

PENNSYLVANIA STUDIES
IN HUMAN RIGHTS

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*Gender
and Culture
at the Limit
of Rights*

Edited by

Dorothy L. Hodgson

PENN

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

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Chapter 8

The Rights to Speak and to Be Heard: Women's
Interpretations of Rights Discourses
in the Oaxaca Social Movement

Lynn Stephen

This chapter highlights the process by which several hundred women in Oaxaca City, Mexico, from different types of backgrounds took over state and then commercial media for a period of several months and in the process came to a gendered analysis of human rights. Their thinking centered on what they called the rights "to speak," "to be heard," and "to decide who governs." Through an event-centered analysis I will argue that the appropriation of human rights discourses became gendered through the process of the media takeover. Through their experience running state television and radio stations and subsequently commercial stations, women who held the stations produced a gendered local vernacular of rights talk that then became accessible to many other women and men in the city. Women who were previously silenced and characterized themselves as "short, fat, and brown and the face of Oaxaca" allowed new voices to be heard, new faces to be seen, and permitted silenced models of governance and democratic participation to move into the cultural and political mainstream.

**The Oaxaca Social Movement of 2006: Political Context,
Rights Talk, and Events**

Oaxaca has historically been one of the poorest states in Mexico and continues to rank either first or second to Chiapas in extreme poverty, depending

on the year and data source. Home to more than sixteen different indigenous ethnic groups, each with a distinctive identity, language, and self-identified traditions, Oaxaca often seems to belong to a different country than the central and northern parts of Mexico because of its strong indigenous cultures and intense poverty. Some estimates put the number of people living in extreme poverty as high as 78 percent (Thomas 2006). About 33 percent of its 3.5 million inhabitants are indigenous according to the 2005 population counts (INEGI 2006).¹ The capital city of Oaxaca had an estimated population of 256,270 in 2008 (Encarta Encyclopedia MSN 2008). Oaxaca City grew rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s due to immigration from the countryside to the city. Mixtec- and Zapotec-speaking populations make up significant portions of the city today.

Unlike the rest of Mexico, where the Party of the Institutional Revolution (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) was finally ousted from power after a seventy-year rule in 2000, the state of Oaxaca has remained rooted in an authoritarian political model where the PRI (and other political parties as well) use selective and sometimes more widespread repression, manipulation of the justice system, and political co-optation to retain control. While the Mexican constitution and law provide for freedom of speech, rights for women, and racial equality with specific mention of indigenous peoples, these ideological rights are juxtaposed with a contradictory reality in Oaxaca. There, a political elite has maintained control of politics and economics through a regional political culture that is built on a contradiction between claims to equal citizenship rights for women, indigenous people, and the poor and the lived reality of people who lack the resources, public spaces, and legitimacy to exercise such rights. Awareness of citizenship rights for these silenced sectors is at an all-time high due to ongoing contact with discourses of rights coming from the Mexican National Human Rights Commission, the Oaxacan Commission for the Defense of Human Rights, social movements, and a wide range of NGOs. A repressive state political system has made expression of such rights increasingly dangerous.

Elected amid widespread charges of electoral fraud in 2004, Oaxaca Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz took office with a pledge that there would be no more social protests in the streets and public spaces of Oaxaca. He moved the seat of the state senate and the governor's palace to the sleepy, pottery-producing town of San Bartolo Coyotepec in an attempt to dissuade the continual occupations of these public governance spaces by relocating them outside the capital city. More recently, the state government was moved again, to a new

fortress called the "Administrative City," in another small town about ten miles outside the capital. The governor's removal and reinscribing of state governance spaces as well as his brutal treatment of social protesters and anyone who criticized his government set the stage for a prolonged period of conflict, polarization, and violence.

During the summer and fall of 2006, what began as a large group of teachers exercising their right to bargain for higher salaries through the occupation of Oaxaca City's historic colonial square erupted into a widespread social movement after state police violently attempted to evict the teachers. The movement included "megamarches" of thousands, creation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO—a coalition of more than 300 organizations), occupation of state and federal buildings and offices, takeover of the state's television and radio stations, and construction of barricades in many neighborhoods. Regional movements throughout the state questioned the legitimacy of the state government. The main events that are the focus of the analysis here took place during August 2006, two months into a five-month period in which the APPO maintained control over significant parts of the city of Oaxaca. A complex mixture of movements including a teacher's movement, indigenous movements, women's movements, student movements, peasant movements, and urban neighborhood movements coexisted in Oaxaca for several decades and are the political soup out of which the social movement of 2006 emerged (see Magaña 2008; Poole 2007b; Rénique 2007; Esteva 2007; Stephen 2007).

As elsewhere in Mexico, the 1990s saw major growth in the number of organizations in Oaxaca carrying out work they called human rights monitoring and defense. The defense of the human rights of indigenous peoples in Oaxaca is rooted in the experience of organizations such as the Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students (Coalición Obrera, Campesina, Estudiantil del Istmo, COCEI), Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (Union de Comunidades Indígenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo, UCIZONI), and Services of the Mixe People (Servicios del Pueblo Mixe, SER-MIXE) formed in the 1980s and dedicated to gaining power at the municipal level, defending indigenous land rights, promoting community-based grassroots development, and later linking to national networks and movements for indigenous rights and self-determination (see Stephen 2002: 235–37; Rubin 1997). Initially, organizing focused on human rights at the grassroots level emerged not out of organizations with the label human rights, but out of organizations defending indigenous and peasant

rights. Because members of these organizations suffered from harassment, death threats, illegal detention, and imprisonment, their work increasingly came to focus on defense and protection of their members. The independent teachers confederation, National Coordinator of Education Workers (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación, CNTE) formed within the National Union for Education Workers (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación, SNTE) described below created its own human rights organization in the 1980s called the Teachers Human Rights Commission (Comisión Magisterial de los Derechos Humanos, COMAT), which dealt with disappearances, assassination, and human rights violation of teachers in the independent unions.

In the 1990s, with the militarization of several regions of Oaxaca including the Loxicha region, specific human rights organizations were founded, as was a Regional Center for Human Rights. Many of the organizations that now participate in the Regional Center for Human Rights Bartolomé Carrasco (BARCO) are supported by the Catholic Church. Other state groups include the Center for Human Rights Flor y Canto, the Center for Human Rights Siete Principes, and the Oaxaca Network for Human Rights (Red Oaxaqueño de Derechos Humanos, RODH). These groups have undertaken campaigns to defend the rights of communities and individuals in the face of military and paramilitary occupation and harassment as well as individual cases of detention, torture, and illegal incarceration. The Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights (Liga Mexicana de Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, LIMEDDH) established an office in Oaxaca in 1996.

The State Commission of Human Rights in Oaxaca (Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos de Oaxaca) was formed in 1993 in response to a new state law calling for the formation of the commission and outlining how it should work. The website for the commission, now called the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights of Oaxaca (Comisión para Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de Oaxaca, CDDRO), states: "with the creation of this commission the necessity of the people of Oaxaca to have their rights and liberties guaranteed as well as the prompt and impartial procurement of justice is satisfied." The specific human rights CDDRO states that its projects address include "the right to life, to physical integrity, equality, liberty, dignity, and judicial security of all persons, property, as well as the best possible efficiency in the provision of public services" (CDDRO 2008).

In addition to the areas of indigenous rights and human rights, women's rights have also received much institutionalization in communities, NGOs,

and branches of the government. All this history is an important backdrop to the current movements in Oaxaca and the kinds of rights claims they are making. The historic feminist organization, Grupo de Estudios sobre la Mujer, Rosario Castellanos A. C. (Rosario Castellanos Group for the Study of Women), began in 1977. In the 1980s, it sponsored weekly radio shows, workshops on health, and worked to bring women's rights to state and city political arenas. In 1991 it opened La Casa de la Mujer Rosario Castellanos, and in 1995 it began a scholarship program for young indigenous women that provides mentoring and support to continue in high school and university.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a wide range of indigenous, peasant, urban, student, and other organizations had "women's" committees within them, functioning as internal human rights committees had in the 1980s. In 2003, women's groups from around the state of Oaxaca, including independent groups such as the Grupo de Estudios sobre la Mujer Rosario Castellanos, as well as women's committees and caucuses within other groups, formed the Huaxyacac Collective. The purpose of this alliance-building network was to pressure candidates in the 2004 elections (in which Ruiz Ortiz was "elected" governor of Oaxaca) to sign the Oaxaca Agenda for Gender Equity, which would have obligated Oaxaca to adhere to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ratified by the Mexican Senate in 2001 (Dalton 2007; Magaña 2008). The Huaxyacac Collective also pressured the administration of Ruiz Ortiz shortly after his election to take action on the alarming number of femicides in the state.² In 2006 and beyond, the Huaxyacac Collective was an active member of the APPO, and some of the women who took over public media in 2006 were from the collective. Some were also a part of the independent teachers movement.

Since 1979, Local 22 has joined other locals in forming a dissident federation within the SNTE, known as CNTE. The CNTE was formed to democratize the larger group, to democratize the process of education, and to democratize the country, according to CNTE activists Alfredo Chiu Velásquez and Rogelio Vargas Garfias.³ While the CNTE controls about 45 percent of the 1.4 million workers in the SNTE nationally, in the state of Oaxaca CNTE leaders estimate that they have about 60,000 members. In Oaxaca indigenous teachers, particularly bilingual indigenous teachers, are a significant presence in the CNTE. It is estimated that 60 to 80 percent of the teachers in the CNTE are women.

As part of their annual bargaining strategy with the state governor, the teachers of Local 22 occupy the historical town center or *zocalo* of the city

of Oaxaca. Usually this occupation lasts one to two weeks, while union officials work out annual agreements about salary, benefits, new schools, classrooms, and programs for children. In 2006, their demands included breakfasts for children, chairs and infrastructure for classrooms, a cost of living increase for teachers, and other matters related to improving the educational experience for children. The governor of Oaxaca refused to negotiate and instead sent in poorly prepared state policemen who attempted to evict the teachers and their families camped in the zocalo. Many were camped out with small children and sleeping in tents, on cardboard, next to improvised kitchens.

On June 14, 2006, the governor launched a massive operation against the teachers with helicopters strewing tear gas canisters, hundreds of armed police beating back unarmed teachers, destruction of the teachers' radio station known as Radio Plantón, and destruction of teachers' personal property. In addition, dozens of people were seriously wounded, leaders were arrested, and the population in the center of the city was massively affected by the presence of tear gas. Small children were intoxicated with gas, as were many other bystanders and neighborhood residents who had nothing to do with the teachers or their occupation of the city center.

The eviction of the teachers was unsuccessful. They regrouped and spread out to a larger area, with more than 30,000 teachers from around the state continuously occupying a large part of the city center. The outraged city residents who had watched the brutal treatment by police against women, men, and small children began to bring the teachers food, blankets, water, and other necessary items. Businesses such as restaurants let them use their bathrooms and kitchens and helped supply food. Entire extended families reorganized their lives to provide support to those in the occupation. The teachers from different regions of the state worked out a rotation system whereby one group would rest and go back to their families for a week and others would take their places. After a week of rest, they would return to the occupation and others would take off a week to rest. Four days after the intended ouster of the teachers, a widespread coalition of more than 300 organizations formed calling itself the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. Many key APPO participants were also members of Local 22 who militated in other organizations outside the teachers' union.

In July the APPO took over many state and some federal buildings, including the state legislature, state offices for collecting taxes, offices for various social services, and some offices of the legal system. Large marches were

frequent and the official police forces were seen less and less. The governor was unable to show his face in the capital city. The APPO successfully ran a boycott of a long-running state-sponsored folk festival known as the Guelagueta, which was a major tourist attraction and revenue generator in the city. In addition to preventing the festival from happening, the APPO and Local 22 sponsored a successful free parallel event that over 30,000 people attended (see Poole 2007a).

By the end of July the social movement had a very solid presence in the city with marches happening every other day, nightly rallies, and cultural activities showcasing young musicians writing songs about the movement. A wide range of independent video producers sold cheap DVDs highlighting footage of the attempt to oust teachers from the zocalo, interviews with the wounded, and "extras" on other social movements in Mexico, such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) in Chiapas and the May 2006 confrontation in Atenco where hundreds were arrested, many were wounded, and some prisoners were sexually assaulted by federal police (see Gibler 2009: 71–80).

Women's Takeover of Public Radio and Television Stations

On August 1, 2006, between 2,500 and 5,000 women participated in a march known as La Marcha de las Cacerolas, the march of the pots and pans. They brought cooking pots and utensils to bang with while shouting slogans related to the Oaxaca movement. They called for the ouster of the governor, justice for those who had been arrested and detained, and fulfillment of the teachers' original demands. The idea according to Conchita Nuñez, a long-time feminist and also member of Local 22, was "to make women visible by the banging of pots and to assemble all kinds of women . . . I remember that there were even some sex workers who participated in the march. . . . The idea was to arrive at the zocalo and make a lot of noise. After we got downtown they started to talk about going to the station." Another participant, Mariana Gómez, recalls that the several hundred women from the march who decided to go to the state television and radio stations didn't decide to take over the stations, but merely wanted to have some time on the air. Once they were at the station and were denied air time and not given any forum, they decided to take over the station. Their treatment at the station led many to decide to take over the media. She recalled:

When we got there some women asked for some time on the air to tell the truth about what was happening. First they told us to wait. . . . They didn't make any move toward letting us get on the air so we said, "You know what, we are going to occupy the station." We had a meeting in the patio of the radio and TV stations and decided to take them over.

The women decided to take over what is known as the Oaxacan Radio and Television Corporation (Corporación Oaxaqueña de Radio y Televisión, COR-TV). In the 1990s, COR-TV had a director who was well known for his support for public media and was also a reporter. Under him, people in Oaxaca became accustomed to having the programming content reflect a wide range of concerns from across the state. There was programming in indigenous languages and all the ethnic groups in Oaxaca were represented. According to Roberto Olivares of the MaldeOjo TV Collective and a long-time independent film-maker and journalist I interviewed in 2008, COR-TV would "even go out and record the community's fiestas or broadcast on traditional indigenous medicine. People got used to it being an effective public medium." In the late 1990s and 2000s, COR-TV was taken over by other directors and became like other public broadcast media in Mexico, which "are media in the service of governors and those in power, they are more instruments of propaganda than public media," according to Roberto and many others. Thus by 2006 COR-TV and radio functioned primarily to applaud the actions of the governor and prepare the public for upcoming governmental campaigns.

Another participant in the march, Catalina Ruiz, emphasized the idea that COR-TV was a publicly owned medium, equivalent to public television and radio in the U.S. This was an important part of her argument that women were justified in taking it over. For many women in the march who were a part of the decision, the initial denial of a space to share their perspectives and to speak on the air of a public television station was pivotal in how they came to view their right to hold the station and open up the airwaves. They were familiar with the television and radio stations' past history as more open and this along with their determination to have their perspective aired formed their first conceptual moment of analysis in terms of their rights "to speak" and "be heard."

They didn't even give us permission to talk for even an hour. So the compañeras decided that we were going to stay. We said, "This media

is ours. It is paid for by money from our taxes. We pay for it every time we buy something. It is supposed to be public, to be ours. So now since it is ours, we are going to keep it and run it."

Before the first television broadcast a young woman announced that she and a larger group of women had just taken over the TV and radio station. Once they decided to hold the station, the women held the employees in the station and insisted that they put them on the air. The technicians agreed and they had their first broadcast on television.

The Gendered Construction of Rights Inside the Station

Once they had taken possession of COR-TV, the women organized themselves into a series of work brigades. For the first two days they barely slept and there was a great deal of tension in the air. No one was sure whether the police would try to storm the station, the transmission towers would be shot out, or what else would happen. Shortly after the takeover, the APPO and Local 22 responded by sending groups of people to guard the station and assure the safety of the women inside. The approximately 300 women who ran the stations renamed the TV station Television for the People of Oaxaca (Televisión para el Pueblo Oaxaqueño); the radio station was dubbed Radio Cacerola or Pots and Pans Radio in reference to the August march that led to the takeover. Women were organized into work brigades who rotated between security posts in and around the station and the transmission towers, programming of radio and TV, food and cooking, receiving and organizing visiting individuals and delegations that came to the station to get on the air, outreach and contact with movement activists to monitor events, marches, and security concerns. The physical strain of working constantly, getting little sleep, interacting with hundreds of people who came to the station every day to be on the air, and ongoing discussions of what kind of programming, vision, and ideas should be projected greatly intensified the experience for many women. Running the radio and TV station was a transformative process for women who had left their normal routines, families, and even children to do so. Many had called their husbands to tell them that they were not going home and to bring them clothing, food, and something to sleep on. For many women, this was the first time they had left their families for an unspecified period of time.

Rosario Romero,⁴ who supported the teacher's occupation in the center of the city and then participated in the TV and radio station occupation, stated:

The day that we took over Channel 9 (COR-TV), I stayed there with other women. I asked one of them to lend me a telephone to call my husband. He said, "Where are you? You went to march and didn't return." I explained to him what I was doing at the station. I said, "Please bring me a sweater and two or three for the other women." I stayed until six in the morning and then went home for a while. He was ok with that. For me, the rebellion has been marvelous. . . . The kind of repression we lived through as women is hard. . . . But it is worth what I have learned.

Patricia Jiménez, who became one of the spokeswomen for the group occupying the station, also recalled the intensity of the occupation and the importance of women being able to speak on the air and have their voices heard—the rights to speak and be heard. "Women who took over the station would say 'we took over this station because we want our voices to be heard and we want to appear on TV'. . . . Those of us in charge of the production responded, 'Go ahead.'"⁵ And they did, as did many other people.

From early in the morning until late at night, Radio Cacerola and Televisión para el Pueblo Oaxaqueño became the chief means for people to voice their opinions, receive news, and have debates for most of August 2006. Everyone from the motor-taxi association of six neighborhoods denouncing a corrupt licensing official to Zapotec vegetable farmers fed up with a corrupt local mayor used the station to air their opinions. Regular radio shows cropped up on topics including the murder of women in Ciudad Juárez and Oaxaca, celebrating local musical groups, and hosting discussions of indigenous rights in more than half a dozen of Oaxaca's sixteen indigenous languages.

When local municipal police refused to leave their barracks and Oaxacan head of security and transportation Aristeo López Martínez put together an improvised police force of undercover "municipal" police rumored to include paramilitaries from outside the state, Radio Cacerola announced where they were seen and encouraged people not to lose faith. When APPO leaders were detained without a warrant, Radio Cacerola relayed the kind of vehicle the police used and encouraged people in the neighborhood where the leaders were last seen to search for the car. When APPO needed supporters to rein-

force groups of people holding more than twenty state government buildings, the call went out over Radio Cacerola. When fifty-year-old Jose Jiménez Colmenares was shot dead in the middle of a peaceful protest march on the way to the TV station, Radio Cacerola broadcast the news and urged people not to be afraid and to continue to protect the station and other buildings that had been taken over by APPO. The women behind the radio station appeared to be not militant fighters, but rather long-time Oaxaca residents who had finally gotten fed up with their invisibility and bad treatment by state governments that had been promising to improve their lives for decades. They were also tired of remaining silent in their homes and in the streets.

Radio Cacerola and Televisión para el Pueblo Oaxaqueño became testimonial forums where all the disaffected of Oaxaca could share their stories. Day and night people flooded the station with calls and shared their past grievances, as well as calling in warnings about repression, conflict, and suspicious activities. The right to speak and to be heard was taken up by many and became generalized to a much larger public the longer the women controlled the stations. The TV station also became the source of alternative political histories and interpretations of past and present events.

Over the three-week period that women occupied COR-TV and Radio, long and difficult discussions ensued among them about what they were doing, what kind of programming they wanted to produce, and what kinds of rights they were asserting in the process. For many, the first way they experienced their rights, as individuals but particularly as women, was through literally speaking on the radio and/or in public. While we don't usually think of "the right to speak" as gendered, many of the women who occupied the radio station were accustomed to being silent or soft-spoken, whether at home or in larger mixed grassroots organizations such as the teacher's movement. While women are a majority of the membership of Local 22, very few are in the public leadership structure of the CNTE. Many teachers complained of sexism and exclusion from leadership positions in the union (see Stephen 2007: 109–11). "The right to speak" was experienced by many women specifically as a gendered right because it was articulated within a group of several hundred women in a space where women held power and delegated responsibilities to one another and to men. If "silence" was the norm for many of the women in grassroots movements they participated in and in their marginal political positions as poor, dark, and working class, then "speaking" as and with women was experienced as a "woman's right."

Ruth Guzmán,⁶ whose husband Ramiro Aragon was detained, tortured,

falsely charged, and jailed for 90 days from August to November 2006, recalled what it was like the first time she spoke in public in a press conference that was broadcast on Radio Cacerola, filmed, and attended by reporters. Her husband Ramiro was still in jail. Her brother and a friend of his who were tortured and detained had been freed. On August 12, when Ruth's brother Elionai was released along with his friend Juan Gabriel (both teachers), they held a press conference. It was the first time Ruth had spoken about what happened in public. She had not been an activist before. It was one of her moments of becoming a political actor. I asked her how she remembered feeling in that moment.

The first time I spoke in public was on August 12, 2006. . . . Before that we were angry, but in that interview . . . we made Ulises Ruiz (the governor) directly responsible for what happened. I said that it was he who had beaten Ramiro, my brother Elio, and Juan Gabriel. I said we were holding him accountable for anything that happened to my family. . . . So I accused Ulises Ruiz directly and that appeared in the press. . . . I had spoken.

Ruth connects "speaking" with the right to hold the state governor responsible. She is asserting not only her right to speak, but also her right as a citizen to hold those who govern accountable.

The identification of many women with being silenced and marginalized in multiple arenas of their lives amplified the importance for them of earning the right to speak and be heard through their occupation of COR-TV and their ability to facilitate this right for many others—both men and women who also had been silenced. Catalina who was identified above observed:

We hope that this is a lesson for the larger movement, for women, and for the media. We also hope that it is a lesson for the next governor so that it is clear the governor has to obey the citizens and this includes women. Article 39 of our constitution says—and when you hear this being read in the voice of a working class housewife it is clear—the article says we have the right to decide who will govern us. And if the person who is governing us doesn't work out, then we have the right to change that person.

In this portion of her narrative Catalina makes the move from articulating the right of women to speak and be heard—particularly working-class women, which in Oaxaca invariably means women of indigenous descent—to the right of women as citizens to decide who will govern them. She links the rights to speak and be heard to a more general right of political citizenship for those who reside within a country (she makes reference to the Mexican constitution) to remove from power those who govern ineffectively.

Another key participant in the station occupation and programming, Fidelia Vásquez,⁷ picks up on this theme. In her narrative she explicitly frames her identity as a Oaxacan working-class woman of indigenous descent and deliberately genders her description of what is going on. Fidelia is also a teacher, a member of the Local 22, and a self-declared supporter of the APPO. What is most striking about this testimonial is her claim that women who are "brown, short, and fat" are the face of Oaxaca, represent the people, and have a right to a voice through their occupation of the TV and radio stations and also a right to decide who will govern them.

I am a woman born in Oaxaca of Zapotec and Mixtec blood. We Oaxacan women ask that a woman be treated with the same rights as a man. Our mission as women is to create, educate, communicate, and participate. That is why we are here occupying the state radio and T.V. station. . . . From the countryside to the city, we Oaxacan women are tired of bearing this burden alone of the repression we are experiencing from a long line of people who have governed us and from our current governor, Ulises Ruiz. . . . We went out into the streets on the first of August to tell Ulises Ruiz that he had to leave Oaxaca. We are women who don't usually have a voice because we are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they think that we don't represent the people, but we do. WE are the face of Oaxaca. . . . It is too bad that the government doesn't recognize the greatness, the heart, and the valor of the women who are here. We are here because we want a free Mexico, a democratic Mexico, and we have had enough. . . . They will have to take us out of here dead, but we are going to defend the TV station and radio.

Fidelia's narrative is the most dramatic in terms of the stakes she sees for defending the rights she is claiming: the rights to speak and be heard, the right of women who are "brown, short, and fat" to represent the "face" of

Oaxaca, and the right to determine who governs. She is prepared to die to defend these rights. This narrative is a demonstration of the intense process and passion that women who occupied the stations went through.

**Broadcasting the Right to Speak, the Right to be Heard,
and the Right to Decide Who Governs to a Larger Public**

The passion reflected in Fidelia's statement suggests the determination of women who occupied the station to extend the rights they had articulated for themselves to others. As radio and TV broadcasting from the redefined COR-TV moved into its second week, the opposition to the movement grew as did the means to repress it. On August 10, José Jiménez Colmenares (a mechanic whose wife is a teacher) was killed in a peaceful march, several people were disappeared, and in the place of local Oaxaca police, paramilitary police who were not from the area appeared in civilian clothes and began to circulate in the late afternoon and at night in large convoys.

As stated above, Radio Cacerola became a testimonial forum for thousands of disaffected people in the state. Delegations arrived daily to denounce the governor on the air or other corrupt officials (see Stephen 2007: 101-3). At one point the waiting list was so long that people were told to return in several days in order to ensure that their points of view would be heard. The parade of perspectives aired on the radio made a big impression on many in the city. Josefina Reyes, a forty-year-old working-class mother whose husband has been in the U.S. for almost five years, reflected on the testimonial aspect of the radio that she observed.

The thing that happened with the women taking over the state radio station and TV and then on the other radio stations is that lots of people began to arrive and to go on the air. They would talk about what was going on in Oaxaca. And it wasn't just people from the city. People started to arrive from the towns and the ranchos from all over the state to say that they too were unhappy with things. They would go to the station or call in to say that they were in agreement with the movement, that they supported it.

In addition to facilitating the rights to speak and be heard for those who arrived to go on the air, the women occupying the station also provided a

direct communication channel for the movement and provided protection for people who might be in trouble. The massive access the radio provided to many people to speak and be heard provided an open forum for different kinds of ideas—ideas that many people had never heard about before. This point was also emphasized in the narrative of Josefina Reyes:

There would be young people on Radio Cacerola who talked about neoliberalism and the people started to know more things. Before we never heard about these things and we were not interested. But people started to know more and more, like about the Plan Puebla-Panama and other things that our government was involved in with other nations. People started to hear more and more from lots of people and to know more. They got more and more fed up with our government.

The effects of the movement-controlled radio and TV station became obvious not only to those in the movement who steadily increased their control of the city in August 2006, but also to the governor and the state legislature. Unable to meet in their offices because they were controlled by the APPO and Local 22, state senators were meeting in hotels in the outskirts of the city. The governor made press appearances at resorts on the Oaxacan coast and then appeared on a national television show broadcast from Mexico City to assure everyone that things were under control in the city of Oaxaca. During the dawn hours of August 21, a group of masked men shot out the transmission towers of COR-TV, rendering the stations inoperable. As soon as they began to destroy the transmission towers, a group of APPO members spread out over the city and began to take over 13 other commercial radio stations. The women who remained at the occupied COR-TV and radio stations decided to surrender the station buildings because they were unable to transmit further without the towers. They turned over the COR-TV and radio installations to federal police through a mediated dialogue.

When the dust settled, the federal government had accused the state government of Oaxaca of destroying the transmission towers of COR-TV. On August 22, during a clean-up operation, 400 Ministerial State Police and Municipal Police of Oaxaca designed to retake the 13 commercial radio stations from the APPO. Police opened fire on APPO members guarding one of the newly occupied radio stations in Colonia Reforma. Architect Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes was shot dead and others were wounded. The APPO ultimately held onto one of the stations, dubbed Radio La Ley, and also took

over Radio Universidad, run by students through the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO). The students were in favor of using Radio Universidad to support the APPO and the social movement. Through September, October, and most of November, Radio Universidad and Radio La Ley continued the functions that occupied COR-TV had assumed. They served as forums for a wide range of people to speak, be heard, and express their ideas about state government. They also were spaces where new ideas for democratically governing the state and the meaning of citizenship were discussed. The primary voice of Radio Universidad was Berta Elena Muñoz, an M.D. who first set up a first-aid station for people wounded in the increasingly bloody confrontations that emerged in the city. She also became a radio announcer.

At the end of September, Oaxaca was further militarized, with the Marines running an exercise with almost 100 soldiers, helicopters, and armed vehicles in the coastal region. On October 27, independent reporter Bradley Will and four Oaxacans were killed and more than 24 people were wounded in a day of multiple confrontations. On October 30, approximately 4,500 soldiers from the Federal Preventative Police carried out a large operation to push the movement occupation out of the center of the city. Using planes, helicopters, and tanks they massively launched tear gas canisters. They also used high pressure water hoses and batons to move people. Dozens of people were wounded and 23 people detained. At least one person was killed (Aguilar Orihuela 2006). The APPO and Local 22 relocated their encampment in the UABJO and in front of the Santo Domingo Cathedral. Radio Universidad became the primary communication forum for the movement from October 30 until November 25, when Federal Preventative Police carried out a final repressive clean-up operation which resulted in the imprisonment of more than 200 protesters. "Many detainees have reportedly been subject to ill-treatment, torture and denial of access to family and independent legal counsel. Many were also not apparently involved in violence and evidence against them was reportedly fabricated" (Amnesty International 2006: 7).

Analysis and Conclusions: Articulating the Gendered Rights to be Speak, to be Heard, and to Decide Who Governs

While one might suspect that the primary avenue of rights talk for the different kinds of women who came together to take over state television and

radio and later commercial radio in Oaxaca would be feminism, in fact that was just one strand of the discourse that entered discussions. More central to the definition of a package of rights that emerged as "the right to speak," "the right to be heard," and "the right to decide who governs," what Sally Merry (2006; this volume) and Richard Wilson (2007) refer to as the vernacularization of human rights discourses. Merry discusses both replication and hybridity in her work on how vernacularization functions in relation to gender violence. Of concern here is her discussion of hybridity in the vernacularization of human rights, which occurs "when institutions and symbolic structures created elsewhere merge with those in a new locality, sometimes uneasily" (2006: 46–48). In Oaxaca, human rights and more specifically indigenous rights, women's rights, and the rights of the poor are expressed as an idea, "as a kind of floating signifier that represents a new form of human dignity and moral worth" (Goodale 2007: 160). Thus human rights "can reinforce—and embolden—existing normativities, even if their provisions or rules or 'laws' do not, strictly speaking, conform to specific human rights instruments" (160). In the context of the Oaxaca social movement, the merging of appropriated notions of general, universal "human rights" with particular, local injustices suggests a kind of denotative rights talk where "actors gesture towards aspects of human rights talk with very little specificity or actual content" (Wilson 2007: 358) in relation to specific human rights laws or treaties.

What interests me here is to unravel how the denotative appropriation of human rights talk in Oaxaca through the process of hybrid vernacularization was gendered. I used an event-based frame of analysis because I believe that it was through the process of their three-week occupation of Oaxacan state TV and radio stations that the women created their analysis. I am suggesting that for many (but not all) of the women involved, their gendered connection to human rights talk came not through their absorption of an initial gendered analysis of human rights influenced by feminist organizing and presence in the social movement circuit of Oaxaca, but through a different process. The case of women who organized to take over public and later commercial media in Oaxaca suggests that human rights discourses became specifically gendered through the exercise of specifically defined local rights—"the right to speak," "the right to be heard," and "the right to decide who governs." Many of the women who participated in the takeover of COR-TV and radio came with long histories of silence. Some were silenced as daughters in their families growing up, some were quiet or silent in their relationships with adult men, and many were the backbone and main support for Local 22 and

grassroots organizing in their communities but silenced when it came to assuming public leadership roles.

This does not mean, however, that they were not leaders, that women did not speak to one another or have influence in the movements some participated in. Many assumed the role of center-women, a concept articulated by Karen Brodtkin (1988) in her analysis of union organizing at Duke Medical Center. Center-women, Brodtkin writes, gain their positions through their ability to mediate and resolve conflicts by reconciliation, and to provide emotional support and advice—skills they learned in their families, but were able to deploy in organizing. In both the union analyzed by Brodtkin at Duke Medical Center and the Oaxaca social movement, there were gendered styles of leadership. Most people recognize only one aspect of leadership—that of public and solo speakers. Women can experience this as silencing but also can recognize that they provide other kinds of leadership, less visible. Brodtkin writes that in her initial analysis of Duke Medical Center workers she missed the crucial aspect of network centers. She states: “almost all the public speakers and confrontational negotiators were men . . . women were centers and sustainers of workplace networks—centerwomen or centerpersons—as well as the large majority of the union organizing committee” (1988: 132). Rather than just individuals following a popular orator, “leadership in the union drive involved already existing hospital-based social networks . . . around class and race-conscious or at least job-conscious values. . . . Center-women were key actors in network formation and consciousness-shaping” (133)

Like the organizing model at Duke Medical Center Brodtkin analyzes, most of the “public” speakers for the APPO and the teachers’ movement were male. In the takeover of the TV and radio stations, the leadership was female. Thus while women were not the public spokespeople for Local 22 and other organizations, they did have organizing skills. What was different about their experience taking over COR-TV was that they also became public leaders who spoke and were heard “like men.” For them, this was a new experience and was articulated as a new set of gendered rights. In enacting the rights to speak and be heard, Oaxacan women came to conceptualize what their rights were, thus creating their own localized culture of rights which became a part of the larger movement ideology that washed over the city for a period of several months (see Speed 2007: 184). This gendered, local culture of rights became accessible to many other women and through radio and came to influence their views as well, at least temporarily.

Whether this new set of gendered rights articulated by women who took over the media in Oaxaca will have a lasting legacy is unclear. The Oaxaca social movement, the APPO, and other organizations such as the Coordinator of Oaxacan Women (Coordinadora de Mujeres Oaxaqueñas, COMO) continue to exist and to struggle for some of the same rights they articulated during 2006. Without a doubt one of the clearest legacies of the 2006 Oaxaca social movement is the proliferation of community radio stations since 2006, which offer alternatives to state-run and commercial media in many parts of Oaxaca. The “right to speak” and “the right to be heard” have been taken up in dozens of communities in Oaxaca. The model provided by the women who took over COR-TV in 2006 has spawned a multitude of on-air forums for people throughout the state to share their perspectives and generate discussions on a wide range of themes. Their effectiveness is perhaps demonstrated by the Oaxaca state government’s continued determination to shut them down.

At the end of August 2008, the Assembly of Community and Free Radios of Oaxaca (Asamblea de Radios Comunitarios y Libres de Oaxaca) met in Zaachila. Twenty-two Oaxacan community radio stations along with three international ones and representatives from eight universities and a wide range of NGOs constituted themselves as a permanent assembly. This assembly was formed just one day after federal and local police sacked the community radio station known as La Rabiosa, a Mixtec radio station of the Center of Community Support Working Together (Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos, CACTUS). As in Chiapas, the Mexican government has set out to engage in the political, physical, psychological, cybernetic, and broadcast annihilation of individuals and groups that are labeled as criminals and ultimately as terrorist threats (see Leyva Solano 2009). Taking down radio stations and attacking those who work in them was a key strategy of the Oaxacan government in 2006 and continues in the present. What appears to remain however, is that the “right to speak,” “the right to be heard,” and “the right to decide who governs,” are being articulated in ever-wider circles and have become vernacularized in many corners of Oaxaca as basic human rights and critical components of local conceptions of citizenship.