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Mexico

# Mexican women - then and now

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**Araceli's gnarled hands knead the corn dough in a smoke-filled lean-to next to her kitchen, as the 5 a.m. sunlight begins to squint through the slats. She will make about 48 pounds of tortillas, as she does every day. By noon they'll be on the table in houses all over the 500-inhabitant town she has lived in her whole life, half-way between Mexico City and Toluca, the capital of the State of Mexico.**

This is the 21st century: 100 years after the Mexican Revolution. So many things have changed, yet so much looks so similar. Araceli may well develop a serious lung condition from working over a wood fire in an enclosed space, as thousands of other women have for centuries in Mexico. But her daughter has a high-school education and a job in a library, definitely a step up after working as a cashier in a huge outlet clothing store along the Mexico City-Toluca highway. Araceli herself took up tortilla-making to earn her living after trying other ways: the last was renting videos and DVDs out of her front room.

Women's lives — their work, their family life, their educational opportunities, the health care they can expect, their social standing, and political participation — have changed over these hundred years. The country has gone from being overwhelmingly rural to mainly urban; [1] between 1930 and 2000 average life expectancy rose from 34 to 75 years; the conditions in which women do housework and care for children and the sick — still almost exclusively their responsibility — have changed enormously: the majority have running water, gas for cooking, indoor toilets, and homes with flooring. [2]

In 1910, women made up 14% of the work force, by 2008 they were 38%. Almost half that increase occurred in the last 40 years. Almost four million women 15 years or older (under 4%) are illiterate today; 92% of girls between the ages of 6 and 14 attend school — not the best possible numbers, but still a huge change from a century ago.

And, by the end of the 20th century, 95% of women of reproductive age knew about at least one type of contraceptive and at least 78% could expect to give birth in a hospital or clinic, lowering maternal deaths considerably.

Currently, women's participation in public life is incomparably greater than it was a century ago: women did not get the vote until 1953, but there are 140 women deputies (28% of the total) in the present legislature. Mexico has had two more women candidates for president since Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, leader of the human rights struggle against repression and for the presentation of the disappeared, became the first woman to run back in 1982.

Election laws stipulate that no more than 70% of a party's candidates must be from a single gender — a round-about way of saying that at least 30% must be women. But the recent case of eight women deputies who, after being sworn in, immediately attempted to resign and turn over their seats to male running mates, reveals that the law is seen as only a formal requirement.

On the other hand, women continue to be almost exclusively responsible for housework, with 18% still cooking on wood fires and 13% trying to keep their children healthy and house clean with dirt floors. They continue to earn 84% of what their male counterparts do and on average work for pay five hours longer each week. To support their families they are swelling the ranks of the burgeoning informal sector.

More importantly Mexico has the unfortunate privilege of having coined the term "femicide," stemming originally from

the cases of more than 300 women missing and/or murdered on the U.S. border city of Ciudad Juárez since the 1990s. It is a phenomenon since discovered to be a nationwide and even international trend of increasing violence against women just because they are women. The militarization of Mexico has brought with it increased incidence of rape by military and police personnel [3]; the growing influence of organized crime has caused increasing concerns about human trafficking, mainly women and children.

These contradictory changes are the result of struggles by working people to improve their lives, both during and after the 1910-1917 Revolution, combined with the needs of capital itself to modernize the country and create better conditions to compete in today's world.

## What did women actually do during the Revolution?

Did they benefit from it as peasants and workers? As women?

The most significant, life-changing activities women carried out in the Revolution at the outset were related to their families. Hundreds of thousands of women were uprooted from their homes, traveling with the armies of Zapata, Villa, and Carranza initially people's, not regular, armies. Under these radically different conditions, with the exception of tilling the land, they continued to be responsible for the same kinds of jobs that they had done in the home: making tortillas, cooking whatever was at hand, washing clothes, nursing and caring for injured soldiers.

But these activities were no longer carried out inside four walls, essential as that was for family survival: now they were essential for the survival of the armies. Since water was a major concern for women to be able to do their jobs, they were often the scouts who determined where the armies would camp for the night. All this put women in the middle of public life at its most raw. It was an unparalleled upheaval in the lives of a large part of the female population, changing not only experiences but horizons and expectations.

One of the Revolution's most famous corridos is about these women, called "Adelitas":

*Popular among the troop was Adelita*

*The woman the sergeant idolized,*

*And besides being brave, she was pretty*

*So much so that even the Colonel himself respected her.*

Some of course, risked their lives as couriers or spies or for printing manifestos, making and distributing guns, or they took up arms themselves. As with any mass movement, a few individual women rose through the ranks to positions of command. Zapatista Colonel Rosa Bobadilla and journalist and activist Juana Gutiérrez de Mendoza, who participated in drafting Zapata's Ayala Plan, are cases in point. In the North, Elena Arizmendi promoted the creation of the Neutral White Cross, organizing nurses and medical students as the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship-linked Red Cross stood on the sidelines.

Before and during the Revolution, women of the middle and upper classes, particularly, but also some working

women, set up all-women's organizations to discuss, analyze, publicize, and fight for women's rights. From 1904-07, *The Mexican Woman, Monthly Scientific-Literary Magazine to Promote the Evolution and Perfection of Mexican Women* was published, arguing for women's right to access to the professions in order to become better homemakers.

Two textile workers, the sisters MarÃ-a del Carmen and Catalina Frias, set up the 300-strong Daughters of Anahuac on the outskirts of Mexico City in 1907 to defend the rights of women workers who sympathized with the Flores Magón brothers' Mexican Liberal Party.

After Victoriano Huerta's February 1913 coup against the Madero government, MarÃ-a Arias Bernal, Inés Malvaez and Eulalia Guzmán formed the Women's Loyalty Club, to hold weekly vigils at the gravesite of the assassinated president. In time, these gatherings became massive and a symbol of resistance to the usurper's government. From 1914-19, Hermila Galindo and her team published more than 200 issues of a weekly, *The Modern Woman*, demanding women's right to vote and throwing its support to the Carrancistas.

In 1916, over a thousand participants attended two famous Feminist Congresses in Yucatán, promoted and financed by Carrancista General Salvador Alvarado, then governor of the territory, and organized by, among others, Hermila Galindo. Participants, mainly school teachers, focused their discussion on women's education and job training, but also delved into suffrage and sexual hygiene. The government's objective was to modernize and secularize society, though participants expressed many other aims.

## What did all these struggles achieve for women as women?

In 1915, Zapatista authorities issued a family law eliminating illegitimacy, recognizing common law marriage and establishing a woman's right to divorce. The Carranza government instituted the right to divorce and remarriage in December 1914. After the victory of Carranza's forces, the 1917 Constitution established the right to work and form unions, the right to the land and the separation of Church and state, all important building blocks for future rights. [4] More specifically, it stipulated equal rights to wages and to work for men and women, plus certain protections for women workers who were pregnant.

The Family Relations Law passed the same year gave married women the right to sign contracts, participate in litigation, and equal rights to custody of their children; however it also stipulated that adultery by the woman was always grounds for divorce, whereas in the case of men, there were a series of caveats. [5] The new law also compelled married women to have their husband's permission to work outside the home "a provision this writer had to adhere to as late as 1975. But neither the Constitution nor later legislation enfranchised women despite the fact that dedicated Carrancista and feminist Hermila Galindo proposed it to the Constituent Assembly. To the contrary, the first electoral law gave the vote exclusively to men, constituting a major defeat for women's rights. [6]

It was in the years following the Revolution proper that working people's fight for their rights bore other fruit that women shared: greater access "not just the formal right " to education through literacy campaigns, carried out mainly by women teachers in rural areas (1921-22); making contraceptive advice available " Margaret Sanger's famous pamphlet was translated into Spanish " in Yucatán hospital clinics [7]; the right to divorce by mutual consent, and women's right to custody of the children, established in the 1928 Mexico City Civil Code after a prolonged campaign by feminists; the right for single women and widows who were breadwinners to be full members of the collectively farmed ejidos with the same formal right to the land as men (1927); and the right to maternity leave and not have to perform dangerous jobs, established in the 1931 Federal Labor Law. [8]

In the 1930s, with a strong Communist Party presence, both rural and urban unions organized, spearheading the fight for decent working conditions, wages and other rights. In 1935, women peasants and teachers organized massively in the United Front for Women's Rights (FUPDM) to demand their rights, including the vote. Finally, in 1938, Congress passed a law giving women the vote with the public approval of President Lázaro Cárdenas. But the law was never published in the Official Gazette so it never went into effect, something Cárdenas obviously controlled. It was not until 1953, with the FUPDM long dissolved into the ruling party, that the PRI finally "gave" women the vote.

So, despite all the sacrifices, despite women's massive and specific participation in the revolutionary process and later struggles, before the state was completely consolidated by incorporating all the mass organizations into its structures, and despite certain measures to "modernize" the country with more or less positive consequences for women, what women gained from the Revolution was only partial recognition of their rights and demands. It should come as no surprise that women's organizations "along with unions, peasant and urban residents' organizations" were absorbed into the PRI apparatus, completely eliminating their autonomy and political punch.

## What about today?

The 21st century opened with the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) ousting the PRI from office after 70 years of what Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa called "the perfect dictatorship." But three years earlier, the center-left Party for the Democratic Revolution (PRD) had won the mayor's seat in Mexico City, where one-fifth of the population lives; and six years earlier the Zapatistas had amazed the world by taking over a small but significant corner of southern Mexico. Against a backdrop of deepening PRI-PAN neoliberal policies "even as they began to be discredited internationally" the scene was ripe for social, economic and political polarization as all forces fought for the upper hand.

Feminist groups "the survivors from Mexico's 1970-90 second wave of feminism" had mostly morphed into NGOs working on specific topics like sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, and gender education, as gender studies became more widespread in academia after a 1990s downturn in the social movements and women's organization in them. Many women activists became public officials in the new Mexico City center-left PRD government (a positive development in that it gave women more visibility in public posts, but with the down side of taking both women and men out of the social organizations they had helped form). In synch with international trends (Beijing and its aftermath), NGO activities centered mostly on proposing public policy measures, training public officials, and lobbying Congress, targeting dialogue with women PRI and PAN legislators especially through a series of "Women's Parliament" meetings. These activities continued into the 21st century.

But by 2006, soaring unemployment and growth of the informal sector of the economy, cutbacks in public spending, especially education and health care, the implementation of U.S.-backed measures to open a swathe of gigantic public works in a corridor reaching all the way to Panama, growing use of police and the military to quell discontent throughout the country, and the government offensive targeting unions particularly, all contributed to a situation ripe for explosion.

Major social movements emerged involving women. The Zapatistas continued to develop their self-organizing "Caracol" movement in Chiapas; 50,000 peasants opposed the building of the huge La Perota dam in the state of Guerrero [9]; Mazahua indigenous women organized to defend their water supply from being channeled into Mexico City, totally destroying their way of life [10]; collective ejido farmers opposed president Fox's attempt to expropriate their land to expand the Mexico City airport in San Salvador Atenco and won, only to be arrested en masse with their leaders and sentenced between 31-112 years in prison [11]; a 2006 cave-in at the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila state sparked the mobilization of miners' survivors (mostly women), which eventually led to the persecution and international defense of miner-union General Secretary Napoleon Gomez Urrutia and a three-year-long miners'

strike in Cananea.[Striking Cananea miners and Pasta de Conchos family members were recently forcibly removed from the facilities they had occupied for three years; the strike was declared “non-existent,” that is, without legal basis, and the family members demands that their loved ones’ bodies be recovered from the pit denied.]]

# The dynamics of women's struggles today

To look at women’s dynamics in all these struggles is beyond the scope of this article but I have chosen a couple of examples to examine in slightly more detail.

The first was sparked in May 2006 when primary and middle-school teachers in southern Oaxaca staged a sit-in/vigil in the state capital for higher wages and more funding for schools in the state’s extremely depressed areas. [12] When PRI strongman Governor Ulises Ruiz ordered the teachers repressed a month later, more than 350 local indigenous, community, and union organizations joined together from all over the state to form the Popular Assembly of the Towns/Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) to demand his ouster.

Given a local media blackout, in August 2006, a march of women to the state-owned TV station turned into a 21-day occupation, with the women broadcasting full-time. When the transmitters were destroyed by paramilitary gunfire on the 22nd, Oaxaca City residents came down from the hills to occupy four local commercial radio stations and then set up barricades throughout the city center.

Soon thereafter, the women created their own Coordinating Committee of Oaxacan Women (COMO), whose demands echoed the general APPO demands. Participants included women from different left currents, some familiar with feminist struggles, but were mainly women from community and union organizations. Their high public profile gave them even more weight in the movement than their numbers and heroism already would have. The self-organizing process they went through, organized initially as women but around general demands, allowed them to exchange experiences and to try to collectively understand the difficulties they faced as women participants in the movement. This prompted them to put forward specific women’s demands, including the fight against discrimination and violence against women.

Only days after the radio takeovers, amidst constant clashes with police that cost several lives, including that of U.S. journalist Brad Will, the PAN federal government sent in Federal Police, followed by troops. The movement was so large and entrenched in the communities, however, that it was not possible to completely repress it and the sit-in/vigil moved to a near-downtown plaza. The November 2006 APPO congress emitted the Declaration of Oaxaca, demanding a government truly representative of the diversity of popular organizations, including indigenous peoples, city and country dwellers, peasants, workers, business people, women, men, children and the lesbian-gay community. The general APPO movement and COMO as part of that continued to struggle, but, given the onslaught of government repression and just plain exhaustion, finally retreated around 2008.

Second, as the social movements defended themselves, the PRD ran former Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) for president. After the July 2006 election, both sides claimed victory and a year-long battle ensued as AMLO, backed by a mass movement, demanded a vote-by-vote recount and set up what the movement called the “legitimate government,” complete with cabinet members, which repeatedly brought millions of demonstrators out into the streets. This became without a doubt the largest civic movement in the country, putting forward an alternative government program.[The Zapatista movement created an alternative “Other Campaign” to counter AMLO’s candidacy, which it denounced as a ploy to hoodwink the population. But after the elections, it also took an increasingly separatist position vis-À-vis not only this political movement, but most of the major social movements, posing itself as a contradictory alternative to them, including the electrical workers’ union led fight to

create an alternative program for the social left, the miners' union defense of their working conditions and right to conduct union activities without government interference, and even the fight for the freedom of the Atenco prisoners. Unfortunately, this has isolated them considerably from the other movements, which is of no help in defending their very real gains.]]

In 2008, when President Calderón put a bill before the Senate that would have allowed the construction of oil pipelines and refineries, plus the operation of the latter, to be sub-contracted out to foreign private corporations — functions reserved constitutionally to the state-owned oil giant Pemex — AMLO convened a Movement to Defend Our Oil, bringing together unions and urban community and peasant organizations nationwide to oppose it.

He called for the creation of 20 brigades of 500 women each in the Valley of Mexico to distribute the movement newspaper and go door-to-door to explain why Pemex should not be further privatized. The men emulated them and formed their own brigades, and eventually, together, they numbered 47 or 48 with up to 1,500 members each. About 100,000 women participated as brigade members. The press dubbed the women the “Adelitas,” alluding to the Mexican Revolution, a soubriquet the women took up proudly. It was the women who took over the Senate when the bill came up for discussion, demanding that there be a nationwide public debate before the legislature passed anything. These debates were eventually held and a relatively toothless version of the original bill passed, signaling a temporary victory, and the movement subsided.

According to brigade leader Patricia Ruíz Anchondo, former Mexico City community leader and government official, López Obrador still occasionally convenes meetings of the heads of brigades. Today, however, he has concentrated his efforts on building a national network of community centers dubbed “The Houses of the Movement to Defend the Popular Economy, Oil and National Sovereignty,” which is where many veterans of these brigades have centered their efforts, but no longer in women-only organizations.

These are prime examples of the dynamics in Mexico's popular movements with women's participation: repeatedly women organize around general demands, but very often as women in specific groups, sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes at the initiative of the male-led organizations. Inevitably, women come to the fore as natural leaders: in the case of Oaxaca, former COMO member and primary school teacher Aurora Ruiz now represents her local before the union's Executive Committee; housewife Flor Hernández Quero was elected this July as a city councilwoman in Oaxaca. In the case of the Adelitas, former community activist Karen Quiroga is currently a member of the Mexico City Legislative Assembly.

But the main dynamic is that the contradiction both in their homes and in the struggle itself, as their activity creates friction with their traditional roles, can lead them to put forward some form of specific demands addressing their oppression. The central political problem posed is whether this will flourish and blossom into a full-fledged movement, uniting with other groupings, for women's rights. This depends on the internal development of the overall movement, including how long it lasts, the degree to which the women's organizations are under the tutelage of male leadership, the ways women's demands are posed within the general movement, and the kind of support and link-ups that can be made with other women's organizations regionally or nationally.

## The PAN/PRI attack on women's bodies

The proof that mass women's participation and even self-organization in political or sectoral movements is not enough to achieve an end to discrimination and inequality can be seen in the fact that no one was equipped politically to respond to the PAN/PRI joint offensive against the right to choose launched in October 2008.

The bi-partisan offensive began after the Mexico City PRD-controlled Representative Assembly voted in April 2007 to decriminalize abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy and provide the service in public hospitals for free. A month later, the PAN-appointed head of the National Human Rights Commission filed an appeal questioning the law's constitutionality, but in August, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the legislature. Undaunted, in October, the ruling PAN and the opposition PRI began a joint onslaught in state legislatures to establish the fetus's "right to life" in state Constitutions. By May 2010, they had managed to pass this in 18 out of 31 states. In addition, in some states they changed penal and health codes, with assenting votes by individual legislators from every single congressional party thrown in for good measure.

Feminist groups immediately responded locally, denouncing the measures and defending women jailed for having had an abortion, but only three states coordinated with each other. A few federal PRD congresswomen went to a Santo Domingo meeting of the Socialist International leadership to denounce the PRI, a member organization and very jealous of its prestige abroad.

Six Mexico City-based NGOs that had long been lobbying for the right to choose found themselves facing a brick wall of PAN-PRI unity on the issue: lobbying had reached its limit. They eventually launched a public campaign to oppose the offensive in September 2009. But old capital city-versus-state power rivalries kept the two flanks from uniting until a national forum was convened by a Mexico City socialist feminist group in December 2009.

Thirty-nine organizations present from 19 states launched a National Pact for Women's Life, Liberty and Rights to demand freedom for women prosecuted for having an abortion, the safeguarding of the secular nature of the state, the decriminalization of abortion nationwide and the right to health, plus denouncing all legislators who had voted for these measures. Inspired by Argentina's Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, participants voted to hold coordinated vigils nationwide on the first Thursday of every month.

Despite the feminist movement's relatively small size, local efforts combined with national pressure have had a positive effect. PRI President Beatriz Paredes had to publically retreat from her party's position; in Veracruz, in a second round of voting in the legislature, the PRI voted against its own constitutional reform; in a related matter, the Supreme Court ruled the use of the day-after pill constitutional in May 2010; and in April, PRD legislators formed their own network (including a few PRI adherents) to counter the measures and rein in some of their own party members who had voted for the state constitutional "reforms." This particular war is far from won, but at least a few skirmishes have been favorably resolved.

## So, what does this have to do with the Mexican Revolution?

My initial reflection would be that there seem to be parallels between what happened then and what's happening now. Politically and socially, the kind of dynamics women experience in mass movements and in the way that women respond to the contradictions that sharpen in their lives seem to lead to initial awareness about the social, not merely individual, nature of their oppression. This empowers them as a group and as individuals. But the far-reaching nature of women's oppression, and the key role it plays in maintaining the status quo (something the PAN understands perfectly), is such that more is needed.

It is not enough for women to participate in social movements and political activities; it is not enough for them to participate and organize as women in these activities; it is not even enough for women to put forward their specific demands in these movements. All of this is positive and necessary, but what is also needed is for women to have their own autonomous, cross-sectoral movement.



Easier said than done. Today, the difficulties this poses can be exemplified by a perfectly valid observation by Patricia Jiménez of Oaxaca's COMO: "The PRI and PRD women made a big fuss about abortion in the state legislature last September. Where were they when the [Ulises Ruiz] government was carting women off to jail?" And now that the PAN and the PRD made an electoral pact that successfully ousted the PRI from the governor's seat, what kind of measures will the new hybrid government take on women, and what kind of allies are community and union women going to be able to count on to further their own demands? [\[13\]](#)

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[\[1\]](#) The little census data that exists for 1910 shows that almost 70% of those economically active were in agriculture and animal husbandry, while today, more than half are in the service sector and one-quarter employed in industry or construction.

[\[2\]](#) In 1929, 45% of homes were still made of adobe and only 3% of brick or other solid materials; by 2000, 9.9% were made of adobe and 78.9% of solid materials. In 1950, only 17% of homes had running water either inside or outside the dwelling, compared to 88% in 2005. As late as 1960, 82.5% of homes still cooked on wood fires, while by 2000, this number had dropped to 18.1%. Only 20.9% of homes had bathrooms with toilets in 1960, compared to 86.6% in 2000; and as late as 1970, 41% of homes had dirt floors, a number that had dropped to 13.4% by 2000.

[\[3\]](#) The case of three indigenous Zapatista women raped by troops in 1994, the 2006 rape of 14 sex workers in the Castaños, Coahuila red light district by soldiers, the rape and sexual harassment by police of 26 women detained in a 2006 mass arrest in Atenco, State of Mexico, and the 2007 death of a 73-year-old Ernestina Asencio Rosario, in Zongolica, Veracruz, after being gang raped by soldiers are merely the most publicized examples.

[\[4\]](#) See [Dan La Botz's](#) and [James Cockcroft's](#) articles in *Against the Current* Sept-Oct 2010, or Cockcroft's forthcoming book, *Precursos intelectuales en el siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Jorale/Orfila, 2010), for more about the lessons and contradictory gains of the revolution in general.

[\[5\]](#) For a woman to get a divorce on the grounds of adultery, the act had to have taken place in the family home; the man had to have lived with his mistress; or the husband had to have mistreated physically or verbally or publicly insulted his wife.

[\[6\]](#) Despite this, local dynamics were often more progressive: in San Luis Potosí, women were given the vote for three years in local elections (1923-26), and in Yucatán, several women were elected to local office in 1923 and 1924.

[\[7\]](#) This actually sparked a counter-measure in 1922 by newspaper *Excelsior*, which launched a campaign to make May 10 Mexico's Mother's Day, celebrated to this day.

[\[8\]](#) Although the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) was not established until 1944, it was not until 1973 that the IMSS set up its first child care centers; at the same time, the Mexican government was also beginning a big push to lower the birth rate in accordance with McNamara's worldwide population control policies. On the other hand, the right to "protection" in the workplace also eventually led to women being unfairly excluded from some jobs, a contradiction found in many countries' legislation.

[\[9\]](#) A seven-year struggle led government officials in January this year to "postpone" the building of the dam until 2018, a clear victory; but the government renewed its offensive two months ago by holding fake collective ejido farm elections to give permission to build the dam, signaling the need to rev up organizing efforts in the communities yet again.

[\[10\]](#) The women finally won their struggle and the water was not diverted to Mexico City.

[\[11\]](#) The Supreme Court decided in June 2010 that their arrests had been illegal, and the prisoners were finally freed after spending four years in prison. No justice has been achieved, however, for the 26 women raped and/or sexually harassed by police during that mass arrest.

## Mexican women - then and now

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[12] Besides being organized in Latin America's largest union, Mexico's teachers have played a key role historically in linking the city with the countryside. Traditionally, along with parish priests, they have been community leaders. In the state of Oaxaca, with its plethora of isolated indigenous communities and deep poverty, this role, particularly for bi-lingual teachers, has been especially important. In addition, in 1980, they became part of a national movement to oust the corrupt, bureaucratic national union leadership.

[13] In effect, a week after this article was finished, Manuel Camacho Solís, the head of Dialogue for the Reconstruction of Mexico (DIA), the coalition of the three left parties that allied with the PAN to oust Ulises Ruiz, told his newly elected local deputies that the new legislature would not discuss issues that the broad coalition did not agree on: specifically abortion and same-sex marriage.