access to credit, partly because of how insecure jobs are for women, and partly because of discrimination against them. Since women usually are not granted loans, they are unable to start their business, or their business suffers. This in turn limits the family's ability to access food.

Female farmers in Mexico must overcome many obstacles in order for their business to function. Firstly, she must acquire the skills needed to tend to crops. Most female farmers start out working as a field worker on someone else's farm. Over time, she develops her skills and gains some knowledge about the crops she grows. In order to have her own farm, a woman needs to buy land. She might need a loan to afford this, which would be very difficult to acquire. Even if she does get the loan, many Mexican banks only sell low quality land to women. This is more expensive and more difficult to farm, and requires a lot of knowledge that a woman might not already have. Throughout the process of developing a small farm, women face hurdles that their male counterparts do not. Women face insecure tenure and limited access to the education and credit that men can easily acquire. It is easier for men to develop a farm, so they can pay back loans faster and afford better technology and machinery than women. As usual, Mexican women and their children are pushed into poverty and hunger due to the cultural and economic bias against women. Discrimination against women is detrimental to the entire world. It is estimated that if female farmers had the same resources as their male counterparts, food output would increase enough to pull 100 to 150 million people out of hunger ("About Half The World's Farmers...").

Machismo culture underestimates women. The cause of femicide and other violence against women is the sense of superiority that the men have. Masculinity is seen as the essence of strength, while femininity is seen as weakness. Mexico is the heart of machismo, and the country is falling apart because of this. Men's advantage over women leads to the economy being unbalanced, and it is quickly crashing down. Women make up more than 51% of Mexico's population (The World Factbook). Although they are oppressed, they make up the majority of the population. Because their engagement in the economy is restricted, women aren't given the opportunity to 'carry their own weight' and the country plummets into poverty, and, consequentially, food insecurity.

Mexico needs to liberate its women from the chains of discrimination so that they are free to work alongside men, and for the same amount of pay. Females must be given the same opportunities as males. Mexican states need to outlaw the bias against women in the job market and gender discrimination in the workplace. Employers cannot afford to hire a man over a woman based on the assumption that the woman has a husband who can feed their family. Both candidates are equally likely to be their household's main source of income, so their gender has nothing to do with how badly they need a job. This is no longer an excuse businesses can use as an attempt to shroud their sexism. The government needs to enforce these anti-discrimination laws and apply penalties heavy enough to discourage sexism.

More women in business would benefit all parties, including the business. The truth is the complete opposite of the beliefs about femininity that machismo culture has harbored for centuries. This culture believes that because women tend to be more empathetic than men, they are weak. It is believed that this empathy is detrimental to society. However, because women tend to be more empathetic towards animals, women who raise livestock tend to raise them in more humane conditions. For example, studies show that women are twice as likely to choose cage free eggs over others. It is logical to see that if 50% of an egg producing business' senior positions were occupied by women, then there would be more internal pressure to switch to cage free eggs. If this were true for all businesses, many more of them would have more humane or organic practices ("Agriculture Needs More Women."). Also, women tend to be more aware of the causes and effects of food-borne illnesses such as salmonella and therefore would take more measures to prevent the spread of such illnesses. Cage-free eggs happen to have a significantly lower risk of carrying salmonella than the alternative ("Agriculture Needs More Women."). All around, more women in business and agriculture would make for a healthier, wealthier, and fuller Mexico.

One solution that is assisting Mexican women to advance themselves is easier access to financial aid. Organizations such as Pro Mujer give Mexican women in poverty microfinance loans to start or better their businesses. Through Pro Mujer, women can acquire these loans and other financial services that help them develop their businesses and increase their income. The advancement of these women benefits the economy greatly. As of March 2014, Pro Mujer has had over 38,000 clients. The average loan that the organization gives a woman is \$409 (Pro Mujer). The women use these loans for a variety of different purposes. A woman who owns a jewelry business might use a loan to afford more beads to produce more items. A woman who sells pottery could use a loan to buy a booth in a local market. A woman could use a loan to buy property to run a restaurant out of. A woman who is a farmer could use a loan to buy new technology that increases crop production. There are endless uses for these loans, but they all greatly increase a woman's income. Pro Mujer's loans have helped to make \$15.6 million for these women through their small businesses (Pro Mujer). This money will greatly stimulate the Mexican economy, and the small businesses will continue to contribute to this stimulation. When women have their own businesses, the entire world benefits. At the moment, women have a much smaller economic output than men in Mexico. If women are given the same resources and opportunities as men, their economic output will be at least the same as men's, if not greater. If the economic output of women equaled that of men in Latin America, the region's Gross Domestic Product would increase by 17% ("Economic Status..."). This figure doesn't take into account small-scale businesses, which would boost economic growth even more. This change, if fostered, would produce enough money for countless women to pull their families out of food insecurity. Trade in Mexico and abroad would further develop, producing thousands of jobs and opportunities to make a living. Mexico has millions of women who are ready to work so that their families won't go hungry.

Destroying the social construct of machismo is easier said than done. It is a stubborn mindset that has been ingrained in the minds of Mexicans for centuries and it continues to affect society to this day. Even some women still embrace this cultural plague because it is all they have ever known. A lifetime of oppression and violence turns into internalized misogyny, and that scars women for life. It will be extremely difficult to dismantle this violent, dangerous construct, but it must be done. Machismo culture must end in order to end violence and hunger in Mexico. By closing the wage gaps, employing more women, offering more financial services to women, and prosecuting all crimes against women, Mexico can put an end to its poverty and food insecurity. With the help of organizations such as Pro Mujer, Mexico can level the playing field between men and women and subsequently feed its millions of starving citizens. The importance of women is explained most eloquently by the proverb, "The house does not rest upon the ground, but upon a woman." This is true. Mexican women are strong enough to support their families, but they are even more than that- they are strong enough to carry a nation out of poverty and food insecurity.

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