



Rights to the rescue? The promotion of Indigenous women's political-electoral rights and the rise of the Mexican security state

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how the promotion of Indigenous women's political-electoral rights in Mexico has furthered a conservative agenda of state securitization. To do so, it presents a discourse analysis of national media reports focused on the story of Eufrosina Cruz, a Zapotec woman who became the figurehead for state-led initiatives to promote Indigenous women's rights. It argues that a colonial rescue narrative constructed through Cruz's figure helped generate new hegemonic discourses of gendered indigeneity that portrayed Indigenous peoples' alternative political practices and spaces as anti-democratic and illegal. In an era where advancements in party democracy were linked to processes of state securitization, these categorizations helped justify new forms of state intervention into Indigenous peoples' lives. By exploring how rights initiatives were discursively constructed through racialized, spatialized and gendered constructions of indigeneity, this article contributes to a critical geography of indigeneity within political geography.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial feminist theory regularly questions women's rights as neutral tools for empowerment. Scholars emphasize how liberal women's rights initiatives can generate new forms of oppression or exclusion for Indigenous women, women of color, or immigrant women, the infamous colonial "others" in different settler colonial, postcolonial, and multicultural contexts (Ahmed, 1992; Grewal, 2012; Ho, 2007; Simpson, 2014). Specifically, they analyze the discursive construction of rights, or the hegemonic cultural and political processes through which certain sets of rights are determined as imperative to guarantee. Time and again, they find that women's rights initiatives are often discursively constructed through a colonial "rescue narrative" that depicts women as victims of their oppressive "native" (Indigenous or Non-western) culture, and rights as a tool to "save" them (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Consequently, this discourse often uncomfortably uses rights initiatives against women, turning them into weapons deployed for conservative political and economic agendas rather than progressive forms of gender equality (Bob, 2019).

In this article, I utilize these insights to examine the promotion of Indigenous women's political-electoral rights in Mexico. Specifically, I analyze how a rescue narrative permeated the discursive construction of

these rights as they were understood through the figure of Eufrosina Cruz. A Zapotec woman from the state of Oaxaca, Cruz was barred from running for president of her Indigenous municipality in 2007 because she is a woman. Cruz's hometown, like almost three-fourths of the municipalities in Oaxaca, holds local elections via custom and tradition rather than secret ballot and universal suffrage. This form of local election—upheld as the most advanced institutionalization of multicultural rights to self-determination in the country—is controversial because it has historically marginalized women (M. Dalton, 2012; Hernández-Díaz, 2015; Vázquez García, 2011).

Cruz denounced the limitations placed on her political rights and shared her story with the media, politicians, and public institutions. She garnered attention locally but catapulted to fame nationally when then Mexican president Felipe Calderón and his wife, Margarita Zavala, took interest in her case. She soon graced the cover of Mexican Newsweek and Forbes, appeared on the floor of the United Nations, and even met the Obamas. Numerous documentaries, books, television reports, and newspaper and magazine articles covered her story. At Zavala and Calderón's invitation she officially joined the conservative National Action Party (*Partido de Acción Nacional, PAN*) and subsequently served as a state and then federal congresswoman (via proportional representation), where she began modifying multicultural laws regarding

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Indigenous self-determination in order to promote women's electoral participation.¹

Not since the images of masked Zapatista women, particularly those of Comandanta Esther speaking on the floor of Mexican Congress, has the figure of an Indigenous woman caught the attention of the nation (Belausteguigoitia, 2001; Ruíz, 2001). However, the differences between Esther and Eufrosina are vast. Esther emerged in 2001 from an armed rebellion that promoted Indigenous peoples' collective rights in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism. Six years later, Eufrosina emerged as a lone figure, seeking her individual rights to political participation in a new era of state securitization (Mora, 2017; Speed, 2010).

In what follows, I explore how Cruz became the figurehead for the issue of Indigenous women's political-electoral rights in Mexico from 2007 to 2014. Through a discourse analysis of newspaper reports about her, I demonstrate how the media built a colonial rescue narrative around her figure. This narrative drew upon common historical racist and sexist tropes of gendered indigeneity in Mexico, which position Indigenous women as the embodied margin of the Mexican state. However, it also pushed this margin in new directions. Specifically, in the context of Mexico's democratic transition and the advent of the drug war, it generated a discourse in which Indigenous peoples, customs, and spaces were portrayed as non-democratic and illegal. By creating new hegemonic ways of conceptualizing indigeneity within a legal/illegal binary, it helped promote an agenda of state securitization that portrayed Indigenous people as a threat to national security (Hernández et al., 2013).

This article contributes to scholarly literature exploring the reconfiguration of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state in contemporary Latin America. Specifically, it analyzes the shift from neoliberal multiculturalism to what Speed (2019) refers to as neoliberal multiracialism, or the rise of state securitization paradigms (Goldstein, 2010; Povinelli, 2011). Latin Americanists have emphasized how an emerging binary of legal/illegal (Goodale, 2008) has become tied to broader governance strategies in the region through studies of violence (E. D. Arias & Goldstein, 2010), accumulation regimes (Martínez, 2017; Rodríguez-Garavito, 2011), and development (Mora, 2017). Others examine how legal pluralism and collective rights paradigms are increasingly understood through this binary to the detriment and criminalization of Indigenous peoples (Sieder, 2016; Sierra, 2017). This article adds an important focus on how discourses of legal and illegal are created through hegemonic social and political processes linked to gendered indigeneity and democracy (Goodale, 2008; Sieder, 2019).

Additionally, this article engages with literature on Indigenous women's political rights in Latin America. Numerous scholars explore how Indigenous women navigate multicultural policies to promote both their individual and collective political rights (Danielson & Eisenstadt, 2009; Kuokkanen, 2012; Speed, 2006). Meanwhile, a rich literature inspired by decolonial thought analyzes how women actively shape different conceptions of rights not ascribed to political liberalism or multicultural politics. Particularly, this scholarship examines alternative conceptions of rights "from below," or from within Indigenous epistemologies, which decenter and reframe questions of sovereignty, autonomy and political participation (Aguilar Gil, 2019; Forbis, 2016; Naylor, 2017; Speed & Reyes, 2002; Tzul Tzul, 2016).

This article complements studies of alternative rights production from below by exploring what they are up against from above. By examining rights discourses as structures of power and knowledge that reproduce colonial logics in modern forms, it contributes to calls within Anglophone political geography to engage with decoloniality (Naylor

¹ Currently, she is the Secretary of Indigenous Affairs in her native state of Oaxaca, allied with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRD). Cruz was ousted from the PAN after she supported Margarita Zavala's unsuccessful presidential bid in 2018.

et al., 2018; Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020). Similarly, by emphasizing how racialized and gendered constructions of indigeneity are a foundational aspect of statecraft and nationhood in the colonial present, it helps build a critical geography of indigeneity (Radcliffe, 2017). Finally, by analyzing the hegemonic *discursive* construction of rights promotion, this article expands the conversation about Indigenous women's political rights to include the way in which they can become harnessed to hegemonic cultural and political configurations. Using postcolonial feminist theory to illuminate the power of the rescue narrative, it demonstrates how legacies of racism and oppression can be reconfigured, rather than redressed, through the promotion of specific types of women's rights agendas in colonial modernity.

2. The discursive construction of Indigenous women's rights

By the discursive construction of rights I refer to the idea that rights are discourses, or "a specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible" (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 166). While discourses are constantly constructed and the networks of practices and representations are fluctuating and contested (what Laclau & Mouffe [2001] refer to as the "field of discursivity"), they tend to solidify, or generate configurations in which contingent meanings become fixed (Müller, 2008). These fixed configurations are often expressions of cultural and political hegemony, which promote dominant, or "preferred meanings" (Hall, 1999, p. 513); as Ferguson (1994) demonstrates, they may work to inadvertently advance systems of power that they do not explicitly address. Thus, by analyzing hegemonic discourses as constructed through rights, we can explore how "social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted" (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352).

In particular, rights discourses become solidified or "institutionally anchored" (Marx Ferree, 2003) through actual legal documents (codes, constitutions, etc.). However, they also come to be "fixed" as normative ideas and ways to justify how society should operate. Indeed, as Goodale (2008) argues, rights can be understood through appeals to laws, which are "open systems of representation that produce both regimes of truth and categories of social subjectivity" (p. 216). Thus, rights come to "resonate" with social norms, generating a "mutually affirming interaction" in which certain aspects of the discourse of rights are linked to and understood via other hegemonic discourses (Marx Ferree, 2003). Specifically, I refer to the discursive construction of the claimants of rights—who is created and understood as an appropriate claimant—in relation to the perceived validity and value given to the content of the rights they claim, or whether the rights are considered to be appropriate and important (Bob, 2019). In the case at hand, this means exploring how discourses related to Indigenous women's political-electoral rights converge with other hegemonic discourses surrounding indigeneity, gender equality, democracy and security.

To conduct this analysis, I draw upon postcolonial feminist theory. The construction of rights discourses in relation to subaltern women has been an important focus of postcolonial feminist scholarship.² Ahmed (1992) coined the term "colonial feminism" to describe how the British took ideas of women's emancipation from early suffragettes at home to justify colonial interventions in the name of women's political rights abroad. Other scholars have since demonstrated similar mechanisms at work in colonial modernity. Analyses of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan demonstrate how the media, the government, and civil society all used appeals to Afghani women's rights (to education,

² Although decolonial feminist theory specifically analyzes gender and indigeneity in Latin America (see Mendoza, 2016), I draw on postcolonial theory because of the way it illuminates the rescue narrative in relation to rights discourses and statecraft more broadly.

movement, dress, political expression, etc.) to justify military, legal, and development interventions (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fluri, 2009; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Jiwani, 2009; Nayak, 2006; Russo, 2006; Shepherd, 2006). Bracke (2012), Grewal (2012) and Ho (2007) explore how the defense of Muslim women's rights in the Netherlands and Australia is regularly used to promote anti-Muslim sentiment and limit multicultural policies. Similarly, in different parts of Africa, Nnaemeka (2005) and S. Hale (2005) argue that combating female circumcision and promoting African women's rights to sexual freedom have become caught up in an imperialist discourse that fundamentally devalues and commoditizes African women and their cultures. While none of these studies minimizes or denies practices of women's oppression, they all skeptically explore how specific aspects of women's oppression are taken up within rights frameworks as a way to justify political, cultural, and economic interventions in postcolonial or multicultural contexts.

Likewise, this literature identifies a common mechanism through which subaltern women's rights are discursively constructed: the "rescue narrative" (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This narrative presents women as victims who need saving from their oppressive Nonwestern cultures by focusing on practices coded as "a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition" (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 622). Examples include the veil for Muslim women, female circumcision for African women, "widow burning" for Indian women, or in the case at hand, political exclusion for Indigenous women. Economic and political explanations are conveniently pushed aside (Abu-Lughod, 2002) as women's oppression becomes discursively adhered to cultural difference that represents "alien and threatening values" (Ho, 2007, p. 294; see also; Ayotte & Husain, 2005). The narrative thus emphasizes the moral imperative to rescue these women, usually through an appeal to the protection or promotion of a specific set of rights, such as health care, education, or political participation. Spivak (1988) adequately summarized the racial, gendered, and colonial aspects of this discourse: "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (p. 296). Subsequently, the path of salvation involves a shift away from particular Nonwestern cultures categorized as oppressive and toward a presumably more egalitarian and universal culture based on a Western notion of agency and liberation (Kapur, 2002; Mahmood, 2005). Emancipation is thus envisioned as a process in which women adopt "Western values," including individual rights, in order to "end their victimization" (Bracke, 2012, p. 242).

When women's rights are discursively constructed through the rescue narrative, it creates yet another problem for subaltern women. Since they are only understood to be "worthy" or appropriate claimants of rights based on their status as authentic victims, women who speak out remain framed within this logic. They are understood as victims-turned-heros, never escaping the categorization of oppressed (Kapur, 2002).³ This importantly limits women's political actions and subjectivities because their claims are always already interpreted as a criticism of their entire culture and its practices. As a result, when women denounce oppression, they are often rejected by their own communities and embraced by other power players interested in using their critique for particular political and economic agendas. I posit that this is what occurred with Cruz.⁴

In what follows, I demonstrate how a colonial rescue narrative promoting Indigenous women's political-electoral rights was created through Cruz's figure. First, however, I explore how this narrative

resonated with already existing discourses and helped pushed them in new directions.

3. Hegemonic discourses of gender and indigeneity in Mexico: Indigenous women at the margin of the state

In this section I briefly outline different hegemonic discourses surrounding gender and indigeneity as they have changed over time in post-revolutionary Mexico. Following Radcliffe (2017), I approach indigeneity as a specific historical construction that "attends to the social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, and epistemic processes through which the meaning of being Indigenous in a particular time and place is constructed" (p. 221). It is created through unequal relations of power that center on notions of the colonial "other" (Bonfil Batalla, 1972). Othering, or "the socio-spatial processes and practices whereby Indigenous people and places are determined as distinct (ontologically, epistemologically, culturally, in sovereignty, etc.) to dominant universals" (Radcliffe, 2017, p. 221), regularly places Indigenous people "at the historical and geographical frontiers of modern society" (Bryan, 2009, p. 25).

This is the case in Mexico, where Indigenous women are understood in national imaginaries to embody the "margin" of the state. In other words, they are positioned as external objects whose incorporation occurs through state action upon them. As such, they serve as the raw material through which the state defines itself (Asad, 2004; Das & Poole, 2004). This is a racialized hegemonic process linked to national identity, practices of statecraft, geographical imaginaries and the production of popular culture (de la Cadena, 1991; Nelson, 2001; Ruíz, 2001). In what follows, I outline several ways in which gendered indigeneity has been employed to define the margins of the state over time and how this has helped build a rescue narrative surrounding Indigenous women.

3.1. Post-revolutionary *mestizaje*

The end of the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) heralded in a new era based on the concept of *mestizaje*, or the biological and cultural mixing of Spanish and Indigenous peoples (Basave Benítez, 1992; Lomnitz-Adler, 2001; Vasconcelos, 2007). *Mestizos* were the new, modern subjects upon which a post-revolutionary nationalism was built.⁵ Although *mestizaje* was touted as an inclusive post-racial ideology (as opposed to segregationist policies that entrenched racial difference), at its core it promoted the idea that Indigenous and black people were inferior to white Europeans. Indeed, it espoused the racist idea that through mixing with white Europeans, Indigenous and black people would be "improved" (and erased) through progressive whitening (Gall, 2004; Moreno Figueroa, 2011; Wade, 2008).

This racial ideology was also profoundly gendered. Post-revolutionary *mestizaje* tagged Indigenous women as the "source" of the Indigenous part of the *mestizo*. Women, even *mestiza* women, were seen as "more Indian" (de la Cadena, 1991; Ruíz, 2001). In part, this gendering of indigeneity drew upon the colonial figure of *La Malinche*, the Indigenous "mistress" and translator for the conquistador Cortés (Messinger Cypess, 1991; Paz, 1997).⁶ Through her figure, Indigenous women were viewed as the bearers of a new nation, the embodied source of *mestizo* identity. This generated a paradox: as *La Malinche* birthed the new "cosmic race" (Vasconcelos, 2007), she simultaneously eliminated Indigenous populations. Her figure was thus despised as racially inferior on the one hand, and as a traitor to Indigenous people on the other. But

³ Although beyond the scope of this paper, postcolonial feminist theory has promulgated an intense discussion regarding the subjectivity of subaltern women (Spivak, 1988). In particular, the debates surrounding the narrative of Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche' woman from Guatemala, indicate the complexities Indigenous women face when they speak (A. Arias, 2001; Gossen, 1999; Nelson, 2001).

⁴ The case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands is oddly similar to Cruz's (De Leeuw & Van Wichelen, 2005; Grewal, 2012).

⁵ *Mestizaje* was a discourse important to the formation of Mexican nationalism after Independence as well (Basave Benítez, 1992; Lund, 2012; Stabb, 1959).

⁶ Recent Chicana feminist analysis reinterprets *La Malinche* to focus on her role as a translator, emphasizing her intelligence and her voice as a challenge to patriarchy. See Messinger Cypess (1991) and Helber (2013).

although despised, she—and Indigenous women more broadly—could not be dismissed. They were necessary for the construction of a new nation.

Over time, the racial logic behind the categories of mestizo and Indigenous became obfuscated by difference coded as “culture” in post-revolutionary Mexico. Indigenous people were not just marked by phenotype, but also through their embodied activities, including forms of labor, ways of speaking, clothing, and mannerisms (R. López, 2002; Ruíz, 2001). As D. Dalton (2015) argues, these “cultural” practices were understood through a continuum of modernity: practices associated with modern technology defined a person as mestizo, while those associated with archaic tools or activities defined a person as an “indio.” Particularly, Indigenous women’s social reproductive work encapsulated this idea. For example, the use of the *molcajete* and the *metate* (stone instruments for grinding chili peppers and corn by hand) indicated a primitive state of being (Ruíz, 2001).⁷ Similarly, this work was linked to a geographical imaginary: it wasn’t just Indigenous women that represented the foil of Mexican modernity, but Indigenous women located in specific places, most notably rural villages (Lund, 2012; Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). As a result, Indigenous women became linked to a powerful spatial and temporal imaginary of “backwardness” in which specific discourses depicted them as being “flash-frozen in time and existing in a singular framing of space” (Banister, 2007, p. 466).

At the geographical and temporal margin of the state, Indigenous women thus became the target of intervention. State policies of *indigenismo* defined Indigenous peoples as the primitive other that needed to be brought into modernity, thus legitimizing statecraft in Indigenous villages. This was done through paternalist and corporatist education, health, and hygiene programs (D. Dalton, 2015; Dillingham, 2012; Fallaw, 2001; Taylor, 2006; Vaughan, 1994). However, as Gall (2004) argues, this agenda targeted Indigenous men and women differently. For men, the strategy was assimilation. For women, who could never fully escape the category of being Indian, different racist logics were applied to state-led interventions, including segregation, extermination, and reproductive control (Gall, 2004).

This configuration of hegemonic gendered indigeneity in post-revolutionary Mexico set the stage for the discourse of the rescue narrative. By pushing the colonial binary of modern/non-modern onto the figure of Indigenous women in racialized and sexualized ways, it helped justify state intervention into women’s lives through a logic of paternalistic rescue. This discourse remains prevalent in Mexico but has since incorporated new dimensions under neoliberal multiculturalism.

3.2. Neoliberal multiculturalism

Starting in the 1990s, mestizo nationalism gave way to neoliberal multiculturalism (C. Hale, 2005). In this new moment, Indigenous difference was not to be erased through assimilation, but rather identified, demarcated, and included in a newly denoted pluricultural nation.

⁷ Additionally, indigeneity was defined hegemonically through a barbaric state of moral being, as exemplified in vices such as alcoholism and “immorality” (D. Dalton, 2015).

Hegemonic discourses of gendered indigeneity expanded the binary of the modern (masculine) mestizo and the backward (feminine) Indian to include the idea of the “good” Indian versus the “bad” Indian, or the distinction “between good ethnicity, which builds social capital, and ‘dysfunctional’ ethnicity, which incites conflict” (C. Hale, 2004, p. 17).⁸ Rivera Cusicanqui (2015) and others referred to this as the *indio permitido*, or the permissible Indian, constructed via the “policing of cultural boundaries” (Wade, 2017, p. 14).⁹

The state-sanctioned recognition of certain types of rights linked to indigeneity became one of the main ways that the good/bad Indian dichotomy was established. Particularly, the multicultural recognition of Indigenous peoples’ collective rights to self-determination served as a way to delimit this difference.¹⁰ Certain rights, deemed non-threatening to the state, were seen as permissible. These included collective rights to cultural practices (language, education, dress) and occasionally local forms of limited autonomy. However, the claiming of these rights came at a cost, as “certain rights are to be enjoyed on the implicit condition that others will not be raised” (C. Hale, 2004, p. 18). The ones not to be raised included projects of self-determination.

This was evident in the Mexican government’s denial of Zapatista demands for multicultural reforms that included self-determination (Díaz Polanco, 2001). However, although the Zapatistas abandoned state-sanctioned multiculturalism, emphasizing autonomous organization instead, the institutionalization of some collective rights proceeded, albeit in a limited and controversial way (Recondo, 2007). Specifically, in 1995, Oaxaca, Mexico’s most Indigenous populated state, legalized municipal election via “custom and tradition” (*usos y costumbres*), now called Indigenous normative systems (*sistemas normativos indígenas*). Almost three quarters of the state’s municipalities (17% of all municipalities in the country) decided to hold their elections according to “custom and tradition” rather than through standard mechanisms of universal suffrage, secret ballot, and political party affiliation.

Yet even this limited form of self-determination came under scrutiny, and the rights of Indigenous women were at the heart of the debate. Echoing global discussions, critics of multicultural recognition posited that because Indigenous women can be marginalized within their own polities, the legalization of collective rights could exacerbate internal gender inequalities (Moller Okin, 1999). A polemical discourse emerged in which collective rights to self-determination were seen as being fundamentally opposed to—indeed clashing with—women’s individual rights.

The discourse of the clash did important work. Like *indigenismo* policies, it justified state intervention in Indigenous women’s lives, but this time through rights frameworks and legal proceedings working to define the limits of good versus bad cultural practices. “Bad” cultural practices, particularly the “customs and traditions” of alternative political configurations, were defined as those that infringed upon women’s individual rights. Zapatista women attempted to thwart this

⁸ In a different context, Povinelli’s (2002) work in Australia similarly demonstrates how multiculturalism served as an attempt to re-center the nation while also demarcating the margin of the state through a binary of an acceptable/non-acceptable Indigenous subjectivity.

⁹ The emphasis on cultural difference, however, hides a racial agenda. As Wade (2017) argues, multiculturalism was not a clean break from the idea of gendered racial inferiority that served as the foundation of mestizaje. Rather, it continued the ideas of racial difference and inferiority implicit to mestizaje and solidified them through a notion of bounded, “pure” cultures. This masks processes of racial discrimination (Hooker, 2005) by hiding “the hierarchies of race and class that attach to cultural difference” (Wade, 2017, p. 14) and ignoring race “as a structuring principle that organizes social life and creates ‘racist logics’” (Moreno Figueroa, 2011, p. 122).

¹⁰ For a summary of different political parties’ perspectives on multicultural rights, see Díaz Polanco (2001). The PAN was always critical of differentiated rights regimes and against rights to self-determination for Indigenous peoples (Shirk, 2000).

intervention. While they did not deny women's oppression within Indigenous polities, they denied the idea of the clash between individual and collective rights, arguing that women needed both to be full political subjects (Hernández, 2008). They argued that women themselves—without the “help” of the state—could determine when and how different rights could be utilized to promote their wellbeing (Speed, 2006).

However, politicians and government officials largely ignored these arguments. Indeed, Indigenous women's individual rights and their possible violation became a key way to intervene in internal disputes (Hernández, 2002). Subsequently, the violation of women's rights to political participation increasingly served as the rationale for legal challenges to local elections within Oaxacan municipalities ruled through Indigenous normative systems (Worthen, 2015).

Neoliberal multiculturalism thus generated a new relationship between Indigenous women, culture, and the law. Once again, Indigenous women were placed at the margin of the state, but this time as the political subjects upon which multicultural laws would determine good versus bad forms of indigeneity. This helped further a rescue narrative in which women were now seen as *victims* instead of bearers of Indigenous culture (Newdick, 2005). The state was portrayed as an ally of Indigenous women, saving them from oppressive cultures and to new forms of equality by securing their individual rights. This idea was then furthered through the subsequent agenda of state securitization.

3.3. Human rights and state securitization

The presidential victory of Calderón in 2006 marked the beginning of a new relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Governance moved away from neoliberal multiculturalism and toward state securitization, or the emphasis on existential threats dictating the use of measures beyond those previously established (Buzan et al., 1998). This shift largely played out through the advent of the war on drugs. Drawing on a 2005 law in which national security was “understood as the actions destined to immediately and directly maintain the integrity, stability and permanence of the Mexican State” (Carlsen, 2012, p. 151), and backed by technical and financial support from the United States through the Mérida Initiative, Calderón sent thousands of armed forces into the streets to wage war against drug cartels (Hendrix, 2008). However, by securing the state through militarization—a process contested as illegal—the armed forces made life less secure for many civilians. Reports of human rights violations—including arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances—rose dramatically (Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez A.C., 2018).

Meanwhile, as only the second president in power after the end of more than seventy years of rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or the PRI), Calderón, of the conservative PAN party, also had to confront doubts regarding Mexico's democracy. His narrow electoral win generated claims of fraud and shook the already limited trust in the country's electoral system (Arenas, 2007). As a result, all major political parties in Congress agreed to a state reform that emphasized a discourse of strengthening democracy by enhancing the rule of law. The pillars of these reforms included new electoral procedures, a revamped criminal justice system, and enhanced human rights protections (Shirk, 2010).

Extralegally sending armed forces into the streets and violating human rights while promoting an agenda of democracy was a contradiction not lost on Calderón's administration. In response, Calderón paradoxically incorporated human rights discourses into the rule of law agenda, using them to advance interests of the state rather than fully

promote rights recognition (Sieder, 2016). This was most evident in the 2008 criminal justice reforms. The reforms divided the civilian population into regular citizens versus “enemies of the state,” and created a bifurcated justice system in which one set of laws and procedures for common crime existed versus one for organized crime.¹¹ Particularly, those suspects linked to organized crime could be detained longer and under a different set of conditions (Brewer, 2009; Hine-Ramsberger, 2011). Subsequently, human rights were applicable to some, while others, linked to illegality, were cast out as criminal subjects unworthy of rights.

This division helped create a discourse in which human rights violations were attributed to criminals and their illegal activity, rather than characterized as the abuse of state power. The action of securing human rights was thus understood as being tied to fighting crime (Brewer, 2009). In this fight, the state and civilians now had a common enemy, and Calderón called on the public to ally with the government in order to “transform Mexico into a country characterized by the rule of law and human rights” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Overall, the reforms worked together to redefine a legal/illegal binary in the interest of state securitization (Goodale, 2008).

The effects of these initiatives reconfigured the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. The criminal reform discourse of regular citizen versus enemy of the state mapped onto the neoliberal multicultural dichotomy of good versus bad Indian. Subsequently, “bad” Indians—those who manifested dissent—became categorized as criminals, associated with threats to national security and the rule of law (Hernández et al., 2013). This was evident in the war on drugs, as Indigenous people—especially women—continue to be incarcerated for petty drug-related offenses at higher rates than the non-Indigenous population (*ibid.*). Attempts at creating local forms of justice and security have also been criminalized, most notably the formation of Indigenous community police forces in the state of Guerrero (Sierra, 2013). Additionally, Indigenous peoples' demands for territorial rights and resistance to mining, hydro-electric, and wind power projects have also been interpreted through a optic of criminality (Howe & Boyer, 2016; Villafuerte Solís, 2015; López Bárcenas, 2011).

However, the criminal justice reforms and militarization were not the only initiatives that affected Indigenous peoples. The electoral reforms of 2008, designed to enhance party democracy, also set the stage for new ways to question Indigenous peoples' self-determination via the legalization of gender quotas.¹² By requiring that 40% of each political party's candidates for public office be women, these reforms pushed gender parity to the forefront of democratic change.¹³ In 2013, a constitutional reform increased the percentage of women candidates for state and federal legislatures to 50% (Peña Molina, 2014). Shortly thereafter, the High Court of the Federal Electoral Tribunal pushed women's participation further by ruling in favor of mandating gender parity in *municipal* elections as well, an area notorious for women's

¹¹ Indeed, they implemented important procedures to promote human rights such as strengthening due process and presumption of innocence, as well as banning the use of torture (Shirk, 2010).

¹² Reforms largely focused on the role of media, campaign financing, and electoral procedure while another important aspect involved how parties determine their candidates (Carpizo, 2008; Núñez Jiménez, 2008).

¹³ Gender quotas have been gradually gaining legal force since the 1990s, actively promoted by cross-party coalitions of women who have argued that Mexico's democratic opening needed to support women's political participation to be effective (De Barbieri, 2003; Peña Molina, 2014). In 2002 the federal Electoral Code, the *Código de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales* (COFIPE), was modified to stipulate that women must be included in political parties' candidate rosters.

underrepresentation (ONU Mujeres, 2013). In 2019 a Constitutional reform mandated complete gender parity in all public decision-making posts.¹⁴

Once again, concerns about Indigenous women's lack of participation in Indigenous normative systems in Oaxaca came to the forefront. Although echoing previous debates in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, the question of Indigenous women's political-electoral rights were now anchored in the emerging context of state securitization and democratization, which linked gendered indigeneity to a new legal/illegal margin of the state. In what follows, I analyze how a rescue narrative surrounding Eufrosina Cruz's figure helped create this new margin.

4. Eufrosina Cruz and the rescue narrative

To explore how Indigenous women's political-electoral rights were discursively constructed, I reviewed newspaper reports about Eufrosina Cruz from 2007 to 2014. The former was the year that Cruz was prevented from running for municipal president because she is a woman. The latter was the year that Cruz, as a federal congresswoman with the PAN party, helped amend Article Two of the Mexican constitution, which recognizes the pluricultural composition of the Mexican state.¹⁵ This date also marked the culmination of her legislative efforts (she was a federal congresswoman from 2012 to 2015) to promote Indigenous women's political-electoral rights. Although Cruz was linked to Calderón, whose presidential period ended in 2012, the securitization agenda and state reforms continued with his successor, Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018).¹⁶

To examine the narrative surrounding Cruz, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of four major Mexican newspapers from across the political spectrum, including the left-leaning *Jornada*, the centrist *El Milenio* and *El Universal*, and the pro-federal government *Reforma*.¹⁷ I

found articles related to Cruz in online archives and used qualitative data analysis software to identify and analyze the prevalence of tropes related to indigeneity, rights, gender, security, democracy and illegality (Table 1).

Many articles about Cruz were written by Sergio Sarmiento, her "media godfather" (her term), in *Reforma*.¹⁸ Sarmiento's eleven pieces were exemplary of efforts to link issues of legality and rule of law to Cruz's figure. While Sarmiento's opinion echoed throughout *Reforma*, other newspapers did not provide dramatically different coverage. In other words, key ideas related to Cruz were repeated across the political spectrum. Notably, the left-leaning *La Jornada* rarely discussed Cruz, while the writer most visibly associated with leftist thought, Elena Poniatowska, a famous feminist, promoted key aspects of the rescue narrative in relation to Cruz's figure (see Fig. 1).¹⁹

Additionally, I analyzed a handful of interviews Cruz gave on major media outlets. I found these interviews through a search on YouTube. They include appearances on two of Mexico's most important television networks, Televisa (on its main news show, "Primero Noticias"), and TVAzteca (the shows "La Pura Verdad," and "Rocha & Sarmiento"). In order to explore how her narrative was exported abroad, I also reviewed Cruz's filmed presentation at the Casa de América, a public organization in Spain that seeks to promote cultural, social, and political relationships with Latin America. While the selection of this material was less systematic, the television interviews allowed for an examination of how Cruz employs the narrative. In what follows, I divide the narrative surrounding Cruz's figure into three main tropes: the victim, the struggle for freedom, and the victim-turned-savior.

4.1. The victim

Newspaper articles about Cruz regularly place her within a broader narrative that emphasizes the oppression of Indigenous women. They stress how Indigenous women suffer from excessive amounts of work, arranged marriages, the bearing of many children, and domestic violence (López Morales, 2008). One reporter describes their lives like this: "you wake up at three in the morning and make tortillas with your hands hardened by the lime of the *nixtamal* [lime-soaked dried corn, which gets turned into dough for tortillas], you get married before age thirteen with the person your father chooses, carry wood, and have lots of kids" (D' Artigues, 2008).²⁰ Another states that women "have no worth beyond getting married, having kids, and bearing their husband's blows" (López Morales, 2011). Sarmiento writes that Indigenous women "begin to get pregnant at age thirteen and then for the rest of their lives take care of the men and children in a position of submissive respect" (Sarmiento, 2008, p. 12). Others emphasize that girls do not experience

Table 1
Number of articles about Eufrosina Cruz in four major Mexican newspapers, 2007–2014.

Year	Number of articles
2007	6
2008	57
2009	6
2010	10
2011	11
2012	5
2013	15
2014	12

¹⁴ The judiciary branch has played an important role in promoting gender parity. A benchmark ruling by the Supreme Court in 2002 established the legality of gender quotas (Baldez, 2007), and almost a decade later, a ruling by the Electoral Tribunal ended a loophole in gender quotas (Rodríguez Peñaloza et al., 2013).

¹⁵ The amendment went into effect in 2015.

¹⁶ The return of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or the PRI) to power with the election of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) ushered in another round of sweeping reforms in education, energy, fiscal, and telecommunications sectors that sought to promote foreign investment, break monopolies, weaken unions, and strengthen party democracy (Barrientos del Monte & Añorve Añorve, 2014). This was done through the establishment of the "Pact for Mexico" a political agreement between the three major parties at the time (PRI, PAN, PRD). Despite initial promises to limit militarization, Peña Nieto's government did not deliver, and the modifications to the National Security Law of 2017 solidified state securitization strategies based on military interventions (Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez A.C., 2018).

¹⁷ See the "padrón nacional de medios impresos" <http://pnmi.segob.gob.mx>.

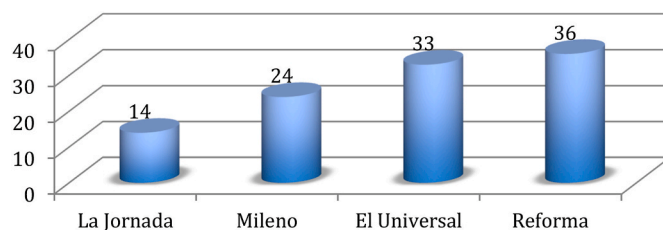


Fig. 1. Number of times Eufrosina Cruz's story was mentioned in articles in major Mexican national newspapers, 2007–2014.

¹⁸ I did not use Oaxacan media sources because I am interested in Cruz's figure at the national scale.

¹⁹ Espinosa Miñoso (2009) offers a critique of ethnocentrism within Latin American feminisms.

²⁰ I translated all text from Spanish to English in the newspapers, books, and television shows I cite.

childhood, working in the fields instead of playing with dolls (Rodríguez Araujo, 2008; Sarmiento, 2008). Sarmiento goes so far as to describe the life of Indigenous women as a type of “virtual slavery” (Sarmiento, 2007, p. 18).

This narrative also evokes a specific geographical imaginary. It does not play out in relationships between Indigenous people, wherever they may be found, but rather it unfolds within rural Indigenous villages, which are depicted as remote and primitive. They are referenced as pre-modern spaces that still shamefully exist in Mexico, a foil to the otherwise modern and enlightened urban spaces of mestizo society (Poniatowska, 2012). Cruz’s municipality is regularly described as being physically isolated, “buried in the highest part of the southern mountains,” (Stevenson, 2008, p. 36), hours away from highways and buses. It is depicted as “frozen in a moment from more than a century ago” (D’Artigues, 2008) where “there persist archaic and retrograde practices” (Rodríguez, 2014).

One of these archaic practices foregrounded in the narrative is the exclusion of women from political life (“*Adelantos...Condiciona PRD inversión privada en Pemex,*” 2008). This is depicted as a sanctioned practice inherent to Indigenous culture. The exclusion of women is portrayed as a key element in a worldview in which women “have no voice nor vote—literally—in the community” (D’Artigues 2008). Others describe it as a culture in which custom dictates that “women were made to attend to men ... not to govern” (Poniatowska, 2012), let alone even “sit at the same table as men” (Sarmiento, 2008, p. 12).

But this discourse goes beyond just equating Indigenous culture with machismo; it also emphasizes authoritarianism. Discrimination against women in political processes is understood as not only sexist, but also as profoundly anti-democratic. Subsequently, Indigenous culture becomes a foil to gender equality and democracy. Likewise, in the discourse’s geographical imaginary, Indigenous villages are then categorized as places in which custom (versus law) and macho strongmen (versus a democratic polity) reign. For example, Rodríguez Araujo writes how “machismo, sexism, and reactionary and brutally authoritarian customs” are a hallmark of rural Indigenous spaces (Rodríguez Araujo, 2008). Others paint a picture of a land without law, in which “the figure of the masculine strongmen are invincible and the *caciques* act above the law” (Poniatowska, 2012). Indigenous villages are thus portrayed as vestiges of an old political system, in contrast to modern Mexican democracy (Sarmiento, 2014).

Thus, frozen in time and located in geographically distant places, Indigenous women are characterized in these newspaper reports as victims of their anti-democratic, authoritarian, repressive Indigenous culture. As one report proclaims, there are “ancestral obstacles in the way of feminine aspirations” (“*Libro documenta la lucha política de Eufrosina Cruz,*” 2012). How then, can Indigenous women be saved? Cruz’s figure provides the answer, neatly folded into a rescue narrative: first, yearn for freedom; second, leave the village and Indigenous culture behind; third become educated about the law; and finally, with the state to become a savior who advocates for Indigenous women’s political-electoral rights.

4.2. *The struggle for freedom*

At the age of 12, Eufrosina announced to her father that she wanted to go to secondary school. However, Domingo Cruz said no. The women of Quiépolani do not study, they make tortillas and birth children. Her father’s refusal made Eufrosina cry like she’d never cried before. But they were not tears of resignation, they were tears of rebellion. Soon after, Eufrosina proposed to her father the idea of leaving Quiépolani in order to continue her studies. Upon seeing his daughter so desperate, sad, and yet resolved, Domingo Cruz got scared. “Fine, go. But don’t ask me for any money,” he told her. As soon as she heard these words, Eufrosina began her journey. She left her house and walked ten hours to reach the bus that would take her

to Tehuantepec, where she had family members whom she asked for help. (Lozano, 2016)

This snippet from a 2016 Newsweek profile of Cruz outlines the important first step in the construction of the rescue narrative surrounding her: acknowledging an innate desire for freedom. As Cruz states in television interviews, “life has taught me ... to fight first of all for my freedom” (Cruz Mendoza, 2014) because “liberty is the most sacred thing that humans have and should have” (Casa de América, 2012). News reports emphasize how once she identifies her desire for freedom she begins to challenge the status quo of women’s life in her village. The media begins to refer to Cruz as a “rebel.” For example, Poniatowska (2012) writes, “since childhood ... she rebelled against her surroundings. She did not accept her destiny of becoming a submissive Indigenous woman.” Another reporter elaborates how she decided to “rebel against the status quo of Indigenous women” (A. López, 2009). The Newsweek article portrays her as rebel “without a facemask” (Lozano, 2016), referring to the predominant image of Indigenous female rebels, the Zapatistas. Indeed, the comparison with Zapatista women is important in this case, as it indicates the attempt to create a new popular referent for Indigenous rebellion.

Unlike the Zapatistas, Cruz does not rise up against the state. She rises up against her own people and customs. Indeed, one reporter presents her as “the first woman to disrupt custom” (Del Collado, 2014), another states that “she is the first woman to defy machismo, sexism and authoritarian customs” (Rodríguez Araujo, 2008). She rebels against what she and the media (mostly in Sarmiento’s writing) begin to call “abuses and customs” (*abusos y costumbres*), a play on the term “uses and customs” (*usos y costumbres*) that is a common way to refer to Indigenous political and cultural practices as well as Oaxaca’s alternative form of municipal elections (González, 2008; Sarmiento, 2007, 2014).

Also important to the narrative is her physical escape from the geographical “trap” she is in: she leaves behind her particular pueblo, the land without law, to enter into Mexican society, which implicitly is coded as the place *with* law. Reports often describe her descending from the mountains and walking for ten hours to reach the bus that will take her into the nearest city (Tehuantepec), where she goes to school and begins to exercise her newfound freedom (Lozano, 2016). Reports only vaguely mention her educational trajectory from secondary school to an undergraduate degree in accounting at the state university (López Morales, 2008). Instead, they specifically highlight how through this educational process she learns about her rights as a woman (Izquierdo, 2008). In a television interview she states:

That’s when I returned and I now am enlightened because my teachers taught me this book called the Constitution of my country, and in this Article, it said that all of us are equal, but in my surroundings that was not the case. In my surroundings we were not all equal because we were women, because we could not have access to public spaces where our communities make decisions. (Casa de América, 2012)

By emphasizing how Cruz familiarizes herself with the law only upon leaving her village, these reports again construct a narrative that brackets her village geographically and legally, as if it were a place external to the law, not a municipality constructed through it.

4.3. *Victim-turned-savior*

Media reports then depict how Cruz, now armed with the weapon of the law, takes the next step in the rescue narrative: she moves from victim to savior, not only ready to defy authoritarian and sexist Indigenous customs, but also save other women from them. Newspaper articles emphasize how she wants to change the lives of other women. For example, they describe her as a professional who “works for women who dream of liberty” (López Morales, 2008), and “a woman capable of changing her destiny in order to change the destiny of others”

(Poniatowska, 2012). They emphasize how she brings help from the “outside”—the new realizations about her rights—back to her village to shake things up. Working as an educator in the region, she starts teaching women about their rights to political participation and helps them access governmental social assistance programs (López Morales, 2008). She is presented as someone who will confront machismo: “Eufrosina Cruz, as she herself says, is the only woman in her pueblo that can look men in the face, without fear or submission” (Poniatowska, 2012). One article describes how she achieved this by gradually doing “manly” things: “She began to win over the men and not sit on the floor like the other women while the men were at the table. Bit by bit. She began to talk to them [men]. Later she drank mezcal like an equal with them. Then she played basketball” (D’Artigues, 2008). Eventually, she runs for municipal president. The media depicts her candidacy as a challenge to both machismo and authoritarianism. She is presented as a beacon of democracy (Del Collado, 2014).

At this point, the narrative makes an important shift: it begins to place the blame for women’s political exclusion not only on Indigenous “macho” culture, but also on culture enshrined in law. Specifically, it begins to call out Oaxaca’s multicultural legislation that allows these practices to persist. The stories emphasize how surprised and disappointed Cruz is when she learns that the local electoral practices of Indigenous normative systems—which justified discrimination against her—are actually legal. As Poniatowska (2012) writes, “Eufrosina denounced fraud to the Oaxacan electoral institute, which did nothing, and she even went to their department of *usos y costumbres*, but the surreal answer they gave her was that in the catalogue of her municipality the word ‘woman’ does not appear, and accordingly, destroying votes [cast in her favor] would be a legitimate act.”

Cruz then argues that the law, the tool supposed to help her, was actually against her, “because what do the government agencies tell you? That it is your pueblo’s autonomy, that in the catalogue the word woman does not exist, so there is no crime to pursue, it is just *uso y costumbre*, it is unwritten law” (Casa de América, 2012). Thus, her narrative begins to emphasize that the laws themselves, specifically Oaxacan multicultural laws, are anti-democratic because they promote discrimination against her in the name of Indigenous autonomy. The narrative surrounding Cruz thus reopens the long-standing ideological debate about multicultural recognition and differentiated rights systems. As one opinion columnist writes in the left-leaning *La Jornada*, “*usos y costumbres*, in my opinion, can be very damaging, as many of them are not democratic and go against the move toward equality for which we on the left proclaim to fight” (Rodríguez Araujo, 2008).

However, the narrative suggests that this is more than just a critique of multiculturalism. Rather, it is about broader questions of promoting liberal (innate) desires for freedom and democracy. This is echoed in reports about Cruz’s affiliation with then President Calderón and his wife, Margarita Zavala. For example, then Secretary of Public Education, Josefina Vázquez Mota, at an event in which Calderón gave Cruz the National Youth Award, stated, “we know, Eufrosina, that you won an election that was stolen from you. But you have won a fight for liberty!” (M. López, 2008, p. 8). Likewise, in a documentary film made about her, *The Suffragettes*, her story is portrayed within “women’s historical fight in Mexico to get the right to vote and be elected” (Bonfil, 2013). She is depicted as a new type of modern suffragette, a proponent of Mexican democracy, and as someone who will struggle for the law to become more just.

Subsequently, the narrative also begins to link Cruz and Indigenous women’s political-electoral rights with the promotion of the rule of law in Calderón’s securitization agenda. As previously mentioned, this agenda included political reforms that sought to reconfigure the margin of the state through legality and illegality. Cruz’s rescue narrative, and its portrayal of Indigenous culture as anti-democratic, pre-modern, and authoritarian, helped define this new margin. As Cruz states, “The *uso y costumbre* that is converted into *abuso y costumbre* has to stop, and that is where the law must be applied” (ADN Opinión, 2015). Thus, Indigenous

culture becomes the field upon which a new binary of legal versus illegal is created.

However, there is a conundrum. Some of these customs are already technically “legal” via multicultural recognition. Cruz’s narrative thus implies that the rule of law does not refer to following all *actual* laws. Rather, it appeals to a specific culture of lawfulness, one in which principles of liberal democracy and freedom are promoted. It is a project of law to be made. As Cruz states, “The problem with this country is that it lacks rule of law, and if you are the weakest, there is even less rule of law for you” (ADN Opinión, 2015). Rule of law thus implicitly becomes associated not just with the generation of laws themselves, but rather with the generation of certain types of laws linked to the broader securitization paradigm. It is, as Cruz states in a speech marking the creation of the PAN’s Indigenous advisory board, about “our democratic will and our ability to ensure respect for legality” (Cruz Mendoza, 2011). It is a political project focused on the promotion of a specific type of liberal democracy, one that is truly “legal,” a part of “the secure Mexico that we are building” (Cruz Mendoza, 2011).

5. Conclusion

In this article, I argue that the recent promotion of Indigenous women’s political-electoral rights in Mexico should not be blindly celebrated as progress toward gender equality. This argument does not dismiss the ways in which Indigenous women creatively use liberal rights to challenge injustices at multiple scales (Sierra, 2017), or engage in the creation of alternative rights paradigms within indigenous epistemologies (Aguilar Gil, 2019; Mora, 2017). Rather, it calls for expanding analyses of rights promotion. Within political geography, it indicates how we must assess not only how rights are claimed or implemented across social and spatial differences, but also how they work *discursively*, or how they converge with hegemonic colonial discourses that promote specific racialized and gendered spatial imaginaries (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). Through this type of critical geography of indigeneity (Radcliffe, 2017), we can create more nuanced understandings of how women’s rights play out in colonial modernity.

Through an analysis of the colonial rescue narrative constructed around the victim-turned-savior figure of Eufrosina Cruz in mainstream media, I demonstrate how Indigenous women’s political-electoral rights came to be justified as important through an attack on Indigenous culture in Mexico. While parts of this attack echoed common historical binaries in which Indigenous people, especially women, have been positioned at the margin of the state, it helped generate a new binary: the illegal versus legal. Thus, I posit that the narrative around Cruz’s figure, while appealing to a specific type of democratic freedom, generated discourses in which Indigenous culture, people, and places became associated with illegality.

This occurred in several ways. First, the rescue narrative drew upon a discourse of women’s individual rights to signify Indigenous political practices as macho, authoritarian, and anti-democratic. The overall promotion of women’s rights within the last several decades in Mexico has focused on women’s participation in electoral systems as a sign of democratic progress; the question of Indigenous women’s political participation in Indigenous normative systems has increasingly become a site of scrutiny and intervention. Cruz’s figure served as a way to materialize this issue. But instead of provoking an examination of how structural forms of sexism and racism affect Indigenous women’s political subjectivities in particular ways, it shifted the blame for Cruz’s and other Indigenous women’s exclusion onto Indigenous culture. In doing so, it cast Indigenous socio-political organization as inherently anti-democratic—the *abusos y costumbres* to which Cruz refers.²¹ Although

²¹ This also refers to Indigenous culture as a monolithic and static entity, and fails to explore how it has been shaped in relation to the Catholic Church and political practices of clientelism under one-party rule (Rus, 1994).

Indigenous women do often face forms of violence and exclusion within their Indigenous polities, attributing this to the sphere of Indigenous otherness helped promote the colonial idea that “modern” (i.e. non-Indigenous) Mexican society is thus a place of freedom for women, an irony noted by high rates of gender-based violence throughout the country (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2019).

Second, the mainstream media also used Cruz’s narrative to push forward the idea that Indigenous difference is not just macho and authoritarian, but illegal. Indeed, Cruz’s legislative initiatives helped create new categories of illegality within Indigenous practices of self-determination. However, the narrative emphasized illegality as inherent to Indigenous practices and places. This had important consequences. While post-revolutionary indigeneity promoted these spaces as backward and thus in need of state intervention in order to promote development, this new configuration made questions of law the main rationale for intervention by the state, or its armed forces, into Indigenous peoples’ lives.

Third, this narrative attempted to create a new relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. A key part of Calderón’s securitization agenda involved solidifying the rule of law as a sign of state strength. Mexicans were encouraged to see the state as their ally in the fight against fellow citizens—disproportionately Indigenous in number—deemed their criminal enemies. The narrative generated around Cruz demonstrated just how “good”—i.e. non-criminal—Indian subjects should behave in this conjuncture by reframing the question of Indigenous rebellion. In Cruz-style rebellion (in contrast to the female rebels of the Zapatista movement), instead of engaging in collective action *against* the state, political participation of Indigenous women became defined as an individual act, buoyed by the state, and turned against the collective. Or in other words, the female Indigenous rebel was portrayed as someone who allied *with* the state to go *against* other Indigenous people. The endpoint of the rebellion was individual freedom, secured in accordance with state intervention to promote the rule of law in Indigenous villages.

Overall, these points demonstrate how the discursive construction of Indigenous women’s political-electoral rights through the narrative constructed around the figure of Eufrosina Cruz helped push forth an agenda of state securitization in Mexico. As such, her figure leaves us with a cautionary tale, of how seemingly progressive discourses of democracy and women’s rights can paradoxically harness long-standing colonial and racist legacies for conservative political agendas.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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