

Centro Las Libres

Semiannual Bulletin

10 Year Anniversary Edition



Todos los derechos para todas las mujeres todo el tiempo
All rights for all women...always

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Introduction

In 2010, Centro Las Libres celebrated a decade of work promoting and protecting human rights throughout the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. A non-profit organization with a network of dedicated volunteers and collaborators, Las Libres works to advance and defend the inherent reproductive and sexual rights of women and youth.

Las Libres first started ten years ago in response to a controversial state bill that aimed to eliminate the right for women to terminate a pregnancy resulting from rape. The Guanajuato State Congress passed the bill without advising civil leaders, interest groups, or the general public. However, thanks to the mobilization of grassroots organizers, national and international pressure was placed on the governor and he vetoed the bill.

In the decade since that victory for women's rights in Guanajuato, Las Libres has developed extensively; they have provided legal and psychological support to victims of rape and sexual violence, developed educational workshops for rural communities on topics such as sexual health and domestic violence, started an economic development project for women from marginalized communities, and monitored and exposed corrupt government activity. The organization has been featured and referenced in both national and international press, and Executive Director Verónica Cruz Sánchez was named Human Rights Defender of the Year in 2006 by Human Rights watch. Join us in reflecting on the past decade and discussing upcoming goals for Centro Las Libres.

Timeline 2000 - 2011

2000

The organization was first founded due to a need to defend women's rights when the political party National Action Party (PAN) tried to change the State Penal Code, prohibiting women who were raped from having an abortion--the only legal exception for abortion in the state of Guanajuato. The initiative happened behind closed doors, which sparked the creation of Centro Las Libres. Apart from local organizers, national and international organizers also pressured the government and eventually the bill was vetoed.

2001

Following its dedication to educate women and youth about their human rights, Las Libres conducted several workshops throughout communities in the state of Guanajuato. Among the themes: the right to a legal abortion, abortion due to endangerment of life or rape, and youth workshops on sexuality and AIDS in rural and urban areas.

2002

Las Libres continued running its educational programs, focusing on the prevention of violence through education. They conducted workshops in rural communities throughout the state, teaching children and families about their right to live a life free of violence and the methods of preventing violence.

2003

Las Libres sought to raise awareness over the unjust case of a woman who was refused her right to a legal abortion by the state of Guanajuato after having been raped by her employer. In spite of a state law that allowed abortion in the case of rape, the woman was denied her right to have an abortion. Las Libres worked to inform the public of this human rights violation as well as so many other cases throughout the state and the country.



2004

In the city of Irapuato, the organization offered comprehensive care and support to women who lived in situations of violence. They continued offering educational workshops on sexually transmitted infections. Apart from those workshops, Las Libres also administered legal advice to women in the state, working with cases involving sexual abuse, domestic violence, voluntary divorce, alimony, and abortion.

2005

Las Libres raised awareness on the lack of female participation in government and

discrimination against women in the job sector. They fought, and continue fighting, such discrimination to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women.

2006

Aside from two important events for Las Libres - moving to their new office and creating their web page - the organization received a great honor. The Executive Director, Verónica Cruz Sánchez, received the prestigious award of Human Rights Defender from the international organization Human Rights Watch for her work defending and promoting women's rights.

2007

In February, the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence was signed into law. The federal law punishes physical, psychological, economic, sexual, and patrimonial (property) violence as well as violence against a woman's dignity, integrity or freedom. It also recognizes femicide as a type of violence against women. State governments were given a six month deadline to initiate their own local legislative changes in accordance with the federal law.

2008

Las Libres called for a State Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence after the nationwide General Law was passed in 2007. However, the women of Guanajuato remained without a local law protecting them from violence, from gender discrimination, and from harmful relationships. By ignoring and refusing the formation of this legislation, the state was not complying with its obligations under the General Law nor its international agreement to protect the rights of women.

2009

Although Las Libres fought arduously in 2008 for the government to approve a state law guaranteeing women their rights, the National Action Party (PAN) denied passing such a bill. However, they did reform the state constitution to recognize conception as the beginning of life, taking away the right of women to decide over their body, life, and health and imposing personal moral-Catholic beliefs on the state constitution.

2010

Las Libres led the public and legal defense of seven imprisoned women who were sentenced to over 25 years in prison on murder charges after having miscarriages in the last months of pregnancy. With the help of the organization, these women were finally freed in September, after serving many years for a crime they did not commit.

2011 and onward...

Las Libres continues to provide educational workshops, comprehensive care to victims of violence and abuse, sex education, and legal aid to women and youth throughout the state. They also continue to defend and promote the rights of women that are being refused or repressed by the conservative PAN state government.

Hear from Our Volunteers

Over the last decade, Las Libres has relied on the dedicated contributions of volunteers, collaborators, and supporters from all over the world and from various professional fields. Lawyers, psychologists, accountants, and volunteers specializing in grant writing, technical support, marketing, or graphic design have all contributed to the success of Las Libres and our goals. We asked two past volunteers to comment on their experience working with Las Libres.



What did your work with Las Libres entail?

Marisa: I volunteered with Las Libres in 2006-2007. I was with them for six months and I worked full-time. I accompanied Verónica and Gabriela when they gave workshops on sexual health, reproductive rights, domestic violence, etc. in various rural communities around the state of Guanajuato and at the University of Guanajuato. Also, I assisted in fundraising, organizing events, etc. Since it was only the three of us working full-time, I did a little bit of everything!

Catia: I helped at Las Libres from January to February 2010. Principally, I helped organize their media archive from the past ten years. Once a week, I went with Gaby and Monica [when they worked with women] in prison, just to spend some time with them. Oh, and I taught them a little bit of French as well!

What was a memorable or impacting experience you had with Las Libres?

Marisa: The truth is that everything was memorable and important. If I had to chose just one experience, I'd say that working in the rural communities with the women of El Coyote San José de la Luz really impacted me. I loved spending time with them, getting to know them, learning from them, etc. Those workshops opened my eyes to another world and they taught me a lot as well. I also greatly benefitted from working with Verónica. She's an incredible leader and woman, and I feel very fortunate to have been able to learn from and work with her.

Catia: Over everything else, the visits to the prison and chatting with the women who were unjustly jailed; it really affected me seeing such injustice. It was a very emotional, happy moment when I received the news that they were released (since I was already back in Switzerland)!



How did working with Las Libres change you?

Marisa: I arrived at Las Libres a few months after graduating from college in California, and so I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. During my time with Las Libres, I learned more and more about myself and how I wanted to continue promoting and defending the rights of women in marginalized communities. The truth is that Las Libres strengthened my conviction to keep working for social justice.

Catia: I definitely appreciate more than ever the rights that women have in Switzerland and Europe, although total equality doesn't exist here either. Experiences like those [at Las Libres] always broaden our horizons, and you see what issues really do matter.

What are you up to now? Did your experience at Las Libres affect your current work? How?

Marisa: Right now I'm working on my law degree from the University of Stanford in California. My experience at Las Libres directly influenced my decision to become a lawyer. During my time at Las Libres I observed how the lawyers we worked with helped the women resolve legal issues and how they also contributed in general to the fight for reproductive rights for women. Seeing that contributed to the idea that I too could work for social justice through the legal system. So, three years after returning from Guanajuato and after experiencing working in various organizations in California and Spain, I began to study law.

Catia: I'm in the publicity world, working in a media agency, developing media strategies for clients. I'd absolutely love to volunteer like I did years ago in Argentina or this past year in Mexico. Also, if it were for more time, six months or more, I'd love that.

How did Las Libres affect change in Guanajuato while you worked with them?

Marisa: I experienced the difference that Las Libres made every time we gave a workshop in a rural community, each time Verónica helped a women in a violent situation resolve the problem and give her psychological and emotional support, each time I talked with Norma and Lúz and saw them lead workshops that they themselves used to be participants in. Most impacting was that--seeing how every act that Verónica and the other men and women of Las Libres did contributed to the personal lives of the women and children they worked with, and how it formed a part of the fight to defend and promote women's rights in that part of Mexico. I also was able to experience (from Mexico) the tour that Verónica made through the United States after being honored by Human Rights Watch.



Catia: For me, the most impacting experience was the release of the imprisoned women in Guanajuato. Without Las Libres, those women would continue living for years without freedom. That was something incredibly valuable to experience! Also, [Las Libres] provided women who were abused or pregnant and didn't know what to do with a place to go, a place that helped them.

If you had to describe your experience with Las Libres in three words, what would they be?

Marisa: I couldn't describe it in only three words! But I'd include in my description the words: free, impacting, happy, essential.

Catia: Emotional, intense, unforgettable.

Interview with Verónica Cruz Sánchez



Executive Director Verónica Cruz Sánchez has watched Las Libres grow and develop since she first established it with other organizers over a decade ago. Now an internationally recognized organization, Las Libres has been featured in national and international press. In 2006, her dedicated work was recognized by Human Rights Watch when she was named Human Rights

Defender of the Year. However, Verónica recognizes that the struggle for women's rights in Mexico is far from over. We asked her to discuss the goals Las Libres has for the upcoming years and the obstacles the organization faces in achieving them.

What do you hope for the future of Las Libres?

I hope that Las Libres has a solid team with a strong but flexible structure, with the necessary economic and human resources to continue fighting for the human rights of women in Guanajuato. I hope that it continues being a leading organization in the defense of sexual and reproductive rights for Mexican women, that it continues being an organization that innovates ways to access, to experience human rights. Finally, I hope that Las Libres continues being an organization where women find a space to experience their rights, an organization where the women who comprise it continue fighting for freedom for all women.

What legislative changes would you like to see in the next few years?

- A State Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence harmonized with all existing legal systems to enforce the right women have to live free of all forms of violence as well as a state public policy that has all the necessary mechanisms to prevent, treat, and eradicate violence against women.
- An amendment to the code of criminal procedures in order to enforce access to legal abortion in the case of rape.
- Reforming the criminal code to increase the grounds for abortion to: economic reasons, risk to the health of women, congenital malformation, forced pregnancy, and mental health.
- Removing abortion from the penal code.
- Reforming the state constitution to guarantee women their right to make decisions about their own body.

What plans or goals do you have for the next 10 years? The next year?

- Consolidate a professional team specialized for Las Libres.
 - Consolidate a plan for economic auto sufficiency for the professional work of Las Libres.
 - Develop a strategic work plan for 5 and 10 years.
 - Systematize the experience of Las Libres.
 - Develop our own teaching materials.
 - Document the successful experiences of Las Libres.
 - Continue reproducing successful experiences and practices of Las Libres in other states of Mexico, such as comprehensive support to women who choose abortion, and research, documentation, and advocacy of women criminalized for abortion.
- Develop a documentary account of the history of women imprisoned for abortion and the defense that Las Libres carried out to secure their release.

What are current obstacles/oppositions against women's rights? What are some laws that you can't believe exist?

The obstacles are:

- A conservative government that is against the advance of human rights for women.
- A society tolerant of violence against women.
- The lack of access to basic and higher education for women and the lack of knowledge of their rights.

Laws that shouldn't exist are:

- Discriminatory laws against women, laws that promote sexist education and render violence against women.
- Discriminatory laws that consider women, for example, as reproductive machines and not people who are subjects with rights.

Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the work Las Libres does for women in Guanajuato?

From our perspective, the work of Las Libres is very important for the women of Guanajuato, since we are an organization that is at times the only way for women to demand, defend, and experience their human rights, at times the only option where women can come and denounce the violence they're the object of in their homes, in the street, in their communities, or even in part from government institutions. [Las Libres is] where they encounter comprehensive support to



access justice, where they find a space for listening, attention, and often, to bring them back to life. We are the only organization in favor of a secular, free, scientific sex education for youth, in favor of a woman's right to make decisions about her own body, that guides children to know their rights from a young age, and that promotes equal sexuality and relationships between men and women, with the intention of substantially transforming society in favor of the human rights of women.

How would you compare the rights and laws about women in Guanajuato with other states in Mexico?

From the perspective of our work in Guanajuato, it's a very conservative state, very retrograde in respect to women's rights, very conventional, and very two-faced--which particularly affects the exercising of women's rights by being a conservative society that doesn't permit that liberal thought is advanced, that individual liberties are installed, that science advances, that men and women decide the course of their life, and that the state exists solely to guarantee the exercise of the self, not to impose dogmas of faith and personal belief in the laws to obligate all people to do what politicians in turn believe what is good or bad for people. From this perspective, the state is most backwards in respect to sexual and reproductive rights compared with Mexico City, where the human rights of women are a state policy and where society is more educated, more politicized, more conscious, and more civic.

Show Your Support & Contact Information

The past decade has seen extensive development, action, and success at Centro Las Libres. However, as Verónica pointed out, there is much work to be done. Each small victory for human rights for women highlights the overall inconsistency and insufficiency in both state and federal law. Despite the passing of the General Law on Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence, the government has not provided the country with appropriate funds and resources to ensure the execution and success of the law. Conservative leaders in the state of Guanajuato are preventing the development of a state law to accompany the national one, which federal regulations ask of them. Despite the 2010 liberation of seven falsely accused women in Guanajuato, countless others are being pressured to incriminate themselves for crimes they did not commit. Women across Guanajuato, and Mexico as a whole, continue to be victims of gender violence and continue to be denied their basic human rights.



There are many ways to demonstrate your solidarity with Centro Las Libres and their cause. Some of those ways include giving time as a volunteer, professional services and support, and monetary donations. To inquire into how you can support us, please visit us at:

<http://www.laslibres.org.mx/>

or contact us by email:
laslibres@laslibres.org.mx

or call us at:
(011) (52) (473) 731-0522

Thank you. Gracias.

Centro Las Libres

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