

# TERRITORY, MEMORY AND GENDER: THE MEANINGS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ATENCO, MEXICO

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## Introduction

*"I bring the feeling of my people of Atenco, where the wound remains open."*<sup>2</sup>

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, nineteen expropriation decrees planning the construction of a new airport in the area of Texcoco, State of Mexico, were announced by the federal government headed by President Vicente Fox. This measure that was going to affect the municipalities of Texcoco, Atenco, and Chimalhuacan; was widely resisted by the popular social movement, which formed the *Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra* (FPDT, People's Front in Defense of the Land). July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002 was a milestone in the struggle for resistance against the airport project: a public protest ended in a confrontation between the police and members of the FPDT, which resulted in violent police repression with hundreds of detainees. Social struggle intensified and finally, on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002, the cancellation of the project was announced by the presidency of the Republic of Mexico. The FPDT constituted a peasant social movement that has remained active to this day, transcending the exclusive struggle against the construction of the airport and articulating with other social movements. May 2006 was another key period in Atenco's social movement history. Amidst flower growers' protests for imminent relocation, the Mexican State (at a federal, state and local levels) responded with a repressive operation against flower growers, the FPDT and the general popular social movement; which included arbitrary and violent arrests, imprisonment of social leaders, and sexual violence against women<sup>3</sup> as a strategy of demobilization and fragmentation of local political organization (GUZMÁN, 2014).

Atenco's social movement has been studied, for example, from the perspective of the types of social organization that it has enabled and its transformations over time in relation to social, urban and socio-political aspects (MORENO, 2014); or focusing on

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2. This is a statement by Trinidad Ramírez, one of the women who participated in Atenco's social movement in defense of the land. Personal interview.

3. A case against the State of Mexico was presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) by 11 women who survived the assaults and sexual abuse committed by police officers in Atenco during the May 2006 repression.

the sociological construction of a collective actor (KURI PINEDA, 2010). Also, it has been studied from a feminist geography point of view, with an analysis of the relationship between body, gender, space, women's political participation, and the State's use of repressive sexual violence (GUZMÁN, 2014). In this regard, the present research sought to analyze the participation of women in the social conflict, particularly between 2001 and 2002 (first period), focusing on the opposition against the airport project. As Kuri Pineda points out, "despite the constitutive plurality of this social movement, land played the articulating axis of this struggle" (KURI PINEDA, 2010, p. 325). Another of the outstanding characteristics of this process was the leading role played by women. Drawing upon a framework that joins together interpretative sociology and a gender perspective, the interest of this qualitative research was to inquire about the process of women's involvement and participation in the social conflict of Atenco and the meanings they gave to both their participation in the social conflict and their relationship with the territory.

The article is organized as follows: first, the theoretical and methodological framework of this research is developed. Then, the conflict and the social movement of San Salvador Atenco is described. After, the results of the research are presented, giving an account of the experiences and meanings of women's political participation; and finally, conclusions are provided.

## Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research is based on the contributions made by interpretive sociology, phenomenology and sociology of the everyday life (BERGER; LUCKMAN, 2011; HELLER, 2002; LUCKMAN, 1992; SCHÜTZ, 2003); gender perspective and feminist geography. It was a qualitative study, in 2014 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 women who were part of the social movement of Atenco between 2001 and 2002 with the aim of reconstructing the meanings and importance of the experience of political participation both in their individual lives and also as a collective of "us women". As Ruiz points out, "qualitative methods start from the basic assumption that the social world is a world built up with meanings and symbols, which implies the inquiry for this construction and its meanings" (RUIZ, 2003, p. 31).

Content analysis was applied to the textual material gathered in the interviews, and the analysis emphasized on 5 dimensions: participation, meanings, social conflict, everyday life and social action - linked to the theoretical framework of the research -. In terms of participation, Giménez's proposal was taken, for whom to participate is to influence and to take responsibility. Participation is a process that necessarily reinforces subjects and groups, the participation of someone in something relates that one person to the others also involved. Being a participant implies being coagent, cooperant, co-author, co-responsible (GIMÉNEZ, 2002). From this perspective, paying attention to the forms of participation allows us to access the processes of women's political action and their meanings in everyday life, at a subjective and collective level. Following the phenomenology of Schütz, meaning is intersubjective; that is, "it is constructed considering the other and in interaction with the other in what happens in the world of the everyday

life” (HERNÁNDEZ Y GALINDO, 2007, p. 232). Therefore, the reality of everyday life is presented as an intersubjective world (SCHÜTZ, 2003).

Following Melucci (2002), we understand social conflict as a relationship between opposing actors who fight for the same resources to which they give value. In this case, the disputed resource is the territory of Atenco as a community asset of agricultural and historical value or as a necessary resource for the construction of the airport. Returning to the sociology of everyday life, we present the experiences of the inhabitants of Atenco associated to the context of rurality from living (coexisting) in their daily life with the territory, analyzing what becomes subjectively significant across temporalities (past, present and future) in relation to their history, customs and traditions. For Heller, everyday life is heterogeneous in the most diverse senses and aspects. This is the reason why “it’s center can only be the particular, in which those spheres, forms of activity, etc., decidedly heterogeneous are articulated in a unit” (HELLER, 2002, p. 31). Regarding the dimension of social action, it is understood in the framework of interaction. The actions of others, the consequence of these actions and language interact with each other along with the consciousness to the extent that actions are also socially determined (LUCKMAN, 1992, p. 97). Action is an experience that is guided by a plan or project that arises from the activity of the subject and is distinguished from other experiences as intentional, reflexive and endowed in itself with significance. For Schütz, action originates in the consciousness of the actor and has as fundamental features to be projected and endowed with purpose (SCHÜTZ, 1974). In this investigation, the aim is to know the reflexive process of the interviewees, emphasizing in the motives that impelled them to be participants of the social movement and the retrospective analysis that they carry out. We consider women in their heterogeneity, but capable of articulating and organizing themselves in a collective with the purpose of transforming their social context.

Gender constitutes a category of critical analysis to scrutinize the social processes in which subjects become sexually-generically differentiated, in contexts of structural inequalities between men and women and those who do not identify with the sex-gender binary within the heterosexual matrix. One of the aims of the gender perspective is to contribute to a new social configuration based on the re-meaning of history and society that breaks patriarchal matrices, understood as “a generic social order of power based on a mode of domination whose paradigm is man” (LAGARDE, 1996, p. 52). In Lagarde’s words, the feminist perspective gives us an ethical view of development and democracy as vital contents to confront inequity, inequality, “it is a political position taken against gender oppression, it is a denunciation of its damages and its destruction and it is at the same time a set of actions and alternatives to eradicate them” (LAGARDE, 1996, p. 38).

Likewise, from feminist perspectives, work has also been carried out on the relationship between gender and territory. During the last decades, Latin American feminists, indigenous and eco-feminists have promoted debates and contributions regarding the relationship between environment, nature and development from a critical perspective that shows the ways in which territory and body are interwoven and have been historically generated - feminized - and exposed to violence, occupation and colonization (BOLADOS Y SÁNCHEZ, 2017). Feminist geography is fundamental for analyzing the

relationship between gender, territory and political participation, and the meanings that women attribute to both political participation and territory(ies). Therefore, the premise of the neutrality of territory is questioned, in order to see how bodies located in spaces are crossed by power/knowledge and appropriation relations that occur within territory (VÁSQUEZ, 2017).

“Feminist geography examines the economic and political systems and cultural values that shape gender roles and the way they determine or restrict spatial choices (...) recognizes the importance of two spheres of life, the sphere of economic production, sometimes described as the sphere of public action; and the sphere of reproduction of society, sometimes conceived as the private or domestic sphere, to study the ways in which the two spheres interrelate (...), feminist geography seeks sources of information and methods of analysis that reveal women’s experiences and worldviews” (MONK and GARCÍA, 1987, p. 150).

Against politics and history conceived in androcentric and patriarchal terms, a gender perspective considers how women signify space, pointing out the inequity in which women live, questioning the invisibility of their presence in history and criticizing an entire social, economic, political and cultural structure (GUZMÁN, 2014). That is to say, in Valcárcel’s words, to realize how space turns out to be a key element in female discrimination (VÁLCARCEL, 2000). Likewise, feminist geography proposes new dimensions of space and territory, for example, to consider the body as the first place we inhabit, with limits and differences crossed by power relations; the body as the space in which the individual is located (MCDOWELL, 2000).

In this sense, we can speak of territorial feminisms (ULLOA, 2016), from which the different visions and geopolitical positions involved are analyzed, understanding them as alternative territorial visions and care processes at different levels (the first being the body-territory). Thus, it is possible to understand more fully the diverse forms of violence against women, the emergence of networks of indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant women, and their demands for other gender relations between men and women in processes of territorial defense (ULLOA, 2016, p.126).

## **The Territorial Conflict and the Social Movement of San Salvador Atenco**

San Salvador Atenco (SSA) is a town of pre-hispanic origin in the state of Mexico, head of the Municipality of Atenco. In Nahuatl language it means bank of water, in reference to its location on the banks of the ancient Texcoco lake. It is less than 10 km from Texcoco, the most important municipality in the area for its economic development and its 220,000 inhabitants. Currently, SSA is organized politically and administratively into five villages, nine colonies, eleven villages and a municipal capital. It is a municipality with a predominantly agricultural history, dedicated mainly to the planting of corn and alfalfa.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, the federal government, headed by then-President Vicente Fox, published 19 expropriation decrees in the Official Journal of the Federation, through

which the construction of a new airport terminal was planned in the Texcoco area, State of Mexico. This would affect the municipalities of Texcoco, Atenco and Chimalhuacán, with their respective 13 communal land nuclei. This decision was based on the growing integration of the Mexican economy into the world economy, which in turn substantially increased the flow of goods and people; and, therefore, the number of routes and flights to Mexico City's international airport (ALCAYAGA, 2002).

The New Texcoco Environmental Project promoted by the Government of the State of Mexico (1999-2005), in its advertising message referred to "more than an airport, a project of life". The proposed airport would also have three secondary parallel runways, which would double the capacity of the current airport and significantly reduce delays and cancellations. It was claimed that the area of the Texcoco lake would be designated as an ecological protection zone, which would avoid the risk of speculation. Beginning in March 2001, different national and international civil and environmental organizations, as well as several universities, prepared studies with the purpose of assessing the two possible airport sites: Texcoco or Tizayuca. According to the different technical studies, one of the main reasons in favor of Texcoco was related to the optimization of economic resources and infrastructure. The Texcoco zone is located only 26 kilometers from Mexico City, while Tizayuca is 73 kilometers away.

According to the National Population Council (CONAPO), if the new airport headquarters were to be settled in Texcoco, there would be danger of generating a fragmented urban structure, degradation of the urban environment, uncontrolled land use, in addition to the permanent risk of flooding and damage to natural resources and the environment in general (ALCAYAGA, 2002). Likewise, the federal decision on the new air terminal could not be limited to technical, aeronautical or financial reasons, but also to demographic and urban factors. In that logic, this instance projected that the impact of the new airport in Texcoco and the six surrounding municipalities would be that these would absorb around fifty percent of the total population increase of the metropolitan area, with the consequences that this would imply.

On the other hand, the Programa Universitario del Medio Ambiente (PUMA – University Environment Program) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, participated in the studies to decide the location of the new airport in coordination with the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources). Although the results of this evaluation did not favor any of the alternatives, it was pointed out that Texcoco would imply a greater risk of ecological imbalance. Other social actors also expressed their concern, specifically a group of Mexican environmentalists pointed out that the construction of the airport in Texcoco implied the urbanization of an ecological restoration area where 100,000 migratory birds arrive annually, specifically arguing that this Mexican zone is the most important birdlife redoubt in the region, for which the airport constituted an enormous risk for the survival of these species, in addition to the latent danger of collisions between planes and birds (ALCAYAGA, 2002, p. 79). Another argument for not building the airport in Texcoco, was referred by specialists from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH, National Institute of Anthropology and History), who indicated that thousands remains

of prehistoric animals would be buried in areas that were distinguished by their vast paleontological wealth, such as Tocuila, where bone remains of mammoths, horses, birds, camels, bison and rabbits had been found (ALCAYAGA, 2002).

The inhabitants of SSA expressed their disagreement with the announcement of the construction of the airport. On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a long day of demonstration and a march took place in Texcoco, in which the people from the communal lands of the towns of Atenco and Texcoco declared that they would show “to the people of Mexico that we are not irrational people who don’t have a conscience and that our struggle is just and is based only on the defense of the land” (ALVARADO et. al, 2001). The People’s Front in Defense of the Land (FPDT) emerged in protest against the expropriation decree that affected the patrimony of 4,375 families. It was made up of a small group of people from communal lands, who mobilized against expropriation for “the cause of public utility,” which devalued the price of the land. According to Alcayaga, for the FPDT, land represents much more than “an economic good that can be alienated and commercialized: it represents the indispensable settlement of a communal cultural tradition, forged and preserved over many generations” (ALCAYAGA, 2002, p. 28). It is important to recognize the “peasant” as a heterogeneous social actor, “plural, constituted - due to its link with its territory - by rural individuals linked to the countryside and the city, who are men, women, elderly and children: peasants, tamaleros, seamstresses, neveros, merengueros, loneros, workers, maquiladoras, producers of belts, students, housewives, merchants, professionals etc.” (CAMACHO, 2008, p. 26).

Atenco’s legal and socio-political conflict not only involved the Federal Government through its various institutions, but also the participation of multiple social actors in direct relation with Atenco, particularly environmental and human rights related. For example, the 1999 UNAM student strike, Escuela Normal de Mexe, schools that represent the latest model of socialist education of the Mexican Revolution, members of the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (FZLN), peasant organizations throughout the country, the Frente Nacional Francisco Villa (FPFV), The Human Society of the US, and The World Watch Institute, among others. A milestone in the development of the conflict was July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002. That day, the possible entry of the army and the Policía Federal Preventiva was reported, and by the evening they had surrounded the town. Various social organizations from Oaxaca, Yucatán, Guerrero and Michoacán, among others, went to Atenco to support the struggle. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002, the expropriation decree that dispossessed the lands of the people from the communal lands of SSA was repealed. The Federal Government announced the cancellation of the airport project, arguing that the social movement made the project incompatible with the preservation of order and social peace (KURI PINEDA, 2008).

The second stage of the conflict followed the announcement of the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, launched by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in June 2005. The FPDT expressed its adherence to this declaration and its incorporation into the Other Campaign (La Otra Campaña). Based on this, it committed itself together with the Zapatistas in the construction of another way of doing politics, a national program of struggle and a new Constitution, creating solidarity networks among different struggles and

resistances in the area of the State of Mexico and other regions of the country. One of them was that of the flower growers of Texcoco, who traded their products on the streets outside the market despite the fact that the municipal authorities of Texcoco prevented street sales. On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006, a group of flower growers refused to leave their stall and were evicted by the authorities. Blockades were organized on the Lechería-Texcoco highway and there were confrontations with the police to avoid the eviction. Armed, the *Policía del Estado de México* and the *Policía Federal Preventiva* entered the town of San Salvador Atenco. In the operation, more than 3,000 police officers faced resistance from a small group of the FPDT. There were arrests and the police shot and killed a 14-year-old teenager. The FPDT reacted by holding 11 police officers in the Emiliano Zapata auditorium. During that day and the following, the police entered homes without search warrants, beating and torturing and leaving more than 200 people detained, as well as sexually abusing women who were protesting. Since then, the social movement continues to organize and fight for the liberation of detainees and for justice, and articulates with other social actors and broader demands for resistance to the neoliberal and extractivist model.

As Moreno points out, Atenco's social movement goes from being exclusively about defending the land in the face of the threat of the construction of the airport (2001-2002 period) to expanding and relating to struggles of economic, employment, security, human rights, environmental and gender nature with a wider geographical scope, maintaining links with other actors that broaden the base of the original organization (MORENO, 2014). According to Kuri Pineda, during the 9 months of the airport conflict, the collective resistance against the construction of the airport had two fronts of struggle: legal and social mobilization. Both fronts had two different conceptions of what the spaces and strategies for defending the land were, but despite the plurality of the social movement, the land played the articulating axis of the struggle (KURI PINEDA, 2010, p. 325).

In the neoliberal context of what Harvey (2003) calls "accumulation by dispossession", the logic of global power crosses lands and territories, so that these become the axis of socio-political contention and socio-environmental conflicts give rise to movements of resistance and social organization, which dispute the dominant ideas of progress/modernization imposed from positions of power. Following Harvey, "the commercialization of nature in all its forms entails an escalation in the decline of the goods so far common that constitute our global environment (land, water, air) and a growing degradation of habitat, blocking any form of agricultural production that is not capital-intensive (...) not to mention the wave of privatizations of water and other goods (...) supposes a gigantic scale re-edition of the fence of communal lands" (HARVEY, 2003, p. 118). As Caló (2013) points out, the construction of a discourse and a counterhegemonic practice in relation to the dominant constructions of land and territory, are articulated around two dimensions that constitute the dominant ideas of territory in contemporaneity: colonialism and capitalism. In the face of globalization, territorial conflicts must be understood from the point of view of resistance and the dispute for local power, as an important expression of social change (GUZMÁN, 2014).

As for the relationship between socio-territorial movements and feminism in Mexico, is during the decade of the 80' that the issue of peasant women emerges inside

popular feminism, brought up by women who lived in the countryside and began to fight in defense of their lands and territories (LATANI, 2016). However, this was only consolidated during the decade of the 1990s, due to processes that occurred in the Mexican southeast, such as Zapatismo, a moment in which the national and Latin American indigenous movement burst onto the scene, achieving legitimacy, making it possible for many women to articulate and connect their ethnic, gender, rural and class identities (LATANI, 2016).

## The Women of Atenco: The Meanings of Their Political Participation

The defense of the land constitutes a transcendental milestone in the social conflict, and women in defense of the land begin their process of participation gradually, from feelings of indignation, fear, but at the same time of willingness to organize and confront the media and authorities. *"I took the microphone, and at that moment I was in an event... where they were making a soy demonstration... and I mean, how are they doing this right now? and we are already dawning with an expropriation decree and they are taking the land from us"* (E6)<sup>4</sup>. For some women, the decision to engage is based on the well-being of their children *"because it was not easy to make this decision to fight, because it is precisely thinking about our children mainly, right?"* (E6). The condition of being women and the relationship they have built with motherhood and the assigned gender role of being in charge of their families, is what prevails in their speeches at the moment of realizing why they decided to participate in defending their territory: *"the two things are connected, they cannot be separated from each other, can't they? First, I believe your impulse is to say "I'm going to fight for my family", yes? That's your first impulse"* (E6).

A relevant aspect to point out is the machismo of some husbands regarding the participation of women, because when they expressed their desire to participate or participated *"...they told you "because women don't", or "women should move to this side because of the risk and that", I believe that women took their place and women said "it's not where they put me, it's where I want to be"* (E4). Although some of them did not live it directly, they do recognize it as something that happened in that context: *"it was not my case, perhaps it was more difficult because the husband did not give permission, because the husband did not have to find out but "poor you", right? poor woman was more difficult to sneak out. When the husband did not agree because "how you are going to go around shouting, how you are going to be disruptive?"* (E6).

Women's decision to participate evidences a process of transformation, negotiation and dispute over the traditional boundaries that shaped their public/private, domestic/political spaces and the roles they had to play. Although participating in the social movement is experienced as an emancipatory process on the part of the interviewees, it is not exempt from insecurities and fears: for example, their insecurity as women to speak in public: *"if I say something, what are they going to say about me? Right? Will I say it well? No, I'll be like "better not to speak" because surely what I am going to say is not good, but we still dared and took the microphone"* (E6).

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4. The interviewees are identified by a number.



Therefore, the process of collective participation was gradual, since the insertion of women in the social conflict of Atenco began with activities of convocation, information to the community, among others. As one of the interviewees points out: *"...in particular, I was involved, only in handing out flyers, and the more you find out, the more you get involved. Hiding didn't make sense for us, after May 3<sup>er</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006 the participation of men dropped and those who participated in order to obtain the freedom of their companions were women"* (E1). *"...when compañero Ignacio is arrested, and compa José Enrique dies, women assumed all the commissions and there would be a lot of very combative commitment"* (E3). This is how a repressive act constitutes and signifies for women the possibility of broadening their participation and disputing their rights, advancing from a more marginal participation to a social and political participation that is acquiring more and more fundamental roles.

Women's participation transforms their daily lives, adding new tasks and activities that they did not do before. But also, they begin to speak and to make visible issues that previously went unnoticed as social problems, such as gender violence in the domestic space. *"A companion who hardly speaks says, my husband beats me, and I face the State, etc., and when I arrive at my house my husband beats me, now I arrive at my house and he is not going to beat me anymore because I walk with my machete, and I start to value my rights, starting in my house"* (E1). Therefore, the struggle in defense of the land began to review other battles, as gender violence: *"the compañeras reserve their comments as they go in life, some are doing well and speak wonders of men and some go badly and speak wonders for fear of being beaten"* (E1). Participation in the movement generates a re-interpretation, a re-construction of their reality, and those aspects considered "normal" in everyday life begin to present themselves as problematic and therefore in need of transformation. In other words, a process of revision of the patriarchal tradition and the history of the community begins.

Everyday life is also loaded with emotions. In their stories, the interviewees talk about the role of fear, insecurity and uncertainty in certain moments. For example, for one of the interviewees, the beginning of political participation is marked by fear: *"I take the microphone with all the fear it caused me and... the fear of taking a microphone and addressing people, I could do it, I think it was the same impotence, the indignation of what was happening to us"* (E6). Women cease to have only the role of caregivers for their children and assume a collective commitment to the community: *"because today I not only care about my family, my children, because not only with them, now I am also anxious, indignant when one of my brothers suffers an injustice"* (E6).

Women experience in their bodies this fear, which gradually disappears: *"I leave the kitchen and let's go, or at the same time I'm in the kitchen, but I also dare to get into a truck, I dare to leave, I dare to take the machete, I went out like this, little by little and convincing myself and also with fears, but convincing me that it was necessary to be, that I could not stay still"* (E6). Thus, women place their bodies, which is the first territory they inhabit, at the service of the struggle of the social movement. The body-territory and the land-territory are consciously politicized in the struggle against the construction of the airport. In socio-environmental conflicts, the women's body becomes the scene of the conflict. If we remember what happened in Atenco, we see how this same body, which today speaks its voice out and overcomes fear, is the place where sexual violence has been committed.

The struggle was transcendental because it did not only implied the defense of the land, but also the defense of women in their rights and being able to choose to participate, which ended up being another struggle to transform the patriarchal socio-cultural limits that prevented their full participation in equal conditions to their male companions, as well as the dispute to redefine the terms of their roles and division of tasks in the domestic space. In this same process, a community of women is being formed, a “we, women”, an intersubjective reality that arises from the recognition among them as political actors and that encourages the action of other women. It is also a space for mutual learning. As one of the interviewees points out: *“I saw many women, shouting “the land is not for sale, it is to be loved and defended. When I see a girl, a young girl who comes up and takes the microphone, and I mean she is a girl and she is taking the microphone, it’s such a serious problem, how well she performs. I approached her admiring her and told her you are my teacher, I had to see a woman, I think many women went through that, see the model first”* (E2).

From the public speech made by other women, the spectators are moved and challenged to act, their daily lives are transformed and they incorporate experiences that give them new meanings to their lives. In the words of another interviewee: *“to be in front of other women who are fighting this struggle, because it allows me to learn. I believe that this is very big and very important, to learn from other women, from my compañeras of the Frente del Pueblo en Defensa de la Tierra, but also from other compañeras that I have been finding on this path, on this path of construction toward organization and toward the defense of human rights and women’s rights”* (E6).

Therefore, this struggle has a transversal and daily impact on the lives of women: *“this struggle is transcendental, because this struggle began with women themselves, and we have won a lot, you listen to a compañera who used to say that she cannot defend herself from her husband, but from the government or from a rancher”* (E1). The defense of the land is simultaneously an act of transformation, emancipation, consciousness and empowerment. The opposition to government action and the visualization of the repressive violence of the State also make it possible, at the same time, to begin to recognize gender violence inside couples, as well as to devise strategies of resistance. Arising from some cases of gender violence that become more visible, there are new possibilities to talk, share, name and defend their selves against the multiple gender violence in different spaces: *“...and it was my turn to see and learn the machismo of the compañeros and how to carry it in such a way that suddenly I did not lose the courage towards myself and other compañeras”* (E2).

While the struggle of the women of Atenco implied, on the one hand, a transformation of their roles and their subjective positions towards men, on the other hand, it was also rooted in the defense of the “traditional community” and the historical memory of the people, emphasizing the role of women as heirs and conservers of the values and traditions of their community. In general, the struggle against the airport reflects the historical autonomy that would characterize the community of Atenco and its courage in the struggle for their rights, because *“Atenco is a people that have been known for that reason, in demanding their rights. Atenco has always fought for land, in 1537 there was a land conflict. Another conflict after the revolution was for the distribution of land and has been a*

*struggle for history, for identity and for our future*" (E1). Another interviewee points out: *"We say that history, land, culture and identity are not for sale"* (E4).

In this sense, the participation of women was key in the transmission of a historical memory in defense of the land, tracing its genealogy within the local and national history. Most of the interviewees indicate that they are descendants of families that actively participated in the Mexican Revolution and other social processes. The struggle for land and territory is expressed in resistance to both capitalism and colonialism, and women engage in counter-hegemonic practices rooted in their own community historicity, which is reflected in sayings such as: *"history is calling me," "it is a historical defense for decades," "Atenco has always fought to have land, in 1537 there is a land conflict. Another conflict after the revolution for land distribution has been a struggle for history, for our future"* (E1). The story they tell about Atenco refers to the different struggles and confrontations in the face of dispossession: *"then the inhabitants of this territory were dispossessed in the conquest, and in the Mexican revolution it recovers, and then my revolutionary grandfather and grandmother working in conditions of slavery"* (E2). The construction of the town has been based on the need to ensure the defense of the land. *"That history that we heard from our grandparents, who participated in the Mexican Revolution, well we had it in mind and we did not give it life until we faced this situation"* (E2).

It is interesting to show how in this recovery of the previous historical legacy, there is also a twist: what is remembered as a past of resistance mostly led by men, now also includes, and even ends up in, the key role that the women of Atenco have today. One of the interviewees says that her grandfather was a *"revolutionary [who] came from Zacatecas to the Mexican Revolution, next to Villa and joins the forces of Emiliano Zapata"* (E2). This ancestral legacy fosters in the interviewee the commitment to engage in social action of resistance, as she says, *"my grandfather, and now it corresponds to me"* (E2).

This story is related to the construction of an identity, which is symbolized in the machetes, as icons of the defense of the land. This *machete identity* is recognized from outside the village. One of the interviewees commented that *"people came from outside like students, we want to go and see Atenco, we want to meet those macheteros"* (E3). The machete is recognized *"first as a work tool, but it is more than that, because historically the people work with machetes, it represents their history, dignity, the work of their peasants in land work, the right to justice, freedom and represents won and lost struggles"* (E1). This instrument contains the meaning that Atenco has to its people and its cultural baggage; the representation of the machete in the struggles, demonstrations is a socio-historical legacy: *"it rises with the left hand, it is a symbol that also represents the tears we shed for the murdered people and also happiness"* (E1).

*"The only ones who deserved to carry the machete are the peasants, only they have the dignity to carry it"* (E2). The machete implies the effort, work and dedication of the peasants to the land. But also, of the peasant women. During the process of collective mobilization, the machete is also recovered by the women as a symbol of their own struggle. The same interviewee points out that *"I began to reflect on what has convinced me and when I hold the machete in my hands, at that moment I saw the work of my father, the peasant, my grandfather... I begin to see history, what our lands have cost, and I see the future threatened, and when I see all that, I say if I am worthy of carrying the machete"* (E2).

An interviewee tells about another compañera: “*she played three roles, that of compañera in the movement, of the wife of a man sentenced to life imprisonment, mother with a son in prison and a persecuted daughter*” (E1). The women’s empowerment process in Atenco brings with it feelings of pride, courage, conviction and belonging. For them, Atenco’s struggle was against the dispossession of land, but also a struggle for them, from the struggle for participation there was one for the transformation of their lives as women in a macho and patriarchal context. “*For example, at home Nacho used to say Trini where my shirt is, now if he says that to her, she says look for it. It changed life in that sense. I feel that the struggles when they come to you give you a transformation*” (E3). These transformations influenced their perceptions of life: “*Oh, this is over, and I’m going to have to go back to my husband, to the little children, to everyday life, to the monotony, to my historical role that they’ve imposed on me, to go to hell*” (E7), and they also implied ruptures. “*There were ruptures, by ruptures I don’t mean in relationships, ruptures of their own lives*” (E7), that is to say, important changes in personal and family lives. These ruptures have to do with the fact that the path of transformation of the assigned gender roles was not free of disputes and resistance on the part of both the men of the community and other women. For the fighting women of Atenco, occupying new positions involved challenging powers and articulating their identities from different positions to those previously occupied.

Atenco did not have a single battle, but several, and in that sense, participating and winning battles with other women was a process that brought them pride, company and belonging. For example, regarding the conflicts generated within the community due to tensions with machista traditions, one interviewee remarks the admiration she feels for a “*brave woman, so brave because... it’s excellent that she got rid of her batterer/ her rapist. To several of these women I owe all my honors, the one who separates from her husband, rapist, that woman who decides to fall in love with another person and has the courage to put up with all the social harassment*” (E7).

## Conclusions

“*I have always said that the battle of Atenco has many battles, it was a battle that had many internal revolutions, there were many changes, that is, after Atenco we are no longer the same, we were not the same, we will not be the same again.*”

The aim of this article was to reflect on the process of women’s participation in the social conflict of Atenco, giving an account of how they give meaning to their participation and the relationship with the territory. We can observe changes in the daily lives of women since the involvement in the political struggle in a double sense: on the one hand, the struggle itself for the territory; and simultaneously, the dispute for the right to participate with their compañeros in the social conflict of Atenco and the great transformations and effects that this struggle brought. Their relationship with the land (as a socio-historical, economic, family and affective value) prompted them to defend it and to assume the challenges of joining spaces of mobilization and organization where they usually did not transit.

The political struggle for the defense of the land changed the relationship of women with the territory(ies), the community, and history at different levels: it implied a reconfiguration of the power relations that determine the limits and differences that separate and signify the boundaries between bodies and territories (women and men, the house and the countryside, the domestic and the public; the family and politics, domestic work and peasant work; the private and the political, among others); it implied a transformation of the relations between the same women that constituted their own community with their own knowledges, strategies, victories and resistances; and it modified the hegemonic narrative of local history founded on the struggle for land, to the extent that they were incorporated and registered in the genealogy of the struggle for territorial autonomy that comes from their ancestors (generally understood as males) and claimed their place in that tradition, for example, giving another meaning to the machete. This incorporation meant, at the same time, a fight against the binary and patriarchal terms of gender constructions and also positioned themselves as actors in the fight against gender violence at the intra-family, community and state levels.

Domestic space has been traditionally assigned to women in their roles as mothers, wives and housewives and has been identified in our societies as the place of female subordination (BARBIERI, 1993). According to Teresita de Barbieri, the subordination that affects all or almost all women is a question of power, but this is not located exclusively in the State and in the bureaucratic apparatuses. It is a multiple power located in very different social spaces that can even dress not with the clothes of authority, but with the noblest feelings of affection, tenderness and love. "This need for struggle and resistance seeks to modify the role played by the political and economic interests of those who exercise power, but it not only remains in this area, because the objective of resistance is the search for justice, and not only refers to the institutional conditions of the State, but to all the scales where abuse of power is inserted" (GUZMÁN, 2014, p. 25).

In this sense, we can say that the women of Atenco broadened the framework in which the struggle for justice and against the abuse of power in their community was understood, to include gender relations as part of the territory; the body as part of the territory; and the territory of the body, everyday life and the domestic space as spheres and territories in dispute and transformation. They became social actors who, with the same force that they have demanded their rights to the State, have been able to demand their rights and fight for gender equity within their homes, facing other challenges. In other words, they have been producing a *different geography* of the territory and territories crossed by power, showing the multiple battles around the politicization of the women of Atenco.

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# TERRITORY, MEMORY AND GENDER: THE MEANINGS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ATENCO, MEXICO

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JACQUELINE DE LOURDES QUINTANA MUÑOZ

## LAND, MEMORY AND GENDER: SOCIAL MEANINGS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ATENCO, MEXICO.

**Abstract:** This paper analyses women's political participation in the struggle for the protection of the land against the construction of an airport in Atenco, México, between the years 2001-2002. From a gender oriented qualitative approach, the investigation focuses on the characteristics of women's political participation, social meanings attributed to the process and how they related to their territory. They experienced transformations in their daily lives and gender relations as they got involved in political struggle at two intertwined levels: the dispute with their male partners for their rights as women to participate in the social movement, and the fight for the protection of Atenco's land.

**Keywords:** women, Atenco, land, political participation, gender

## TERRITÓRIO, MEMÓRIA E GÊNERO: SIGNIFICADOS DA PARTICIPAÇÃO POLÍTICA DAS MULHERES EM ATENCO, MÉXICO.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a participação das mulheres na defesa do território perante o projeto aeroportuário, conflito social este ocorrido em San Salvador Atenco, México, entre 2001 e 2002. A partir de uma metodologia qualitativa e com perspectiva de gênero, indaga-se particularmente as características da participação das mulheres, como elas significaram este processo e a sua relação com o território. Conclui-se que, na sua vida quotidiana, experimentaram uma transformação das relações de gênero a partir do envolvimento simultâneo na luta política em duas vertentes: por um lado, a disputa pelo direito a participar junto aos seus parceiros varões no conflito social de Atenco; por outro lado, a luta pela defesa do território.

**Palavras-chave:** mulheres, Atenco, territorio, participação política, gênero

## TERRITORIO, MEMORIA Y GÉNERO: SIGNIFICADOS DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN POLÍTICA DE MUJERES EN ATENCO, MÉXICO

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la participación de las mujeres en la defensa del territorio ante el proyecto aeroportuario en el conflicto social de San Salvador Atenco, México entre los años 2001 y 2002. Desde una metodología cualitativa y con perspectiva de género, se indaga particularmente en las características de la participación de las mujeres y cómo ellas significaron este proceso y su relación con el territorio. Se concluye que ellas experimentaron una transformación de su vida cotidiana y de las relaciones de género a partir del involucramiento simultáneo en la lucha política en un doble sentido: por un lado, la disputa por el derecho a participar junto a sus compañeros varones en el conflicto social de Atenco, y, por otro lado, la lucha por la defensa del territorio.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, Atenco, territorio, participación política, género

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