

Celebrating the Bla, Bla, Bla of Mexican Women



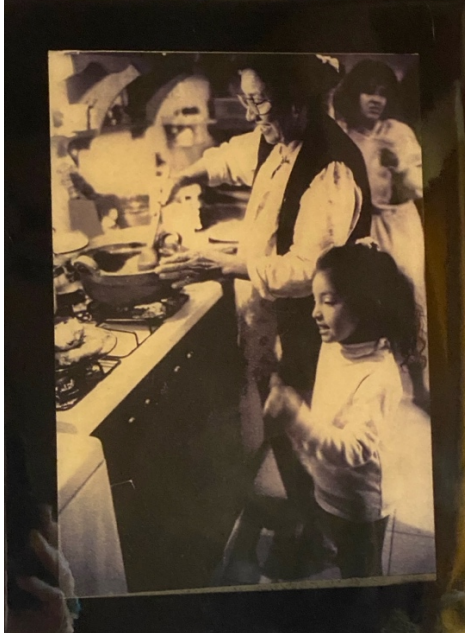
What's the status of women in Mexico today? Claudia Sheinbaum will likely become Mexico's first women president in June. Billboards abound with women candidates running for political office in every state we drive through. But over 171 local candidates have been killed in recent months.

Machismo is well and alive, revealed in both overt and subtle ways. I complain to the waiter at the restaurant where we ate in Tlaquepaque about how the washroom doors are labelled: The men's with a single "Bla" while the door to the women's washroom is plastered with infinite bla, bla, bla's. I argue with John about this perjorative stereotype, and then decide to reframe the "bla bla bla" as a strength rather than a weakness! Women know how to talk honestly about their lives, and offer each other support in the talking. We have a lot to say, about the broader world (BLA, BLA, BAL), as well as the about the more intimate but important relationships in our daily lives (bla, bla, bla).

Visiting women friends in Mexico whom I've known 10 – 30 years meant that we were beyond the polite formalities, and so each encounter revealed aspects of their daily struggles, both Big and small: whether BLA, BLA, BLA or bla, bla, bla.

Antonieta (Mexico City)

There I found her, my research collaborator on the tomato study 30 years ago, hunched over her computer at the dining room table, cross referencing statistics about schooling, health, and working conditions of migrant farm workers in various states of Mexico. At 83, Antonieta is finally being recognized for her decades of economic research (BLA, BLA, BLA) on migrant workers. Claudia Sheinbaum, the likely next president, has asked for recommendations for improving their work and home lives.



During my first visit in 1994



During my last visit in 2024

This is her moment. While we were there, she spent 10 hours a day preparing this historic research proposal. But she was still up at 6, to cook the main meals of the day for her intergenerational household of two adult children, and three grandchildren. None of them have taken on these tasks for the family. She's also disappointed that none of them are following her path of socially committed work. Bla, bla, bla.

Maria (Nurio, Michocán)



When we arrived at the Indigenous autonomous community of Nurio, Maria was away in Michoacán's capital city Morelia meeting with clients of the family business of organic inputs (BLA, BLA, BLA). The next day, Easter (not celebrated among most P'urépecha), we chatted in the kitchen as she prepared a big meal for her intergenerational household of three children and two grandchildren.

She was exhausted because at 3 AM the previous night she and Fulvio had gone in search of their son, who was out drinking with friends. She had the police put him in jail for a few hours, to teach him a lesson. “You should be an example to others,” she chided him. This same 20-year-old son, recently elected as town clerk, had been kidnapped a few months ago, when narcos stole his 4-wheel moto and put a gun to his head. “Go ahead and kill me,” he responded calmly. “But you know there will be a hundred community residents destroying your families.” Maria was home alone, grabbed a gun, and headed out to rescue her son, accompanied by a hundred residents. Fulvio explained later: an autonomous community that is organized and armed keep the drugs out of town.

When Maria’s sister Anna arrived, she shared more complaints about the lack of help from husband or children in the kitchen. All the while, Maria is the primary manager of the family business, super grandma seeking special help for Felipe, her grandson with Down Syndrome, and planner of extended family vacations. Bla, bla, bla.



Rosy (Guadalajara, Jalisco)



Rosy worked with IMDEC, the popular education centre involved in my research projects two decades ago, when they started doing workshops on “masculinity” to challenge patriarchy within their NGO. Eight years ago, she became the first woman president of CEAAL, the Council for Popular Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. She gifted me their recent journal on anti-patriarchal feminism.

During our dinner out, she shared photos from the recent World Social Forum, that she helped organize in Katmundu. One photo shows her with Indigenous delegates from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. Another shows her translating for Che Guevara’s daughter. BLA, BLA, BLA.

“What do you do to relax, Rosy?” I ask. “This work energizes me,” she responds. Her pet volunteer project? Creating zoom platforms that use 150 volunteer translators in eight different languages to create linguistic parity. “You must have techies helping you at the time of the webinars?” I assume. “No, I’m the main techie, too..! she laughs. Bla, bla, bla.



Marisela and Teré (San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato)



Our short visit to San Miguel allowed John to join Marisela and Teré, her household help for the past 40 years, for their daily jog up and down the hills surrounding this picturesque colonial town.

On their return, Teré takes breakfast up to the third-floor man cave of Don, the gringo artist/archeologist/environmentalist, who married Marisela, his Mexican English teacher shortly after he arrived to this artist enclave 50 years ago.

Marisela goes off to manage her coffee shop down the cobblestone street, where she often meets up with other women friends. Bla, bla, bla.

Don is in poor health and rarely descends from his third-floor lair, where the sound tracks of movies and U.S. news drift down the stairways. We expect to have the mid-day meal with him, but Teré doubts it, as she quips "*Don es Viejo, siempre ha sido viejo, mismo cuando era joven.*" (Don is old, he's always been old, even when he was younger.) Bla, bla, bla.

Yolanda (San Miguel)



She recognized me right away, and grabbed two mangos as a greeting. Yolanda's stall was my favourite spot in the market for our fruit and vegetable purchases last year. "How is your husband?" I asked, knowing that he was to have eye surgery. "One eye is done, the other one will be operated on next month," she answered.

“But I had a terrible fall,” she continues, and invites me back behind the vegetable displays to show me where she fell backwards and hit her head. Most concerning for Yolanda, however, was the fact that she also fell on her altar and broke off a piece of her favourite Saint. Bla, bla, bla.



Hilda (San Antonio, Texas)

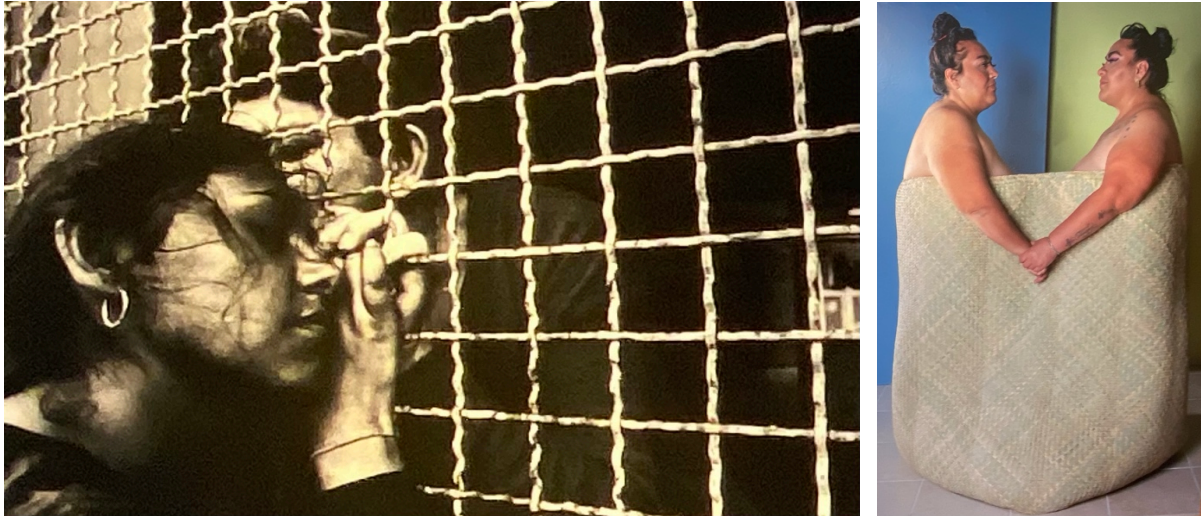
Since our Legacy partner Fernando was sent to work for sesame farmers in Texas, Hilda has continued to manage a program for IMDEC in Guadalajara, which integrates their rooftop community garden with educational alternatives for kids and young people in poor neighbourhoods, leading to jobs. But now she's starting an ice cream business, building on the legacy of her grandfather who started the famous Michoacana ice cream business almost 100 years ago. She's a genuine entrepreneur. BLA, BLA, BLA.

But she's also focused on finding a good school for their son Diego. One that doesn't prohibit talking among kids at lunchtime. One that doesn't require parents to line up in their cars to pick up their kids an hour before they leave school. I'm wondering what the mothers would talk about if they weren't forced to sit in their cars, but could share their concerns about the school. Bla, bla, bla.



Resistance is Alive in Women's Art Projects

A photographic centre near the Temple Mayor in the Xocolo featured the courageous work of Patricia Aridjis, from intimate relationships among women prisoners to embracing photos of large women. I can only imagine the bla, bla, bla among them.



I wonder, as I stand in front of Guillermo Orozco's famous mural at the Bellas Artes Gallery, what the cleaning women say about the larger-than-life voluptuous body that dominates this painting. Do they know that this caricature with legs wide open is Orozco's depiction of his country willing to sell its soul to capitalism?



Even more challenging is to imagine the utterances or dialogues of the pre-Hispanic women depicted in the Museo de Antropología. If the stone sculptures could speak, what would their bla, bla, bla be...?



I happened upon three activist art exhibits honouring women at the Bellas Artes Center in San Miguel de Allende. They also reflected participatory art processes. Metal mobiles hanging from the trees in the courtyard carry the words of women sharing their experiences with violence:

“One man grabbed me, the other pulled down my pants, all the others laughed,” and also reflecting their resistance: “I will not be silent.”



In a separate room is a series of charcoal drawings of International Women’s Day marches, under the title “Jacarandas.” The images were recolored with purple and green, my favourite colours, symbolized by the Jacaranda trees, which flower in March, and are now identified with women’s resistance. BLA, BLA, BLA.



Bla, bla, bla on the walls

Women find alternative ways to express themselves, adding their stories of violence to a community quilt. Many bla, bla, blas....ultimately become BLA, BLA, BLA.

