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The Women of Okupa Cuba Casa Refugio

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Violence against women has been a pressing issue in various countries around the world, particularly in Latin America where it often manifests as its most extreme form, femicide. Femicides, or the killings of women because they are women, are one of the biggest human rights concerns in Mexico, where approximately ten women are killed per day (Miller). The fact that forty percent of victims know their perpetrator indicates that femicides are an "intimate crime" in Mexico (Sandin). Despite the implementation of the General Law of Access for Women to a Life Free of Violence (GLAWLFV), femicide rates have had a "steady increase since the year 2007" (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) 3), and in the period between 2015 and 2020 they increased by 145% (Sandin). This number has been growing even more in the past few years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased confinement of women to the household (Miller). Tackling this issue is a question of life or death for many Mexican women and the means through which they decide to protest it, which will be discussed later, are often not a matter of choice since survival is at stake. It should be emphasized that violence against women in Mexico is disproportionately more directed toward lower class and/or Indigenous women (Eagan; Miller; Na'atik Mexico). The legacy of Spanish colonialism, its impositions of patriarchal and racist norms, and the exercise of power through violence and territorial control have created a society where indigenous women "suffer a "quadruple burden" of poverty, indigeneity, rurality, and gender" (Na'atik Mexico).

The state and its institutions, particularly the legal and justice systems, have proven to be inadequate to deal with the consequences of machismo, an ideology built not only into the mindset of many Mexicans, but in the culture and social structures as well. The current president, Andrés

Manuel López Obrador, has repeatedly denied femicide as an issue in Mexico (Wattenbarger) and has blamed the increase in murders of women on drug cartels and organized crime, previous administrations, and neoliberalism (Phillips). One of the many issues with how the state deals with femicides is that less than half of Mexican states recognize it as a crime separate from homicide (CDD 3), and even if they do, it is often explained through the "reasons of honor" framework, which justifies and gives shorter sentences for femicides that occur when a woman is caught cheating (CDD 15). Not mentioning femicide in their criminal codes makes it difficult for states to collect accurate and exhaustive data on femicide rates. Even when femicides get reported, however, there are numerous legal obstacles that prevent a proper investigation and punishment for the perpetrator. One of such obstacles is the endless bureaucracy (Wattenbarger) that the person who reported finds themself in or the fact that court trials are often ignored and prolonged until they become old and are dismissed. Another frequent issue with reporting violence and requesting help from authorities is the inadequate implementation of the so-called "protection orders" and the too big of a time frame (72 hours) for them to be executed (CDD 10).

Numerous feminist social movements, social justice organizations, and protests have emerged in Mexico over the last years, often triggered by extreme forms of violence, such as the case of a seven-year-old Fatima Aldrighetti who was kidnapped, tortured, and whose dead body was found in a plastic bag (Phillips). Cases like these provoke deep feelings of grief, anger, and helplessness not only because of the overtness of their brutality but also because of the lack of a proper response from the authorities. The state and its institutions have most often been the target "enemies" of these movements because through their repeated failure to provide adequate measures of protection and punishment, they have institutionalized violence against women. Even though the state introduced various laws in recent years to attempt to challenge the systemic

violence against women, the increase in femicide rates have raised questions about whether the liberation of Mexican women can be achieved through incremental legal changes or if a more radical change is needed. It appears that liberal ideals of granting rights and changing laws work only to a certain extent, but ultimately fail to challenge and abolish the systems that have produced and maintained femicides, i.e., the systems of patriarchy, racial capitalism, and colonialism. When there is neither protection nor justice for female victims of violence at the individual and state level, ordinary women are forced to take the matter into their own hands and create alternative ways of living. It is in this context that the Okupa Cuba Casa Refugio ("Cuba Occupation-Shelter House"), or Okupa for short, was formed in September of 2020 (Wattenbarger).

The Okupa was a two-year long project started spontaneously by two women whose unfortunate cases[i] were being persistently ignored by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), the same institution that is supposed to help the victims of social injustice and their families. After the CNDH's refusal to properly address these women's cases, one of them tied herself to a chair and refused to leave their office, and the other joined the protest. After the word of these two women's protest spread, an anarcho-feminist organization called El Bloque Negro ("Black Block") came to support them. Even after the two women resolved the issue with the CNDH, the Black Block seized this opportunity to express their anger and use this protest as a platform for their activism. On September 4 of 2020, fourteen Black Block female activists officially took over the CNDH building and transformed it into a women's shelter (Wattenbarger), where it existed until April 15 of 2022, after it was raided and taken over by the police (Infobae). Albeit temporary, the Okupa's endurance can be seen as one of the four indicators that we can refer to this project as a social movement (Edwards 4). Another indicator, or criterion, that Edwards (4) points out is if such projects are "collective, organized efforts at social change, rather than

individual efforts at social change," which certainly applies in the case of Okupa. It is important to emphasize here that, although Okupa was a collective effort, we can question whether it was "organized" or not, depending on how we understand that term. Often the word organized indicates a prefigured, well thought of plan that a group of people, usually with one or a few leaders, carries out. Not only has Okupa started spontaneously without upfront planning, but it has also for the most part been a leaderless movement with a decentralized form of power. Also, given that the Okupa actively pursues change through protest, we can say that it fits a third criterion that Edwards (5) attributes to social movements.

For a better understanding of the Okupa movement, their choice of tactics, and their effectiveness, we may analyze them through the perspective of Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT). RMT argues that resources, tangible or intangible, determine whether a social movement occurs and to what extent it succeeds (Edwards 44). This observation is very important because it helps us explain how a group of fourteen activists were powerful enough to seize an entire building and were able to, with the help of others, stay there until now. From an RMT point of view, these women were successful in their attempt at occupation thanks to the resources they mobilized, the first one being their own bodies. The Black Block anarcho-feminists are known for their use of human bodies as a resource during marches, especially in the form of a human shield which protects protestors primarily from attacks by the police (Medina). Another significant and recognizable resource of the Black Block is the use of various sharp objects, working tools, and other weapons, to send a message of power and intimidation to possible perpetrators, including the police. The Okupa movement has taken this strategy and used weapons as a resource through which they not only asserted dominance by taking over but have also maintained their control until

now. There were always a few armed Okupa women safeguarding the street where the building is located, ensuring that there were no unwanted visitors, i.e., men and the police.

The strategy of intimidation that Okupa used is not reflected only through its use of arms, but also their clothing. Even when protesting outside of the Okupa, members of the Black Block are recognizably all dressed in black, with capuchas and balaclavas. One effect that their uniformity has is that they are hard to identify and trace, which comes in handy when fighting against the police. Nevertheless, anonymity has never been the main reason for their uniformity because worrying about being imprisoned or killed by the police is not the primary concern of someone who risks being murdered for simply existing as a woman. Another and arguably more significant reason is that it creates a sense of solidarity and belonging to a community. This idea of oneness is well summarized by the phrase "fuimos todas" ("it was all of us") often referenced in feminist movements including the Okupa (Wattenbarger). Thanks to this unity, which is reflective of their non-hierarchical mode of organizing, no one is alone, and everyone has each other's backs. Uniformity, therefore, contributes to forming their sense of identity, which I will say more about later in the essay.

It is important to mention that, although RMT is useful for understanding social movements, some of its tenants do not accurately describe Okupa. For instance, some RM theorists have presented social movements as almost entirely rational, seeing them as manifestations of the so-called "instrumental rationality," i.e., an individualistic approach to a cost-benefit analysis (Edwards 48). Such an analysis does not give an accurate account of the Okupa movement, a project which has been heavily reliant on spontaneous, interconnected, and democratic decision making of all its members. Another issue with RMT's approach is that they tend to present social movements as formally organized structures that have their own sectors, industries, and even

businesses (Edwards 58-60), which is quite a narrow definition of social movements and certainly does not apply to Okupa. However, by emphasizing the intangible as much as the tangible resources for social movements, RMT helps us see another important aspect of Okupa – its relation to other feminist movements in Mexico and across Latin America. The legacy of these movements has acted as both a role model and a support system for the Black Block. The Okupa is, thus, in debt to various movements and organizations not only for being able to persist, thanks to their resources and donations, but also to exist in the first place, thanks to their legacy. The interconnectedness of these organizations is a useful intangible resource because it connects existing networks and enables a potential continuation of the movement in the future. To understand the Okupa movement better, especially in terms of its choice of tactics and their effectiveness, we may reflect on some of the preceding feminist movements in Mexico.

One of the many important moments in Mexico's recent feminist movements was in August of 2019, when a teenage girl was raped by police officers causing a rally in Mexico City where an activist threw purple glitter in the city's security minister's face, something that would later be called the "glitter revolution" (Rios). Protesters chanted demands for justice leaving a trail of glitter behind them while also breaking windows, damaging public transportation, and burning a police station (Rios). A similar type of protest broke out following the earlier mentioned brutal murder of the seven-year-old Fatima in 2020, when protesters gathered outside of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City and vandalized the main door with blood-red paint and graffiti (Phillips). On March 9, 2020, tens of thousands of women deliberately disappeared from their jobs and schools for 24 hours, taking part in a nationwide leaderless walkout referred to as #UnDíaSinNosotras ("a day without us") (Sandin). To all these protests, the state has resorted to violence and the use of police force as a response, as well as to creating physical barriers to keep protesters away from

governmental buildings. For instance, prior to the 2021 International Women's Day, a 10-foot metal fence was built around the Palacio Nacional and was named "the wall of peace" by President López Obrador (Rios). It was soon after painted over by thousands of names of victims and renamed as "the wall of remembrance" by feminist activists. As demonstrated by this example, creativity also comes out as another frequent tactic of feminist movements such as the Okupa, alongside intimidation and property damage. We notice creativity in one of the first steps that the Black Block members took after occupying the CNDH building, when they covered the interior with murals and art. They decorated not only the walls of the building to signify its transformation but have also repurposed the space to use it for the expression of their creativity through poetry, songs, and dancing. By doing so they reclaimed the space that failed to protect their rights as humans, and they asserted their own narrative of the world through a fun mechanism which fosters collective ties, love, and healing. To understand the significance of such tactics for the effectiveness of Okupa, we may turn to Collective Behavior theory (CB) of social movements.

CB theorists believed that social movements are irrational manifestations of collective grievances that are caused either by deprivation or detachment from society (Edwards 14). Herbert Blumer, one of the most influential CB theorists, emphasized the role of "the crowd" (Edwards 19) in creating a space where rational thinking is suspended and emotions take over, an interaction that he calls "circular reaction" (Edwards 20). His observations can be useful when thinking about the effect of employing tactics like rioting, but also more peaceful tactics such as creating art. Art in all its variations has the power to make us express and feel our own and others' suffering. In feminist movements such as the Okupa, art is used to publicly denounce a message of justice, commemorate victims of violence, and be a cathartic remedy for the oppressed (Hernández). A good example of art as a strategy is the choreographed street performance of the song "Un Violador

en Tu Camino" ("A Rapist in Your Path"), which appears frequently at feminist demonstrations in Mexico and around the world (Hernández). Through the coordination of movements and singing, this street performance enhances circular reaction and emphasizes female unity and support, ideas that are fundamental for feminist movements. Although CB theorists have been helpful for highlighting the importance of circular reaction during protests, their theory has overemphasized irrationality as an integral component of social movements (Edwards 21). Looking at the longstanding Okupa movement, we see that although femicides and other forms of violence against women provoke intense feelings that can be contagious and spark circular reactions, the movement for female lives is certainly nothing but a rational response to people's grievances.

In their book *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward strongly oppose the argument of irrationality when it comes to social movements. Their ideas are helpful for analyzing the Okupa movement because of the similarities between feminist movements and poor people's movements. This is arguably the case because violence against women is overwhelmingly more frequent in impoverished parts of Mexico, namely rural places inhabited by working class and Indigenous women. The protestors' implementation of violent tactics such as rioting and vandalism can, hence, be seen as a testimony of their socioeconomic standing in Mexican society. Piven and Cloward maintain that such tactics are poor people's only recourse and not a choice, but also that they are usually the reason why these movements are successful. They argue that since poor people do not have access to institutional channels of making changes, the only way they can succeed and persist is if their protest occurs outside of "the confines of electoral procedures" (Piven and Cloward 15). This analysis is especially useful for understanding why the Okupa members resorted to occupying the building instead of using legal pathways for fighting for social change.

Another aspect of social movements that they analyze is the role of large-scale changes in destabilizing the political scene and making political leaders "somewhat vulnerable to protests by the poor" (Piven and Cloward 28), which increases the chance of the movement's success. Indeed, the Okupa emerged during a period when the world, and Mexico in particular, suffered fundamental changes of people's everyday lives, which highlighted and intensified various social issues in Mexico, including its femicide rates. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic revealed the unpreparedness of the Mexican government to ensure its people are safe and healthy, and it illuminated the class, gender, and racial disparities within the country. However, Piven and Cloward can be criticized for their overemphasis of the idea that social movements are determined by "institutional conditions, and not by the purposive efforts of leaders and organizers" (Piven and Cloward 37). When they argue that social movements' success is always indebted to "what historical circumstances have already made ready to be conceded" (Piven and Cloward 36), they perpetrate a very narrow and deterministic view of social movements. Moreover, such an analysis diminishes the active agency of feminist activists without whom the Okupa movement would not have been possible, regardless of the political circumstances of the time.

An aspect of the Okupa movement that is important to reflect on, especially when thinking about its sustainability and future is the collective identity of its members. The movement's members have been exclusively Mexican cis women,[ii] through which the Okupa checked off the final criterion for social movements, i.e., that its members "are not just working together but share a 'collective identity'" (Edwards 5). However, though a female-exclusive space can feel empowering and safe for traumatized women, we must also acknowledge its limitations and hypocrisy. The Okupa's trans-exclusionary policy has led many local LGBTQ groups to withdraw their initial support for the movement (Wattenbarger). This issue of collective identity has raised

several questions. For instance, has the Okupa contributed to perpetuating patriarchal norms while simultaneously trying to oppose them? Moreover, what parts of one's identity are important for being a member of the Okupa movement? Is it one's perceived sex? Is it their personal involvement with the social issue at hand and the movement's cause? These are important questions if we want to understand the true nature of this movement as well as the shape it will take in the future.

For a feminist movement to be complete and sustainable, it is necessary to make an active effort toward eradicating patriarchal norms that it claims to oppose, including the reinforcement of gender binaries and cis supremacy. We must remember that social movements are allowed to change and grow, and that the collective identity of its members need not be fixed and permanent. Not only is identity subject to change but it is often the goal of social movement activists. As James Jasper and Francesca Polletta outline in their article *Collective Identity in Social Movements*, many activists are "torn between asserting a clear identity and deconstructing it" (Jasper and Polletta 292). Another one of their arguments that could be applied to the Okupa is that collective identity does not necessarily precede mobilization, and that solidarity is sometimes equally important (Jasper and Polletta 290-1). In addition to this observation, another important aspect of the Okupa that should be considered when thinking about its possible future continuation is the target enemy of their struggle. Mexican women have rightly identified the state's institutions as their oppressors, but they have also focused their attention on requesting solutions within the same system that oppresses them. My analysis of the movement may serve as a question of whether incremental changes within the Law are enough to eradicate machismo and liberate Mexican women. Since patriarchy is a form of power not exercised only hierarchically but also horizontally, it is difficult to attack. Due to the diffusion of its effect, patriarchy is not located only in the state's institutions, and this complicates the effectiveness of legal solutions. Thus, only through a radical change, a

complete reconceptualization of life, and communal living will Mexican women achieve liberation. Such a reconceptualization needs to be not only anti-patriarchy but also actively anti-racist and anti-colonial. Furthermore, due to the intertwined nature of these different systems of oppression, the movement will only be complete if it is anti-capitalist as well.

Despite outlining specific demands in their 14-point document, various issues of disagreement between the movement's supporters have appeared, raising questions which are partly about ideology and partly about identity. A woman could live in the Okupa because of her experience with gender-based violence without necessarily having to share a specific ideology with the other members. In fact, some Okupa's supporters do not even consider themselves feminists (Medina). The issue of incongruence is possibly a result of the movement's strategy of spontaneity, which can be both a strength and a weakness. The strength of such an approach lies in the fact that not everything needs to be perfectly planned out, especially in the context of the Okupa which not only emerged spontaneously but also kept receiving material and non-material support from unexpected sources. In addition, the fact that a movement is spontaneous does not imply that its members do not act intentionally and do not put effort into maintaining it. However, such an approach can possibly be a weakness if we find that a more structural way of organizing could have contributed to making the Okupa into a sustainable movement.

Through my analysis of the Okupa movement, I tried indicating that the root of the issue of violence against women lies not merely in policies but in deeper and much larger structures of oppression that interlock and often work simultaneously. It will take much more than the change of laws or the government administration to unravel the issue of femicides and other forms of violence against women. My analysis also illustrated the tension between the bold and radical efforts of these Mexican women in their fight against the individual- and state-based violence on

the one hand, and their conservative policies which perpetuate oppressive patriarchal norms on the other. Thus, while the Okupa movement was certainly one of the bravest outcomes of the feminist struggle in Mexico in recent years and has enormous potential, it has several issues to improve upon if it wants to be sustainable and include all those that it claims to be fighting for in its potential future missions. Finally, the Okupa movement and its heritage could be further improved if its members make an active effort to base their sense of collective identity on a shared ideology rather than on those parts of their identity which they are not able to change or choose for themselves.

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[i] The two women were Silvia Castillo, who wanted to resolve the case of her 22-year-old son's murder, and Marcela Aleman, who wanted answers about the sexual assault of her 4-year-old daughter.
[ii] Some of the women's non-female children live in the house as well.