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A Day Without Women

On March 9th, 2020, almost half of the women in Mexico disappeared.

At quarter past nine (because few care to actually show up on time), time cards across urban Mexico were punched, keycards swiped, and the modern workday began as usual come #Mondays. The sun rose to a cloudless sky, giving even those most sceptical no reason to suspect something was amiss. If anything, those filing into the office were in a better mood than was usual for the hour, likely due to less traffic on the commute over. It was a day like any other, if not for one small fact: the men were uncomfortable.

The first tell men may have noticed was the absence of a receptionist, which although ruled an “illegitimate” requisite — alongside age — by the Supreme Court in November 2014 remains the most popular corporate position to have an unabashed restriction for hiring within a specific age and gender. Unless it falls to an intern or entry-level employee, this also meant most offices were lacking, in addition to any messages, hot coffee. This incidence sparked one such conversation in the kitchen of KAVAK, a prosperous startup on the outskirts of Mexico City.

“You know how it is, man. No one wants to talk about it, so we just joked around instead.”

Fernando sports a military-styled haircut from his past in an all-male seminary. His ivory cuffs and iron posture sell his young success up the corporate ladder. At age thirty, he manages a team of the tech department which hires dozens of young graduates, members of a generation who online appear to push for a progressive political agenda. But on this particular day at work, “boys will be boys”.

It is not, of course, that men are complete strangers to feeling uncomfortable. After all, we are programmed to react in such a manner to displays of emotion and affection, or as a substitute to any sign of vulnerability. When violence and aggression are not socially appropriate reactions, as was the case in that particular kitchen on that particular day, there is always the Mexican, passive-aggressive way: humour.

“I mean, to be honest, it didn’t really matter. We just rescheduled our meetings, and ultimately, they had to make up for lost time the day after anyway.”

Coffee was instead delivered by an app service, and the day went on not unlike usual. It was a slow day, “like coming in to work on a Saturday”. Noon came and went, and all that changed was looser ties and tongues.

“The boys felt much more comfortable, it was almost like working in a locker room.”

But when I asked if they were comfortable or merely overcompensating, he grinned, and shrugged.

The day was Monday, March 9th, 2020. For a country so famous for its misogyny that anglophones understand its Spanish translation ‘machismo’, this historic date marked Mexico’s

first large-scale implementation of a feminist movement dating back to 1975's Iceland, when 90% of women left work on strike in what came to be known as 'kvennafri' or 'Women's Day Off'. Its legacy birthed the hashtag #8M. Led by a group of Spanish feminists, the movement has succeeded in rallying global strikes of similar nature to call attention to the threatened rights pertaining to the female demographic. As Mexico becomes increasingly involved in the digital space, the timing was finally right to call for nationwide action.

So they did, and on Sunday, March 8th, 2020, twenty five thousand women took to the streets of the capital and a number of cities around the country. They covered their mouths — before it became the 'law' — with green or purple bandanas (depending on their stance on abortion), and made sure to imprint their general message of inconformity on the physical and digital walls of society. With mixed results (as any social movement), it inarguably sparked a conversation.

But they were not finished.

Mexico is rarely competitive in the global sphere. Growing up, I recall following the career of the track and field athlete Ana Gabriela Guevara, who went on to take a silver medal at the Olympics in Athens early this century. I was eleven, and even then, all that I recall was spoken about her was her masculine features (whatever that means). One of my classmates was her namesake, and she took offence at the relation. Young girls were instead taught to admire female pop stars, all of which very much white-adjacent and much very glamorous.

Where Mexico actively participates on the global stage is in more alarming topics, such as childhood obesity, corruption, and worst of all, femicide, a variant of gendercide, or targeted

homicide attributed to gender; crudely, women killed for being women. Whilst there are disputed numbers around the exact statistics, it is safe to affirm that a word not used by women to describe their situation is, indeed, safe.

“Les valió madre.”

We stood in silence for a long moment, the words piercing through the miles between us over our call. Fernanda was responding to my question of how this national strike affected male behaviour towards gendered issues with a curt and colloquial, “they could not give a fuck”. That is the contextual translation, but it literally translates to “it is worth a mother to them”.

Fernanda wears her distinct identity ostentatiously in a way that challenges the traditional gender norms prevalent in her community, even though she resides in the capital, the more progressive and liberal state. She is a production designer, a position that is also significantly gendered in Mexico. She was not on call that day, but she doubted anyone had scheduled a shoot. Local filmmakers would struggle to assemble half a crew without female members, and a large part of them had attended the march the night before.

While the march itself had been the focal point of the evening news, the invitation of #8M was for A Day Without Women. They incited all women, of all ages, to isolate from their male partners, relatives, and peers, for twenty four hours. This meant no making food except for themselves and outside the presence of any males, no house chores, nothing. In response to the onslaught of missing persons and confirmed assaults and murders across the country and the world, the female community joined in solidarity of these victims to attempt to, at the very least, shake the status quo.

“We could do it once a month and it would still be a joke to them.”

Over one hundred times as many women who marched answered the call and disappeared for the day. On a large scale, there were meaningful economic repercussions, with an estimated 8% devaluation of the local currency, the largest in three years. There was a reported average of 53% of absent personnel. Losses of one and half million dollars.

And yet, “les value madre”.

I sat down with both Fernanda and Fernando and introduced them to each other. They were quick to feel at ease, no doubt helped by how second nature video conferences are nowadays. It was the weekend, and paired with an ongoing pandemic, their clothing was far more relaxed. The same sun blazed through their windows, calling me from the Great North. They both lived a short drive from one another, but would probably never meet in a sea of twenty million people.

I asked them to talk about that weekend from their experience.

“I met a few friends at the subway station closest to where the march was going to happen. It was very tense. Nobody was there for the pleasure of it, you know? No one was smiling or joking around. When we put on the bandanas, it was like we were on a mission. Once we joined the march, there was so many people it was hard to stay together. But it felt important, we felt strong. I knew that at any moment they were going to send police to gas us out or something, but I didn’t see any of that. We marched, and chanted. I didn’t want to be there, but I couldn’t not be.”

“Well, clearly my experience was quite different. To be honest, the day just kinda came and went. I don’t actually remember much of that day. My sisters aren’t living in the city so there really wasn’t someone close going to those things. We got an email from work so I knew we what to expect the day after.”

“It feels so long ago. I mean, after a year of COVID it’s not gonna sound much different. I slept in because I was so tired after the march. Watched Netflix in my room. I tried doing it as best I could but I couldn’t avoid seeing my dad and my brother. It’s a really small apartment.”

“I live alone, so I didn’t have that problem. I went into work. My commute is usually about an hour and half so it was nice to do it in half the time. And yeah, it was weird to see everyone gone at the same time, because usually it’ll only be a couple people missing work for vacation or something. But we’re professional, you know? It’s not like in school when there were no girls and everyone would start throwing chairs or something.”

“What now?” I asked. “I was away from Mexico at the time, and I remember feeling excited that something so significant was happening. I tried calling family and friends to talk about it, to get a sense of what it was like. I went to all-boys school — I know what men are like when things are segregated, and I was afraid there would be little to no change. I get the sense that it more or less went that way.”

“Yeah, but honestly, I’m not sure what we were supposed to do? I mean, I’m as mad about the disappearances and the violence that women go through, but it’s not like I’m doing anything or letting people get away with it, so I wasn’t clear on what I, Fernando, was supposed to do.”

“But it is happening around you, and that’s the whole point.”

Before the sequels of the march and the strike had a chance to ripple, the pandemic stormed in only days after and naturally clouded over everyone’s mind. The initial concerns regarding the strike were only accentuated. Most women who experience domestic violence would not be allowed to participate. In fact, it was expected that the strike might see a rise in targeted violence, as the strongest perpetrators would be most keen on discouraging this agenda. If these women were not permitted a day to themselves, the call for quarantine only prolonged their daily difficulties, and whilst there has not be a total shutdown like in many of the world’s countries, there is noticeably less activity outdoors.

It appeared the answers to Fernando’s questions were indoors.

I phoned my sister, as I had at the time when all of this was happening. It was good I did.

“I didn’t march because I was afraid of what other women might do to me. There was so much hostility online leading up to the march that I was honestly scared to even voice my opinion. Women were taking the chance to express their own views, particularly regarding abortion, and were being shut down by other women with opposing views. Any ideological or religious difference was immediately cancelled.”

Fernando was asking the wrong questions, and I, another man, was a fool for considering them. My sister made no mention of men whatsoever, and as should we.

“The whole thing was a good start, as there hadn’t been anything like this in Mexico before. But at the same time, it kinda felt like asking the macho government for permission, like ‘can you please stop killing us?’ and nothing ever gets done here that way. We should find a way

to create opportunities for ourselves, and instead, we're just fighting amongst each other to no end."

This mattered deeply to her. She wore fluffy bear pyjamas, but looked ready to stand on a car with a megaphone.

"The days after the strike, when we had class (at university), there were talks about the subject all the time. But then everyone moved on, and it's like, now what?"

There it was again. Now what? It haunted me. The storied past of Mexico has been shaped by more than one influential woman, such as my sister spoke of. I decided to look indoors, but in the past, to understand what violence has looked like in my own family. The source furthest back available was actually accessible even in my own memory banks.

I was ten, a head full of imagination and needing little to keep myself entertained. I spent the entire day with a parrot. Bright, yellow and green, he was perched in a cage that would remain covered. But the house was a vertical labyrinth with winding stairs and rooms in every nook and cranny. At the very top, there was a quaint, gloomy attic. There, away from the adults and the stories of little interest to me then, I waited. All the while, my great grandmother was retelling her life story to a video camera.

The footage starts with a painting of our family tree, narrated by my very own grandfather, a man with whom I possess little relation to. At the trunk, two names are etched to the bark: my great grandmother and her late husband. Eighty five years old. The lines of face tell so many stories. She wears a dark shirt buttoned up to the collar not unlike what she might have worn in the twenties. Her eyes water almost immediately when reminded of her home. She

speaks of an earthquake in 1928 that brought her frail family home to crumble, with dinner served on the table. She talks of her suitor, whom she remembers vividly. Her children stand around her, mostly male, laughing nervously as their mother recalls a young boy's love. When she mentions her husband, the words she speaks are "I was afraid".

Her words are met with dead silence. She carries on to say that he "saw her" and went through a world of trouble to find a way into her home. He befriended her cousin to get close to her. This mysterious foreign boy somehow finding himself in the middle of nowhere in southeastern Mexico, a land still inhabited by native folk. He participated in a local festival, where the boys would paint their skin and dance. She remembers him standing beside her during the dance, startling her. This boy would go on to ask for her hand in marriage, to which her parents refused, as they knew nothing of this boy. Yet, in a now eternal gap in the story, she found herself miles away from her home in the hands of a stranger.

So, perhaps the first disappearance I need to look into, is indoors.