

Profile of an Indigenous Woman Organizer

Interview with **María de Jesús Hernández Valderas**

It is important to let Indigenous women speak for themselves, whether in a political context in their respective cultures and communities, or in the pages of the journals and magazines that speak of them. In what follows next, María de Jesús Hernández Valderas, a Nahuatl woman in Mexico, provides us with a glimpse of the activist world of Indigenous women. Surmounting the difficulties historically placed on her, María embodies the enduring spirit of Indigenous women across the continent.

Can you tell us your name and where you are from?

My name is María de Jesús Hernández Valderas. I participate in a women's organization called Campesina Women's Union of Jelica, in San Luis Potosí, Mexico.

Are you Nahuatl?

Yes, we speak Nahuatl.

In how many communities do you work?

We work in nine communities in the municipality of Jelica.

When and how was the women's organization born?

The women's organization was born when our *compañeros*, who have an organization called la Igualdad de Jelica (Equality of Jelica), were able to see that they weren't able to progress, that their organization would not work without the support of women. Because of this, they named us the "right arm of the Cooperativa de la Igualdad de Jelica (Equality of Jelica Cooperative)." From that point on, they saw that it was important that women participate, and

we called for the first meeting. Various women from several communities attended. The important thing was that we were very motivated about participating in a meeting. Before this, we had never attended a meeting. It was the first time that we women left the house, all full of emotion, and carrying our children.

Were the husbands bothered that the women were holding meetings?

Well, at first the women's meetings were held with *compañeras* who already were participating. That was how the organization began. Later, invitations were made to the other women who also wanted to participate.

What are you able to achieve through the women's organizations?

We want women to be recognized; that we also participate and that we be heard. Many times when women speak in a meeting, the men don't pay attention. We want to gain support for us, the women, together, organized.

What are some of the activities usually done by women in your community?

The chores of the woman. . . The home has always been left to us; that is, to take care of the home, to gather firewood, water, and care for the children also. I am finding out that this happens everywhere.

Do you also work in the fields?

Yes, some of the women work in the fields, and many of us dedicate ourselves only to the family.

What do you grow in the fields?

In the fields we produce mostly Coffee, and some vegetables.

Is there much that you don't produce because the land is not good?

The land is good but we have noticed that it is much better for coffee. Very little of corn and beans is cultivated.

Have you all been in contact with the women of other communities?

Yes. Yes. We are participating in a coordinating group. We are participating jointly, men and women. There, at the regional level, we talk about women's situation and special needs.



What is the coordinating group's name?

It is called COCIP (Laguasteca Potosina Indigenous Organization Coordinating Body).

Are all of you Nahuatl in the coordinating group?

No, we are Nahuatl and Mames also.

Are you working closely with women in Chiapas?

Up until now we haven't had much contact, no.

But do you think it's important to be in touch with them?

Yes, we would like to be communicating. We don't hear much about the work that they're doing. We would like to be informed so our organization here can take on some of the responsibility and show that we can help them from here.

Why contact women of other countries?

It is important because that way we find out how women live at the national and international level as well.

Do you have children yourself at home?

Yes, I have four children.

And you have time to work in the women's organization?

Well, I don't have a lot of time, but I make some. My children still depend a lot on me, as well as my husband. They are all still little!

What is your position in the organization?

The women selected me as the Women's Union Treasurer.

So you handle a lot of money?

Well not so much but. . .!

What are some projects you have been involved with?

First we managed to get a popular soup kitchen there in the municipality of Jilitra that is called "Flor del Café," a small goods store that is in one of the communities, and a *nixtamal* (corn for tortillas) mill.

Is coffee produced in the mountains or in the plains?

In the mountains.

We are also participating in alternative medicine and in various bakeries.

Do you still use your traditional medicine?

Well, in large part that was being left aside, but we want to pick up traditional medicine again.

Do you also retain your religious practices?

People are still very Catholic in large part, but we also have other sects in which people participate, but they are much less practiced than the Catholic group.

So you don't retain any of the Nahuatl ceremonies, like offerings to the Earth?

As Nahuats, we always make arches and offerings. The arches are made from a branch, a stick and they are decorated with *palmilla*, and *xempasutchilt* flowers. That is Nahuatl tradition. There are also dances in which we participate, during the patron saints celebrations. This was being left behind but at the moment we are seeing that it is important because it promotes the rebirth of the culture.

Do you wish to send out a message to women of other countries, of other cultures?

Well, I would simply like to say, to all the women that have not yet joined a women's organization, I invite you from this corner of Laguasteca-Potosina, to participate and for us to begin leaving fear aside. That is what inhibits us most. But, yes, I invite you to participate in an organization. It is difficult but we have to do whatever is possible to participate. Thank you. ♡