

The Evolution of the Legendary Activist Dolores Huerta:
A Look at Her Changing Views on Leadership and Feminism,
1970-2000s

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April 20, 2016

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor Thai Jones, for all of the help along the way. Thank you for pushing me to think critically and helping me whenever I needed it.

Thank you to the Barnard History Department for the Hook Grant, which helped make my trip to Detroit for archival research possible. My thesis would not have been possible without my trip to the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs. The experience was truly unforgettable.

Lastly, I want to thank my Dad, Genaro Duarte, for instilling in me a love and appreciation for history. This project in many ways was inspired from his constant reminder to never forget our culture, past, and those who have spoken up for minorities.

Introduction

In 2011, Dolores Huerta was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Obama, who offered the following remarks:

Without any negotiating experience, Dolores helped a world wide grape boycott that forced growers to agree to some of the country's first farm worker contracts. And ever since she has fought to give more people a seat at the table.... don't wait to be invited' she said, 'step in there.' And on a personal note, Dolores was very gracious when I told her I had stolen her slogan 'si se puede, yes we can.' Knowing her I'm glad that she left me off easy, because Dolores does not play.

The highest civilian honor was a testament to Dolores Huerta's life's work to help improve the conditions of individuals in marginalized communities. Born in the 1930s in Dawson, New Mexico to Mexican American parents, Huerta witnessed firsthand the discrimination and poor treatment of Mexican people in her community. Throughout the 1940s-1960s, thousands of Mexican and Mexican-Americans worked as farm laborers. This increase in labor work was prompted by the Braceo Program of 1942, which sought to alleviate labor shortages in the U.S during war time by forming a series of diplomatic agreements with Mexico. While the agreement guaranteed basic human rights such as sanitation, food, shelter, and minimum wage, the reality for many farm workers was very different. While braceros were usually afraid to make official complaints, they suffered from a lack of consistent work, long work hours, earnings that did not sufficiently cover basic expenses, unauthorized deductions from their pay, unsanitary housing, and dangerous working conditions¹. Witnessing her parents'—in particular her mother's—commitment to improving the status of the Mexican-American community, Huerta too at a

¹ "Mexican Immigration: Teachers Resources Library of Congress," *The Library of Congress*, Web.

² Mario T. Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), iii.

young age developed an awareness and passion for activism. As a young adult, Huerta decided to quit teaching and pursue her passions in organizing and activist work—and she never stopped.

Dolores Huerta is remembered by many as a civil rights, workers, and women's advocate. While most commonly remembered as Cesar Chavez's partner in co-founding the National Farmworkers of America in 1962, Huerta has been at the forefront of many actions of the United Farm Workers (UFW), including her critical participation in securing the passage of California's Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975 and the disability insurance for farmworkers in California. Since then she has continued to work endlessly as an activist and community organizer, and she was awarded the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights in 1998. In 2002, she founded the Dolores Huerta Foundation, an organization dedicated to developing community organizers and national leaders—which she continues to be active in to this day. Thus, Huerta is remembered not only for her pioneering role in the labor world, but also through her continuous work helping empower women and youth.

Historian Margret Rose has written many pieces relating to Latinas' involvement in the labor movement as a whole as well as looking into the life of Dolores Huerta. Rose's article, "*Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes*": *Chicana Organizers and Middle-Class Female Supporters in the Farm Workers' Grape Boycott in Philadelphia, 1969-1970*, discusses the huge contributions Latina women made to the UFW during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rose discusses the need for Latina women's contribution to be added to the historical writings of the UFW in order to provide an accurate account of the organization's history. Rose's oral history of Huerta conducted in 1984 is one of the few primary sources that details Huerta's childhood. Available at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs in Detroit, Michigan, the interview discusses Huerta's cultural upbringing, including how her parents played a critical role

in her development as a woman as well as an activist. Rose's article "Traditional and Nontraditional Patterns of Female Activism in the United Farm Workers of America," gives insight into how Huerta differed from many women in the union by not leading through traditional gendered and cultural norms as other women did. Her nontraditional role as a woman in the union demonstrates Huerta's tenacity that helped her succeed in a male dominated environment. Rose's work provides a view of Huerta that demonstrates how women's lifestyles and personal histories reflect the complexity and diversity of the Mexican American woman experience in the 20th century.

Mario T. Garcia's 2008 book *A Dolores Huerta Reader* is one of the first books to focus on the life of Huerta. Through an informative biographical introduction, articles and book excerpts written about her, her own writing and speeches, and interviews, Garcia provides multiple lenses for learning about Huerta. From intimate reflections on her childhood to explaining how she came to be one of the most prominent Latina organizers, *A Dolores Huerta Reader* helps give a general view of Huerta's life and how historians have written about her. In the introduction Garcia himself reflects on the usefulness and holes in his reader, "This reader cannot replace the much-needed biography of this fascinating and powerful figure, but my hope is that it will fill a large void and lay the inspiration for the kind of historical treatment that this great American and Chicana/Latina so rightfully deserves."² While Garcia's work provides a general understanding of the ways historians have written about Huerta, it lacks a chronological approach detailing the various stages in her life.

Huerta is a legendary figure that set precedents as a woman of color leading in the labor world as well as in the feminist realm. Throughout her life she has broken down barriers and

² Mario T. Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), iii.

expectations for a woman and continues to lead by example. Yet, as Mario Garcia underscores in his introduction there are not enough historical accounts or biographies on her life to give Huerta the place in history she deserves. While Huerta is most commonly remembered for being one of the first leading female labor activists as well as being a supporter of women's rights, there is a lack of focus on the contextual factors that shaped her views as well as her evolution overtime. While Huerta indeed was an impressive and visible leader in the UFW, her conception of her own status as a leader, and a female leader at that, have changed from 1970s to the present. Similarly, her self-identification as a feminist and her focus on improving women's rights has changed significantly throughout her life. Thus, in order to understand Huerta's life fully, it is necessary to look at the evolution of herself as a labor organizing leader as well as a feminist. To explain this evolution, I will be looking at how Huerta describes herself in interviews, articles, and other primary documents in different years. In order to understand Huerta's legacy, it is vital to look at the different factors that shaped her view of herself at different times such as her family, the time period, and the dynamic of the UFW.

The first chapter will provide biographical information on Huerta's life and achievements as well as her childhood. A deeper look at the historical context of her childhood and her relationship with her parents, reveals how her mother and father shaped her views of gender roles and activism in ways that would greatly influence her life. Chapter two examines Huerta's reflections on herself as a leader as well as her ideas of female leadership as a whole. Through interviews, magazine articles, and other primary sources from 1970 to the 2000s, I demonstrate how the time period has influenced her evolving view of gender and leadership. Finally, chapter three traces Huerta's evolution as a "feminist". By looking at what she defines as her focus throughout the decades, it is possible to see how and why her development as a feminist changed

throughout her career. All three chapters look into the time period and evolution of Huerta and her career in order to accurately depict the development of the legendary labor activist.

Chapter One

Laying the Foundation: A Look into the Influential Forces Behind Dolores Huerta”

Dolores Huerta’s path to becoming one of the U.S’s most prominent Mexican-American labor activists began at an early age. Growing up in the 1930s to a working class Mexican-American family, Huerta recognized early in her life issues of race and sex discrimination. Her drastically different relationship with her mother and father influenced her views on gender as well as her future as an activist. Similarly, her community and her personal experience with racial discrimination were huge factors in her decision to dedicate her life to activism.

While her childhood is not often discussed, it reveals insight into Huerta’s early development. In 1984 the historian Margret Rose conducted an interview with Huerta in which she discusses her early childhood. The oral history, “California Agricultural Oral History: Interview with Dolores Huerta,” provides a rare and in depth look of her life growing up as well as the important influence both of her parents had in her life. In order to understand Huerta’s legacy as an organizer and feminist, it is critical to consider the ways in which her adolescence shaped her views of herself and her future.

The Early Years

Dolores Huerta’s early years represent a complex upbringing for a Chicana in the 1930s. The 1910 Mexican revolution which profoundly transformed Mexico also had a significant effect on the United States. Along with the “push” factors that came from the violence and instability of the Mexican Revolution, an economic “pull” force was simultaneously occurring in the U.S

for cheap Mexican labor which was desired by farmers.³ More than a million Mexican immigrant workers traveled north to the United States in the years 1900-1930, settling mostly in the southwest. Most Mexican immigrants worked as agricultural wage laborers. In 1930, an official report to the Governor of California stated that the Mexican “is today a principal source of farm labor in California ... He does tasks that white workers will not or cannot do. He works under conditions that are often too trying for white workers. He will work in gangs. He will work under direction, taking orders and suggestions.”⁴ Also, nonagricultural labor requirements of the rapidly developing Southwest increased sharply. While in other parts of the country the demand for unskilled labor, manufacture, and service industries, were filled by African Americans who migrated from the South. In the Southwest Mexican immigrants provided a growing part of the low-wage work force. Thus, Huerta’s parents are an example of the working class Mexican-American community that was becoming an increasing part of the Southwest.

While Huerta is celebrated in the Mexican American community, in feminist history, and in American labor history, her early life is not commonly known or written about. However, her early life is an integral part of her development into the influential activist we know today. Huerta was born on April 10, 1930 in the small mining town of Dawson, New Mexico. Huerta was the second child and only daughter of Juan and Alicia (Chávez) Fernández. On the maternal side of her family, Huerta was a third-generation New Mexican and her father was a son to Mexican immigrant parents. While Huerta’s parents divorced early on, her mother moved to Stockton, California with Huerta and her two sons John and Marshall.

³ Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, Ralph C. Guzman, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation’s Second Largest Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1970,197).

⁴ Grebler and Moore, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation’s Second Largest Minority*, 66

While usually discussed as a distant father who did not fully reflect Huerta's values and lifestyle, Juan Fabian Fernandez played a key role in Huerta's development as an individual and leader. Born in 1910 in Dawson, New Mexico Fernandez faced what Huerta describes as a very bitter childhood. With his father's death at a young age, he and his mother moved from Mexico to Dawson where he faced much discrimination. A coal miner, Fernandez was an active member in the United Mine Workers until he moved into farm work. Huerta notes first becoming aware of the dangers of mine work through her father who would discuss the poor and dangerous work conditions as well as the child labor that existed. Similarly, Huerta was able to access a closer look into organizing through her father who was a member of several Hispanic organizations in the community. Huerta had a close relationship for a short time when she lived with him as a young child. As a sickly child, Huerta would spend some summers with him and remembers how he would bring her things during his time in the navy. However, as Huerta became a young adult her relationship with her father changed as well as her perception of him. As a teenager, Huerta disliked the way he treated his stepmother and grandmother. She describes her father in a critical light as an adult "... he was also very, very smart. He was handsome. He was very dark and very handsome. He also had a lot of personality. He had a lot going for him but I think my grandmother spoiled him so much that she made him [like he was]. He was not a really nice person." When asked by Rose if she believed her life would have been different if her parents had stayed together Huerta answers:

Oh God, I shudder to think of it. I doubt I would have been the person I am today. I would have been an oppressed child. I don't know. It's hard to say. I was very quiet as a little girl. ... My mother used to push me all the time. I guess I would

have been a different person. Probably very quiet, unassuming, mild, male worshipper or something.⁵

While Fernandez was supportive of Huerta's organizing—even sending money to the UFW—he did not approve of her divorces, which caused them to have an even more tense relationship.

While Huerta did not agree with much of her father's behavior, she wishes she would have seen her father more towards the end of his life no matter how difficult it was for them to be together.

Despite their different views and personalities, Huerta's father represented both a man she respected for his organizing but also a man whose sexist values clashed with her beliefs and lifestyle.

As a single parent in the depression-era California, Alicia Chávez Fernández endured hardships to support her family. To make ends meet, she worked at a cannery at night and as a waitress during the day. However, during the war years their family's economic circumstances improved which led Alicia to manage a restaurant and then acquire a hotel with her second husband, James Richards. As Huerta admiringly shares about her mother, “She was very effective at whatever she did, and very ambitious.”⁶ Due to her mother's new financial stability, Huerta experienced more of a middle-class upbringing.⁷ Huerta's mother proved to be a strong influence in her life through her hard work and support for her children to partake in activities as Huerta notes, “My mother was always pushing me to get involved in all these youth activities ... we took violin lessons. I took piano lessons. I took dancing lessons. I belonged to the church choir ... And I was a very active Girl Scout from the time I was eight to the time I was

⁵ Margret Rose. California Agricultural Oral History: Interview with Dolores Huerta, Box 1, Folder 6, Huerta Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁶ ⁶ Rose, California Agricultural Oral History, 4.

⁷ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 9.

eighteen.”⁸ Thus, Huerta’s early life was filled with important influences that would shape her young adult life. From the activities she was able to participate in, and most importantly, through witnessing her mother’s hard work and ambition, Huerta’s upbringing provided her with the ability to develop a self-confidence that would follow her throughout her life and career.

Huerta describes in many interviews the important influence her mother played in her life both in shaping gender norms as well as supporting Huerta’s initiatives. Aside from being a model of economic independence for Huerta, her mother also influenced the way she experienced and viewed gender in her youth. Huerta describes how growing up in a home with a dominant female head shaped her attitudes toward gender,

My mother raised me and was a dominant figure in my early years. At home, we all shared equally in the household tasks, I never had to cook for my brothers or do their clothes like many traditional Mexican families.⁹

Similarly, she viewed her mother’s independence as a way to view women’s abilities, “My mother was one of those women who would do a lot. She was divorced, so I never really understood what it meant for a woman to take a back seat to a man. My brothers would say, ‘Mama spoiled you.’ because she pushed me to the front.”¹⁰ Similarly, her environment helped to shape Huerta’s understanding of herself and her role in her community, “... My mother was a strong woman and she did not favor my brothers. There was no idea that men were superior. I was also raised in Stockton in an integrated neighborhood. There were Chinese, Latinos, Native Americans, Blacks, Japanese, Italians, and others. We were all rather poor, but it was an

⁸ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 9.

⁹ Rose, California Agricultural Oral History.

¹⁰ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 188

integrated community so it was not racist for me in my childhood.”¹¹ Thus, Huerta began her early years viewing women as being equal to men in ability as well as responsibilities regardless of their ethnicity. The lack of limitations Huerta saw in being a woman can be seen through how she describes her mother’s support as Huerta shares:

My mother, was, of course, very supportive of me as a young woman and always pushed me to be out in front, to speak my mind, to get involved, to be active. My mother was a very quiet, a calm kind of personality but she had a lot of quiet energy and did a lot of things.¹²

Huerta’s mother provided her with the support and guidance that allowed her to become such a confident figure. While Huerta realizes her experience is not universal, she credits her mother for providing an environment that allowed her to see beyond gender and societal expectations.

While many have described Huerta and her childhood as untraditional, there is a long history of Mexican women activism. The historian Vicki Ruiz discusses the rich history Mexican women have had in union and political activism. Despite not being their given place in history, Ruiz argues that Mexican women have a significant history in developing very public roles in their pursuit of social justice. For example, during the 1930s the canning labor force included many women. One of the largest canneries in Los Angeles, the California Sanitary Canning Company (Cal San) employed primarily Mexican and Russian Jewish women. They were paid according to their production level and soon formed close bonds by sharing their grievances, which included difficult relationships with superiors and sexual harassment. In 1941 activist Lusía Moreno worked to organize the Cal San cannery. Women came together to demonstrate their ability to unite against a common cause and develop their own strategies, which led to a rise

¹¹ Rose, California Agricultural Oral History.

¹² Rose, California Agricultural Oral History.

in their pay.¹³ Similarly, Ruiz discusses how the success or failure in strikes depended largely on the strength of the community networks. Ruiz notes one woman Sadie Castro who used her culinary skills to feed hungry families and those who were striking.¹⁴ Thus on many different scales, women were actively engaging in activism and organizing to defend themselves and their families. Thus, Huerta's mother's activism and support for her local community can be seen as just one more example of the numerous Chicana women who since the early 20th century have been fighting against discrimination.

This sense of independence to take the lead that Huerta's mother instilled in her can be seen in her young adult life. Learning from her mother's independence as well as her activism in helping poor Mexican families in her community, Huerta too became active in Hispanic groups in high school and became aware of the debilitating inequalities in her community. At the age of 16 Huerta started a teen center to have a space for her and her friends to hang out. She asked one of her mother's friends to borrow their storefront. With a jukebox and table tennis table, Huerta created a space for her friends to be where they would not be harassed. Huerta wanted to protect her classmates from getting into trouble for what she believed to be a desire to keep students from different races integrating with one another—specifically with white students.¹⁵ This was only a preview to what Huerta would become familiar with in the inequalities and injustices that would soon influence her life as an activist. Huerta reflects becoming aware of the extent of classism and racism in high school as she reflects on a teacher who accused her of cheating and using someone else's essay because the one she turned in was so well written, "She gave me a C for my grade, when I had gotten A's on every one of my papers. And so I asked her why did I get a C. She said, it's obvious that somebody else had been writing your papers. She just devastated

¹³ Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82.

¹⁴ Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 76.

¹⁵ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 179.

me.”¹⁶ While Huerta had not grown up at home with limitations on her abilities, as she grew older and experienced life outside of her home and her immediate community, she soon discovered the discrepancy between her views of the world and the views of others. During her high school years it became very clear to Huerta that there was an unjust way in which poor Latino and African American students were treated that helped lead to high dropout rates.¹⁷ As Huerta was becoming a young adult she became aware of social inequalities that she found to be limiting her and her communities abilities. This awareness shaped her life choices that would take her drastically off the conventional path of what most women in her generation pursued.

The inconsistency between her family life and the unjust realities of the world is what ultimately pulled Huerta to make the decision after graduating from community college to pursue her calling for activism. Huerta describes her decision as an internal struggle, “I felt I had all of these frustrations inside of me. I had a fantastic complex because I seemed to be out of step with everybody and everything. You’re trying to go to school and yet you see all of these injustices. It was just such a complex.”¹⁸ Similarly, Huerta would see the children in her classrooms who had worn out shoes, were dirty, and hungry. When she asked for food vouchers for these students Huerta notes that the principal responded with a no because to him Mexican families were poor because they drank their money away.¹⁹ Thus, Huerta followed her instincts and left her path of becoming a teacher to pursue activism.

Huerta’s upbringing fostered not only an awareness of social injustices, but also a self-esteem that helped her look beyond gender restrictions to pursue her goals. Her view of gender equality and fearlessness in fighting what she saw to be injustices, makes her a continuation of

¹⁶ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 180.

¹⁷ Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*, 76.

¹⁸ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader* 30

¹⁹ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 30

the Chicana activism Ruiz discusses in her work. Both her relationship with her mother and her father influenced two important parts of her identity. While Huerta's complicated relationship with her father exposed her to gender norms and stereotypes that she did not encounter while growing up with her mother, her exposure to sexism prepared her for her future in the UFW. By sharing her mother's view of a woman's true potential while simultaneously dealing with her father's sexist views, Huerta's ability to coexist within two vastly different views of women works to her benefit in her later career when dealing with sex discrimination. Thus, Huerta's childhood provides crucial insight into the different forces that led to her development as a woman activist.

CSO: A Young Leader

In 1955 Huerta found a venue to begin community service work when she met organizer Fred Ross. Ross traveled around California, organizing Mexican Americans into chapters of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a statewide confederation that mobilized Mexican American communities for voter registration campaigns and improved public services. The organization worked on registering Mexican-origin voters and electing Spanish-speaking representatives.²⁰ Huerta's continuing role with the CSO led her to eventually meet Cesar Chavez in the late 1950s. After a very successful voter registration drive in 1960, Chávez, then executive director of the CSO, decided that Huerta would make a talented lobbyist. In 1961 Chávez sent Huerta to Sacramento where she headed the legislative program of the CSO. One of Huerta's primary concerns was that many farm workers, as American citizens, were not benefitting from the social service benefits that were established during the New Deal era such as

²⁰ Vicki L Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 243.

social security, disability insurance, and retirement positions.²¹ Huerta pushed for legislation what would help workers who experienced hardships navigating their way in the United States—regardless of citizenship status or language skills.²² At the California State capitol, Huerta successfully lobbied for an old-age pension, a welfare bill, the right to register voters door to door, and the right to take the driver’s license exam in Spanish. Huerta attributes beginning her activist work to Fred Ross who “opened a door” for her as she declares that without him, “I’d probably just be in some stupid suburb somewhere.”²³ At the age of 25, Huerta was already leading initiatives that would have a profound impact not only in her community, but on a statewide level as well. Just a few years after making the choice to follow her passion for activism, Huerta was making legitimate changes on a vast scale. Her future in decision making and organizing would only increase as she joined Cesar Chávez in forming the United Farm Workers just a few years later.

United Farm Workers: A Nation-wide Mission

The United Farm Workers (UFW) was not only an unprecedented organization that gave farm workers rights to better their working and living conditions, but it also became a testament of the invaluable leadership role of Dolores Huerta in the organization’s critical years. After years of organizing, Dolores Huerta along with Cesar Chavez founded the UFW in hopes of improving farm workers conditions. For decades, farm workers were given low wages and worked and lived in horrendous conditions. Through working in the Community Service Organization together, Cesar Chavez saw Huerta’s impressive lobbying abilities and invited her to co-found the United Farm Workers with him in 1962. Early protests in 1965 focused around

²¹ Ruiz and Sanchez. *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, 224.

²² Ruiz and Sanchez. *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, 224.

²³ Ruiz and Sanchez. *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, 226.

Mexican and Filipino workers in Delano, California walking off the fields refusing to pick grapes until growers were willing to negotiate pay and housing. Three weeks after the initial walk out, the strike had spread and almost three thousand workers had left the fields. While growers used legal injunctions to stop picketing and resorted to violence to limit demonstrations, César Chavez and Huerta remained true to their non-violence stance. However, realizing that the battle would not be won in the fields of California, union leaders decided that they would have to carry their message to the marketplace by boycotting table grapes and other produce in supermarkets.²⁴ Their objective was to force growers to negotiate contracts with the UFW that established increased benefits and improved conditions for union members; while they were successful in securing a few contracts by 1967, dozen of growers, including John Giumarra Corporation, would not budge. Huerta would soon have a crucial role in the boycotts that would transform the union to a nation wide movement.

While underrepresented in many U.S textbooks, Huerta was the main organizer behind one of the most decisive and critical moments of the UFW's history. Although the boycott initially targeted only a few labels, Huerta ultimately moved to New York City, the center of grape distribution, to coordinate the industry-wide boycott in 1968 and 1969. Huerta's leadership contributed to the success of the boycott by her ability to mobilize labor unions, political activists, community organizations, religious supporters, women's clubs, peace groups, student protesters, and concerned consumers behind the union.²⁵ Huerta found power in numbers as she explains, "The whole thrust of our boycott is to get as many supporters as you can ... You have to get organizers who can go out to the unions, to the churches, to the students and get that

²⁴ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 58.

²⁵ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 59.

support.”²⁶ Supporters would picket one chain at a time, telling shoppers where they can find other stores to go to. The commercial boycott received tremendous public support and proved very effective, with polls showing that about 17 million consumers supported the boycott by the early 1970s.²⁷ On April 1, 1970 after five long years, one grower came through: Lionel Steinberg of the Freedman Ranches signed a contract with the UFW. Shipments of grapes produced on its land were now stamped with the UFW label, signaling the union’s approval to consumers. In the economic climate, “union” approved grapes were becoming essential.

Huerta handled negotiating these historic contracts with producers that would represent the product of years of organizing and protest. In negotiating the contracts, Huerta earned a nickname among the growers—“dragon lady”—referring to her ability to speak “with fire” as she held fast to the terms and conditions that the UFW members demanded. Huerta’s unyielding persona became so well known that growers pleaded to deal with someone else other than Huerta as one representative notes, “Dolores Huerta is crazy... She’s a violent woman, where women, especially Mexican American women, are usually peaceful and pleasant.”²⁸ Huerta’s response to the resistance to male representatives reflects her unapologetic outlook, “Why do we need to be polite to people who are making racist statements at the table or making sexist comments? I think when they do that you have to call them at it because then also you are educating them in the process.”²⁹ Huerta’s determination led to twenty-six Delano-area growers signing contracts which included, raising wages to \$1.80 per hour plus \$.20 per box, as well as establishing provisions for hiring workers directly from the UFW hiring hall, hiring by seniority, and placing

²⁶ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 59.

²⁷ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 248

²⁸ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 58.

²⁹ Vicki L Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 243.

strict controls on the use of pesticides.³⁰ Huerta reflects on this great achievement by noting, “It never, ever, ever, ever crossed my mind that it couldn’t happen. Not once. I always knew that we would be able to do it.”³¹ Similarly, one of the most important victories came in 1975 with the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) in California. Huerta was also a major force in lobbying legislators to support the ALRA, which provided the right to boycott, voting rights for migrant seasonal workers, and secret ballot elections and control over the timing of these elections.³² Huerta’s achievements in organizing as well as negotiating legendary contracts represent remarkable accomplishments for a woman in the 1960-70s—especially for a woman of color. Huerta’s leading role in the union’s most critical and decisive moment’s demonstrates the entering of women of color onto a national stage—leaving behind the view of women being simply passive and submissive.

Huerta’s family and community were integral parts of her development. The life lessons she learned from her mother and father as well as her personal experience, influenced her to dedicate her life to helping correct the injustices she witnessed around her. As Ruiz discusses in her work on Mexican-American women activists in the early 20th century, Huerta herself represents a new generation of women fighting for similar causes. Huerta’s childhood and young adult life gave her insight into the discrimination that plagued her community as well as the ways in which gender roles defined a greater world around her. Huerta’s early life provided her with a foundation that is critical to comprehend in order to understand her evolution as an organizing leader and feminist throughout her career.

³⁰ Ruiz and Sanchez, *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography*, 249.

³¹ Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 248.

³² Garcia, *A Dolores Huerta Reader*, 249.

Chapter 2

“Rethinking Women’s Leadership: Huerta’s Changing and Consistent Views of Leadership”

Dolores Huerta is often described as either a humble individual or as an aggressive fighter willing to take on whatever is thrown her way.³³ Huerta’s reputation and legacy have been significantly defined by her straddling the line between humility and outspokenness. While some celebrate her tenacity and demand for calling attention to her voice, others highlight her humility and desire to give up the spotlight. Thus, her place in history is often defined by these two opposite views.

The way Huerta is remembered can be seen in the different ways authors have written about her leadership style and what they choose to highlight. In Vicki L. Ruiz’s *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, Ruiz opens a chapter with a quote from Huerta herself, “One thing I’ve learned ... is that having tremendous fears and anxieties is normal ... By doing whatever causes your anxiety, you overcome the fear, and strengthen your emotional, spiritual, activist muscles.”³⁴ Ruiz goes on to a brief description of Huerta noting that while she appears mild-mannered and soft-spoken, she has proved to be a fearless leader, activist, and negotiator who has lived against the social and political norms of her time. After Ruiz discusses Huerta’s life, achievements, and contribution to the UFW, she ends the chapter with this conclusion, “Dolores Huerta’s organizing career has been marked by a combination of aggressive efforts to meet her goals and reluctance to take the spotlight. It has been Huerta’s personal opinion that the

³³ Vicki L Ruiz and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 240.

³⁴ Ruiz and Sanchez. *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, 240.

mark of a true organizer was, ‘someone who trains people and then steps back.’³⁵ This humble and reserved view of Huerta differs greatly from what other authors and individuals have remembered her for. For others she has resembled a *soldadera*, a historic heroine from the Mexican Revolution who fought alongside great male heroes. Huerta is often described as bold, determined, outspoken, and willing to claim what is hers.

While one of these leadership styles and forms of being remembered is not inherently better than the other, together they provide a complex understanding of Huerta and her legacy. Huerta’s name and importance to the UFW is often forgotten or unknown behind the great shadow of Cesar Chavez; her immense contributions remain unknown to a majority of Americans. From a humble figure wanting to stay away from the limelight, to being at the forefront of the UFW and demanding recognition for her ideas, Huerta’s changing leadership style has created different images of her for different people. In a time when women of color—and women as whole—were fighting to be seen as equals with men, Huerta did not always fully speak out about her achievements or rise to her own defense, but rather chose to act in the best way for the union—which often meant working from behind the scenes. Huerta’s evolving view of women’s roles and leadership throughout her career was heavily influenced by the time period as well as her personal views of women’s strengths.

1970s: The Peak of the UFW

The early 1970s were critical years for the UFW. After organizing and picketing in Delano, California in the late 1960s, by 1970 the UFW was successful in getting growers to accept union contracts. The contracts which included a health plan and higher wages marked a

³⁵ Ruiz and Sanchez. *Latina Legacies: Identity, Biography, and Community*, 252.

huge success for the UFW³⁶. While the UFW was busy implementing these changes, a different struggle was taking place behind the scenes for women.

As the co-founder of the UFW, Huerta constantly dealt with high responsibility under great pressure. When discussing the struggles that came with being closely connected to the union, Huerta shares how her experience is similar to all women involved in the UFW,

... All the women in the union have similar problems. They don't have to leave their families for as long as I do. But everybody shares everything, we share the work. The way we do the work is we do whatever is needed regardless of what we'd really like to do. You have a problem when you develop into a kind of personality like Cesar because that really takes you away from the work that has to be done with the farm workers in education and development of leadership.³⁷

Huerta depicts being part of the UFW as a woman means stepping into a self-sacrificing role. Thus, Huerta views women's effectiveness in the UFW as a result of their responsibility to pick up the work when others fall short. While there is strength and respectability in selflessness, Huerta's perception of it falling into the woman's hand is problematic. Some of Huerta's letters to Cesar Chavez during the 1970s reveal this same sense of sacrifice and hardship Huerta herself had to face. In one letter Huerta writes to Cesar and she begins by informing him that she is doing better in health but then goes on to tell him about the difficult time she is having, "The only reason I hate to get operated on is because I hate to lose the time.... My health, plus no bby sitter is one of the reasons things have not been moving, so help me Cesar, without someone to

³⁶ "UFW: The Official Web Page of the United Farm Workers of America." *UFW: The Official Web Page of the United Farm Workers of America*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2016."

³⁷ Workers Newsletter 1980, 1970-1995, Box 18, Folder, 90, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

watch my kids, I just can't find enough time to work, especially in the evening when it counts."³⁸ In another letter to Cesar Huerta again expresses her stress,

Dear Cesar: I am still alive and breathing. I hope all is well. I know you are probably tearing your hair out and I am probably fired by now. I have had a great deal of trouble with my car, all minor repairs, but since I don't have money for parts or a mechanic, I have to wait for a friend...³⁹

This way of viewing gender relations can be seen in Helgesen's work in "Preferred Leadership Prototypes of Male and Female Leaders in 27 Countries," which looks at the ways women's access to leadership positions have been hindered by discrimination and stereotyping. Helgesen notes that many characteristics that are attributed to women's leadership such as communication, interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, as well as a greater capacity for prioritizing than their male counterparts, may stem from gender-specific experiences. Traditionally gender-specific responsibilities such as managing a household, raising children etc. give individuals a gender-based assumption on a woman's greatest strengths.⁴⁰ Thus, while Huerta looks at women as being great leaders for the UFW, the strengths she attributes to them as self-sacrificing and able to pick up where others fall short, are still gendered tasks.

Rather than demand help or realize that these circumstances are beyond her control, Huerta has an apologetic tone even if the situations she is in are not her fault. She finds it to be

³⁸ Correspondence, Huerta/Chavez n.d,1970-1995. Box 2, Folder, 14, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

³⁹ "Correspondence, Huerta/Chavez."

⁴⁰ Paris, Lori D, Jon P Howell, Peter W Dorfman, and Paul J Hanges. 2009, "Preferred Leadership Prototypes of Male and Female Leaders in 27 Countries".*Journal of International Business Studies* 40 (8). Palgrave Macmillan Journals: 1396–1405.

her and other women in the UFW's role to make sacrifices for the union. However, that expectation is not held in the same way for men. While Huerta sees women's ability to get things done as a positive quality in women, the expectation that men will fall short and women will be able to step in and help, falls into gendered expectations of men and women.

The 1980s: A Time of Reflection

By the 1980s the UFW had reached the end of its peak years and faced many setbacks. The union's membership had decreased and many farmers had lost their contracts due to the entrance of the Republican Governor George Deukmejian in 1983. Throughout the decade there was almost no enforcement of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act and slowly farm workers started to work again in poor conditions similar to those in the 1930s.⁴¹ Similarly, by the 1980s a new wave of Mexican immigrant workers were now a huge portion of the farm labor workforce. The lack of knowledge of the English language as well as their lack of U.S. history, made many unaware of Cesar Chavez and the UFW.⁴² Also, leadership in the UFW was also dwindling. Due to many leaders leaving the union for other opportunities as well as internal tensions and disagreements, much of the original leadership had left—except Cesar Chavez and Huerta. Thus, for most of the 1980s the UFW was at a standstill and working to get back its contracts in order to help its communities.

Over a decade after the UFW's famous successes, Huerta's view of her role during the critical years began to change. In an interview in 1981, Huerta spoke on how she has dealt with "envy" from male leaders. Working in a male-dominated environment, Huerta shares how she

⁴¹ MEChAdeGeorgetown, "The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworker's Movement," *YouTube*, YouTube (20 May 2014), Web 18 Apr, 2016.

⁴² MEChAdeGeorgetown, "The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworker's Movement."

had to overcome being stepped on and taken advantage of. She gives examples of instances where she had been left out and needed to publicly call out men for excluding her,

Men don't give you credit for work done. I used to think it was the work of the group alone that mattered. I wouldn't single myself out. But, I found that men in the union, out of their envy for me, took credit for the work I did, such as contracts, slogans, boycotts. I wanted people to know I had done it.⁴³

Huerta recalls one instance where she embarrassed one of the vice presidents at a board meeting giving her husband, Richard, credit for the grape boycott in New York City. Huerta responded to the comment by replying with, "I want to correct you on one thing. Your speech was very fine, but I was the one who organized the work in New York, not Richard Chavez, but I, Dolores Huerta."⁴⁴ Similarly, Huerta notes how she called men out on their sexist comments during meetings, "I call them on it immediately. Women have to. We don't allow jokes about a black person, or a Hispanic or a Jew, so why do we allow sexist remarks?"⁴⁵ Unlike her self-sacrificing description a decade earlier, Huerta in the 1980s begins to strongly take credit for her hard work and ideas.

While Huerta's demand for recognition and respect demonstrates a change in how she views her place as a woman in the UFW, her internal motivations for taking a stand still reveal to an extent conforming to the gender norms around her. When discussing the need to deal with people's comments and attitude towards her, Huerta discusses the separation of her expectations and limits as she notes, "I have to put up with Cesar's (Chavez) chauvinism because he is my boss, and I have had to put up with Richard (Chavez) because he is my old man, but I don't have

⁴³ Letters of appreciation 1981-198, 1970-1995, Box 1, Interview Requests. Folder, 40, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI,10.

⁴⁴ "Letters of appreciation 1981-198."

⁴⁵ "Letters of appreciation 1981-198."

to put up with yours.”⁴⁶ Huerta to some extent expects and accepts dealing with certain criticisms from males in her life. Thus, rather than rejecting all forms of criticisms from males, Huerta acknowledges the dynamic of male and females working together leads to conflict that she expects to have to work around. Rather than dismissing negative behavior as a whole, Huerta compartmentalizes parts of her life and what she will and will not deal with. Another viewpoint that complicates Huerta’s fight against discrimination is in the way she discusses success. Huerta shares one way to deal with “being envied” is to attempt turning envy into respect, “Men respect you when they don’t know what to expect or what you’ll do next, when they see you moving, doing, scurrying about, being effective. If you take the offensive against the envy, they have to pull back and respect you if they need you at all.”⁴⁷ Thus, part of Huerta’s tactic is to call men out on their inherent doubts about a woman’s ability, but there is also a part of her that wants to prove them wrong by her actions—instead of challenging their discriminatory biases. As Huerta notes, “If I do feel hurt, I try not to give into their envy. I try to turn it into something positive. Maybe it means I did something good, so maybe it’s a plus not a minus.”⁴⁸ While Huerta has stood up for herself against men who question her ability, she does not fully internalize and live by those standards at all points in her life. Rather than fighting against the inherent bias that men in her field have about women, part of Huerta’s being so accustomed to sexist norms allow her to fight against them by “proving” them wrong rather than challenging the expectations themselves. Following the path of proving men wrong thus leaves room for them to believe it is acceptable to have harsh criticisms. Huerta notes that having the immense responsibility of having people look up to her led to her having to deal with depression

⁴⁶ Interview Requests, Box, 1, Folder 40, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Detroit, MI.

⁴⁷ Interview Requests, Box, 1, Folder 40, Dolores Huerta Papers.

⁴⁸ Interview Requests, Box, 1, Folder 40, Dolores Huerta Papers

for parts of her life.⁴⁹ Dealing with the internal turmoil of not wanting to fail—and thus proving men right—leads to not only an unsustainable way of living, but it also leaves her views on women’s leadership stuck in between conceding to gender norms and defending women’s abilities.

While coming a long way from viewing her and other women’s roles as picking up other’s failures, Huerta continues in the mid 1980s to straddle the line between changing the fundamental way women’s leadership is perceived and following gender norms. In 1986, while reminiscing on the UFW’s victories, she describes the reasons why there needs to be more female leaders in place by describing the benefits they bring. Huerta describes most women as less likely to go for the “power positions” as men do.⁵⁰ While Huerta comments that all men think about finding a way to position themselves into power, she counters that by describing why women are so different,

The macho trip, you know, women don’t have that problem. We can cut through the bullshit and just do what has to be done without having to worry about credit and so much and you’re going to be cutting balls, pardon the expression, all this bullshit, we don’t have to go through all that.⁵¹

Huerta describes the differences between men and women as women being selfless and not concerned about power and credit. However, Huerta follows by stating,

But women have to learn how to fight, how to fight for ourselves and how to fight for our positions. We have to do a lot of learning ... Men are never going to see us with different eyes ... I mean for a long time as creatures that have to serve them, we’re exploitable

⁴⁹ Interview Requests, Box, 1, Folder 40, Dolores Huerta Papers

⁵⁰ CD: OH-01-091 Dolores Huerta, Sep 4, 1986, Box 3, The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, NY.

⁵¹ CD: OH-01-091 Dolores Huerta, 5.

people, persons, and we can't wait for men to change the way they view us. We've got to change the way.⁵²

While Huerta has been noted to fight for recognition and her rightful place at the table—and encourages other women to do the same—she simultaneously describes one of women's best strengths as not caring about getting credit. Despite wanting to insure that women get their proper credit and respect, assuming that all women are naturally able to see past their pride and recognition is not true.

Similarly, In a 1990 article written by Huerta titled “A Life of Sacrifice for Farm Workers,” she discusses her experience in the UFW as well as the gender discrimination she learned to deal with that made her success possible. Along with making it her life's mission to help farm workers have the same rights, protection, and wages that other workers have, Huerta also notes that she wants to see women being treated equally in the union. As she reflects back she notes,

After we fought hard, I found some women were discriminated against. I realized, in about 1978, it was almost like a conspiracy... To me, racism, chauvinism, is part of the air you breath, the water you drink. It surrounds you, so you have to learn how to fight it, deal with it, work in spite of it. You can't let it get you down or paralyze you. You have to do all you can to change it.⁵³

With Huerta acknowledges that you must be willing to work past this discrimination, she makes the argument that it is not an easy task and requires sacrifice, “I've taken one vacation in 25 years. I was assaulted by a police office, and I spent a week in New York, but I was in a lot of

⁵² CD: OH-01-091 Dolores Huerta. 5.

⁵³ Huerta, Dolores. A Life of Sacrifice for Farm Workers, 1970-1995, July 1990, Box 16, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Detroit, MI.

pain. You have to expect persecution.”⁵⁴ While Huerta is seen as a strong and resilient female fighter to many, the internal and external struggle to earn her place has a complicated mix of gender dynamics. While Huerta presents an awareness of the sexism that is present in the union that she and other women are forced to overcome, she presents the “expectation” of needing to make sacrifices as a way of making acceptance and success obtainable. Sharing a similar tone to her hardships described in the 1970s, Huerta continues to believe that proof of women’s capabilities is in the sacrifice and dedication needed in order to “fight” sexist ideas—rather than in rejecting sexism all together.

The *Soldadera*

In James Rainey’s 1999 article “*The Eternal Soldadera*,” Huerta is described as a strong and unyielding woman who was able to achieve success in the UFW through her fearless persona. The headline of the article conveys Huerta’s bold personality, “To her 11 children, she was an often absentee mom. To those who crossed her, she was a harsh foe. But to thousands of farm workers she still fights for, Dolores Huerta is the ultimate warrior.”⁵⁵ The article describes Huerta’s achievements and how her personality has earned her place in the hall of fame of both labor leaders as well as feminists. While Huerta is noted as a groundbreaking figure for Chicana women, as she “shattered the mold for a Catholic Latina of her generation,” Rainey notes how this at times caused tension with the more traditional members of the union. However, Rainey underscores Huerta’s ability to surpass these tensions by being revered as a version of a famous cultural figure,

⁵⁴ Huerta, Dolores. A Life of Sacrifice for Farm Workers.

⁵⁵ *The Eternal Soldadera*, 1970-1995, July 1990, Box 16, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Detroit, MI.,

But others found in the beautiful young provocateur the logical extension of a cultural tradition. During the Mexican Revolution, a handful of women followed Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa and others into battle. The people called them *soldaderas*, women warriors. The most revered member of the fighting sorority was named Adelita.⁵⁶

Rainey goes on to discuss the way the “people’s Adelita” continued to fight for farm workers through becoming one of the UFW’s primary negotiators. Rainey discusses the reputation Huerta developed for herself during the negotiations as being fierce and unyielding. Huerta became known as the “dragon lady” by growers for her aggressive personality during negotiations as one farmer recalls three decades later, “You don’t get anything from Dolores Huerta unless you fight for it and you earn it ... She is very vindictive and carries a certain amount of resentment. I wouldn’t ever expect anything to be relented by her.”⁵⁷ Huerta’s outspoken and confident demeanor earned her the respect of many of her colleagues as a former UFW executive notes, “She went about this stuff with an amazing confidence... She went in face to face with these lawyers or professional management people and she was just very impressive. She more than held her own.”⁵⁸ Almost 30 years from her early description of herself as being content working behind the scenes and insuring she fixed other’s mistakes, by 1999 Huerta is discussed and respected for her unyielding and unapologetic manner. Thus, 30 years after her critical time in the UFW, Huerta’s push to reclaim her and other women’s role in the union is what is most remembered and celebrated.

While Huerta is remembered as a strong and opinioned women, she still remains a leader shaped by her life experiences. In a 2011 television interview on *La Plaza* with Maria Hinojosa, Huerta reminisces over her career and her partnership with Cesar Chavez. After discussing her

⁵⁶ *The Eternal Soldadera*, 4.

⁵⁷ *The Eternal Soldadera*, 5.

⁵⁸ *The Eternal Soldadera*, 5.

many achievements throughout her career, Huerta discusses the UFW in detail. When asked how her relationship was with Cesar Chavez and whether or not they clashed a lot, Huerta uses the New York grape boycott to explain the differences between them. Huerta notes that their tactics for how to approach the boycott varied greatly. While Huerta started by focusing in on the independent stores and slowly working her way to the big chains, Cesar chose the opposite approach in California and started with the big chain supermarkets like Safeway. Huerta successfully removed unwanted grapes from all New York supermarkets while California was struggling—ultimately needing the help of Huerta to help solidify the boycott. Huerta shares with Hinojosa:

And you know what I call that Maria? It's the difference between how a women thinks and the way a man thinks, right?"

Hinojosa responds hesitantly: "Because?..."

Huerta: "Well because it's the macho thing to want to take on the biggest thing and get them down and it's sort of the domino theory right? And instead we did it the other way, we started with the smallest stores and worked our way up. And so a lot of differences in the tactics that Cesar and I had were kind of on those same lines."⁵⁹

Thus, Huerta continues to use differences between male and female ego to explain the benefits of female leadership. Huerta attributes women as having an organized and less ego-centric approach, while assuming the male approach is the opposite. Cherly De la Rey's article "Gender, Women and Leadership," reflects on the research that has been conducted over the years to learn more about gender and potential leadership style. De la Rey discusses how these differences between men and women are based on cultural behavior rather than biological differences. Her work has led her to argue that cultural sites such as the workplace are important environments in

⁵⁹ "Legendary Activist Dolores Huerta, Maria Hinojosa: One-on-One." WGB, (N.p. n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2016).

which certain norms are created. De La Rey argues that in certain environments certain cultures become hegemonic and other cultures are subordinate and positioned as ‘other’⁶⁰. When looking at different environments De la Rey has been able to see that certain places work on “hegemonic masculinities, while women’s interests are “marginalized, particularized or ignored.”⁶¹ Thus, while Huerta focuses part of her attention on the strengths of women that are traditionally “feminine” qualities, her view that women can fill in where men fail is based on her assumptions of the way men and women interact. Thus, while Huerta in current day is remembered for her strength, charisma, and unyielding passion for justice, her view of women’s leadership today is a product of her own experiences and evolution.

Huerta’s perception of female leadership has changed throughout her life. From seeing women leadership as a helping hand, to empowering women to claim their work, Huerta’s view of what female leadership meant in the UFW has changed throughout the years. However, her personal development of her views on female leadership remains in part a reflection of her experiences throughout the decades. Her awareness and ability to navigate through gender stereotypes she became familiar with since childhood, allowed her to be able to deal with sexism in her early career. After the height of the UFW, Huerta was able to look back and reflect on the flaws of women’s treatment during the 1960s and 1970s. While Huerta believes women should claim their work, her description of women’s strengths demonstrates a gendered view of leadership that can be seen to this day.

⁶⁰ Cheryl De la Rey, “Gender Women and Leadership:” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*” No. 65, *Women and Leadership*, (2005). pp 4-11.

⁶¹ De la Rey, “Gender Women and Leadership”, 8.

Chapter Three

“Born-Again Feminist”: The Evolution of Huerta's Feminism”

The late 1960s and 1970s were critical years for the UFW as well as other civil rights movements such as the feminist movement. With the UFW receiving national coverage over the table grape boycott, many were looking at the huge influence they had gained in forcing big corporations to negotiate farm workers' contracts. The height of the success of the union's activism came with the passage of the 1975 California Agricultural Labor Relations Act. Signed by governor Jerry Brown, this important piece of legislation gave farm workers the right to unionize and boycott employers.⁶² While the UFW was gaining great victories in their cause to improve life and working conditions for minority farm workers, a fight was happening simultaneously for women's rights. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s worked to liberate women from gender limitations that had been imposed on them both in the public and private spheres. The movement largely became focused on dismantling workplace inequality, such as denial of access to better jobs and salary inequality through discrimination laws.⁶³ While both causes were distinct in their focus, the overlap between women's rights and their place in the UFW became an increasingly important topic as the UFW began expanding nationally. While Huerta is commonly described as a feminist figure who was groundbreaking for her time, the new literature on women in labor movements such as Margret Rose's 1995 article, "*Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes:*" *Chicana Organizers and Middle-Class Female Supporters in the Farm Workers' Grape Boycott in Philadelphia, 1969-1970*, reveals important overlaps and absent women in history who made vital contributions to both women and labor efforts. Rose

⁶² "UFW: The Official Web Page of the United Farm Workers of America." *UFW: The Official Web Page of the United Farm Workers of America*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2016.

⁶³ "UFW: The Official Web Page of the United Farm Workers of America."

gives a voice to many Latina women who played critical roles in the movement while having to deal with sex discrimination and organizational limitations determined by their male peers.

Huerta, is an example of such women who helped integrate women and their families into the UFW in the 1970s. By establishing a family's role as critical for the movement as well as underscoring the importance of women's influence in insuring group moral, Huerta's insistence on the importance of their role greatly helped them secure a place in the union. However, many of Huerta's prizes and media recognition of her feminist work came after the late 1980s—years after the peak of the UFW. Being inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993, receiving the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for Human Rights, and dedicating most of her "About" section of the Dolores Huerta Foundation—founded in 2002—to women's rights, follows years after her critical time with the UFW. As a self-described "Born-again feminist" in 2012, much of the extent of Huerta's feminist work is a reflection of the time.⁶⁴ While much of Huerta's support for women in the UFW has been for the strength it would bring the union, throughout the years Huerta's openness and stance on women's issues has evolved. From emphasizing the UFW as her priority, to not fully discussing sex discrimination that existed, to the prioritization of feminism in the 1990s and on, Huerta's feminist position has been one of evolution, change, and most significantly one that has continued to evolve after the critical years of the UFW in the early 1970s.

Women in the UFW

Huerta's most vocal support for women during the late 1960s and early 1970s was urging women to support the union as a family unit in order to make the UFW a bigger nationwide

⁶⁴ "Still and Activist at 82, Dolores Huerta Calls Herself 'a Born-Again Feminist.'" *PBS* (PBS, n.d. Web. 03), Mar 2016.

presence. As part of the UFW's economic strategy with the famous grape boycotts, the union recruited male and female strikers from rural agricultural communities to live and organize boycotts in cities across the United States. Union leaders quickly recognized that families were a crucial part of the UFW as Huerta declared, "Families are the most important part of the UFW... because a family can stick it out in a strange place, on \$5 a week per person..."⁶⁵ Similarly Cesar Chavez underscored, "We have not had one case of split families that has succeed [sic]. Ultimately the pressure gets too great and the husband returns to Delano."⁶⁶ In the early years, Anglo volunteers led the boycott operations whereas farm worker participation was minimal. When the need for farm workers support became a focus, the boycott strategy was refined and women were increasingly recognized as crucial actors in their decision to relocate their families to the cities where their husbands were needed. The departure of husbands created hardships that left them with the primary responsibility of supporting families, raising children, and running households with meager strike benefits. Similarly, married men workers who were separated from their families soon became homesick in unfamiliar settings and quickly returned home as one-woman notes, "He [her husband Manuel] was on the boycott for about two months and then he came back because I didn't go."⁶⁷ Thus, women's willingness to relocate and support their families away from their native homes allowed the UFW to have the support of actual workers in multiple cities across the nation—strengthening and widening their cause.

Huerta helped make women's lives easier by helping create an environment that recognized their vital role to the UFW. Women and families soon became synonymous with the

⁶⁵ Folder "Huerta, Dolores," Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Detroit, MI.

⁶⁶Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 272..

⁶⁷ Huerta, Dolores. A Life of Sacrifice for Farm Workers, 1970-1995, July 1990, Box 16, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Detroit, MI.

movement itself by becoming key components to their boycotting strategy. Women became key parts in helping make the boycotts not only nonviolent, but also about morality. One example of the incorporation of women and families can be seen in the form of protesting as UFW members would stand outside bus stops, shopping centers, and big chain stores such as Krogers and implore consumers, “Please do not shop at Kroger until the Valdez family and 3 million farm worker families secure justice!”⁶⁸ While the strategic approach of using women and their families to appeal to the morality of consumers and growers came from realizing the importance of family, it also came out of the need for more staff. The importance of women’s efforts in the union were expressed in an increase of articles written about women in the UFW’s publication *El Malcriado*. One example of such article—which Huerta was featured in—had the headline, “A Woman’s Place Is... On the Picket Line!,” which featured the contributions of four women field workers to the cause.⁶⁹ Thus, by the 1970s, the union leadership and the boycott staff had more experience in preparing for, accommodating, and utilizing farm worker families to help increase the effect of the boycott.⁷⁰ In 1973, when the UFW had intensified its lettuce campaign, renewed its boycott against table grapes, and initiated its drive against Gallo wines, the family pattern of boycott participation was being fully utilized. While some single Chicano and Mexican men and women participated in the boycotts as individuals, married men were discouraged from doing so unless accompanied by their wives and children. As Huerta noted in 1973, “This time no married man went out on the boycott unless he took his wife”.⁷¹ Thus, women’s role in the movement both large and small was becoming a crucial component to the union. Huerta’s role in helping

⁶⁸ Kathleen M. Bee, *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 276.

⁶⁹ Kathleen M. Bee, *No Middle Ground*, 277.

⁷⁰ Kathleen M. Bee, *No Middle Ground*, 276.

⁷¹ Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 277.

create an acknowledgment and push for such women to make their mark helped redefine what boycotting meant for the UFW.

While Huerta was helping create a discussion and push for the importance of women and family in the movement, this push was limited in part by the demanding time the early 1970s turned out to be for the UFW. For example, in 1971 Huerta had to help deal with the resignation of Larry Itliong who had joined forces with the National Farm Workers Association in 1965. Itliong had served as the leader of the original 1965 AWOC strike in Delano and was one of the most experienced and radical labor organizers. Itliong conceded the leadership of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee to Chavez because the majority of farm workers were Mexican.⁷² Simultaneously, Huerta also had to deal with the conflict that developed with the enforcement of contracts for companies as well as workers as Huerta notes, “We had to enforce the contracts not only with the companies, but also with the workers because they didn’t know too much about contracts either.”⁷³ These efforts included tutorials on the requirements of the contracts and translation of documents into Spanish, etc. Thus, Huerta’s work with the UFW in the critical years of the early 1970s took much of her time as Vice President. While Huerta did support and encourage the involvement of women in the UFW, much of the help and support of women has been for the benefits this support would bring to the UFW as a whole. Huerta knew women had a crucial voice and influence in the family structure, and helping make women’s lives easier was particularly beneficial for the UFW. While Huerta helped push for the acknowledgement of women in the UFW, in the early 1970s she did not actively push for women’s involvement in other realms or professions. While in later years she would go on to discuss women’s potential as leaders as a whole, during the crucial years of the grape boycott her

⁷² Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 120.

⁷³ Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 122.

support and encouragement for women's involvement was defined by efforts that would strengthen the UFW.

The Missing Story

While Huerta focused much of her efforts in the 1970s to the UFW's advancement, women in the union were making their own feminist mark and taking charge. Margret Rose's 1995 article, "*Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes*," looks into the huge contributions women made to the UFW during the crucial years of the grape boycott. While scholarship on Chicanas has begun to create a more complex historical portrayal of them as social activists and critical union members, Rose argues that the achievements of women UFW organizers are rarely discussed in historical writing on the UFW. While Chicanas and Mexican women made critical contributions to the boycotts, the sexual division of labor gave more prominence to their husbands' leadership and methods of community organizing.⁷⁴ Thus, Chicana's dedication to the boycott remained obscured because they simultaneously dealt with domestic concerns, child rearing with picket line duty, participation in demonstrations, and work in the local boycott offices. However, in some instances Chicanas became independent boycott directors as a result of the shortage of union volunteers, "Confronted with a chronic shortage of able staff willing to work for expenses and \$5.00 per week, the union had little choice but to offer talented women the unusual opportunity to assume leadership positions in the national boycott structure."⁷⁵ The lack of a trained professional staff and limited resources helped some Chicana women take advantage of the opportunity to step in. Rose discusses the important impact of some of these

⁷⁴ Margaret Rose, "Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes": Chicana Organizers and Middle-Class Female Supporters in the Farm Workers' Grapy Boycott in Philadelphia, 1969-1970. *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 7, Number 4 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 274.

⁷⁵ Margret Rose, "Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes," 275.

unrecognized Chicana leaders such as Hope Lopez. As the head of the Philadelphia office—the fourth largest distribution center for table grapes in the United States—Hope was well qualified for the role. Born in California in the late 1920s, Lopez worked in the field with her family. Unlike most Chicanas of her generation, however, she graduated from high school and attended the State University of Fresno. Later in 1965 she worked in a poverty program in Fresno County developing self-help projects, teaching English, and engaging in community organizing.⁷⁶

Hope Lopez is just one example of Chicana leaders who worked closely with white-middle class feminists to help the UFW's cause. While many of the newly emerging women's groups were not drawn to a shared domestic culture of the Mexican American community, they were in fact motivated by their demand for social justice. Lopez strategically used the common links between women as well as the demands for a new gender consciousness to help influence her public statements—for example “woman power.”⁷⁷ This balance of interests between the union's needs as well as women's needs helped Lopez create an environment where influential relationships were fostered with members of the feminist movement. Since the UFW worked heavily on donations and volunteer work, many feminists such as Jean Hunt became critical parts to establishing a presence in Philadelphia. The Chicana activists received assistance from middle-class white women in Philadelphia who had volunteered their services soon after the boycott headquarters opened. These women would host meetings at their homes and provide numerous donations. Lopez comments on the huge help Hunt provided by furnishing the home and providing food for the staff as Lopez describes, “I have found her a valuable asset to this cause.”⁷⁸ Similarly, while Lopez was busy organizing boycotts against supermarket chains in the

⁷⁶ Margret Rose, “Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes,” 275.

⁷⁷ Margret Rose, “Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes,” 284.

⁷⁸ Margret Rose, “Woman Power Will Stop Those Grapes,” 278.

area, feminist volunteers such as Hunt helped continue to run the office and handle correspondences.

Aside from administrative assistance, many feminist supporters helped push the farm workers cause. Lopez expressed gratitude to editors who allowed her to publish pieces on the boycott both in English and Spanish. Similarly, Lopez's use of common themes of marriage pregnancy, childhood, and domestic concerns helped link middle class women with impoverished working-class Chicanas. This connection between two seemingly different cultures proved to be a crucial tactic in generating a commitment to support the farm worker cause. Women wrote letters to newspapers, circulated boycott petitions, and asked their communities to not purchase grapes.⁷⁹ Together with the Chicano community and the middle-class white women supporters, the boycott of table grapes became even stronger.

Rose's article reveals the way in which female contributions to the union have been ignored and undermined. Lopez reveals the way in which feminism—across cultures and socioeconomic status—helped create a crucial support system for the UFW. Similarly Latina organizers like Lopez were able to foster relationships with women from the feminist movement that spoke to their grievances and ideas as women. While primarily involved in the UFW, these women were able to make connections with a broader world of feminism that helped offer them support in the gender struggles. While Huerta supported women's rights and the importance of them being in the UFW, her focus on the farm workers as a whole instead of the different ways to incorporate other feminist leaders—as Lopez and other UFW women did—reflects on Huerta's primary focus of farm workers and not necessarily women's rights. By having support for women so closely related to the UFW, Huerta did not fully use her platform as a national

⁷⁹ Margret Rose, "From the Fields to the Picket Line," 279.

labor activist to help bring more of a feminist perspective to the union during its most publicized years in the 1970s. Thus, while Huerta did create significant support for women that fostered an environment where women felt encouraged to establish themselves and their families, her support did not look beyond the UFW as other women like Lopez did. Thus, unlike some women in the union who took into greater account gender issues and the feminist movement, Huerta's primary focus remained on the UFW.

The Evolution

While Huerta's primary focus in her early career was directed toward the development of the UFW, after the crucial years of the early 1970s Huerta begins to open up and discuss women in a more complex manner. In a 1974 article with *The Nation* Huerta acknowledges some of the tensions and issues that existed in the union due to sex discrimination,

I really believe what the feminists stand for. There is an undercurrent of discrimination against women in our own organization, even though Cesar goes out of his way to see that women have leadership positions... But in the beginning, at the first meetings, there were only men. And certain discrimination still exists. Cesar—and other men—treat us differently.⁸⁰

Thus, Huerta presents the challenges that a masculine environment produced. Similarly, in 1998 Huerta provides insight into her own difficulties of being a woman in the union, "For a long time I was the only woman on the executive board ... And the men would come out and say their stupid little jokes about women. So I started keeping a record. At the end of the meeting, I'd say, 'During the course of this meeting you men have made 58 sexist remarks. Pretty soon I got them

⁸⁰ Barbra L. Baer and Glenna Matthews, "The Women of the Boycott," (*The Nation*, February 1974).

down to 25, then ten, and then five.”⁸¹ Similarly, Huerta’s feature in *Ms. Magazine* as Woman of the Year in 1998 demonstrates the way Huerta’s legacy as a feminist has evolved over the decades. The article begins by describing an adoring crowd at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Chicana/Latina Foundation, a San Francisco-based leadership organization, “As Huerta segues from topic to topic—from promoting women’s studies to preventing domestic violence to preserving affirmative action—the women feed off her enthusiasm.”⁸² The article discusses her legacy of co-founding the UFW with Cesar Chavez and the ways in which she contributed to the union through financial and domestic sacrifices, negotiations, political savvy, and overall dedication to the cause. The last section of the article reflects on why Huerta was never given “her proper due” as a result of “pure and simple sexism”⁸³. After describing the sexist comments and tensions between genders, Huerta goes on to describe her view of those issues at the time as the article notes that Huerta acknowledges that when the union first started, she wasn’t really thinking about the rights of women. Huerta shares, “In the sixties and seventies, many of us were working hard to get justice for *la raza*, not for women. We should have been doing more for women at the same time. We’ve had to do a lot of catching up.”⁸⁴ The article closes by discussing what Huerta has been doing to “[make] up for lost time.”⁸⁵ Discussing her work of making sexual harassment a centerpiece of the strawberry worker’s campaign, her fight against state and federal legislation taking away women’s rights such as the Welfare Reform Act to California’s anti-affirmative action Proposition 209, and pushing women into leadership

⁸¹ Baer and Matthews, “The Women of the Boycott.”

⁸² Julie Felner, “Dolores Huerta: For a lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers” (*Latino Leaders*, February 1998).

⁸³ Felner, Dolores Huerta: For a lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers.”

⁸⁴ Felner, Dolores Huerta: For a lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers

⁸⁵ Felner, Dolores Huerta: For a lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers

positions inside and *outside* the union.⁸⁶ Thus, *Ms. Magazine*'s article reveals the ways in which Huerta acknowledges the lack of importance women's issues were given in the 1970s and how she has worked decades since to make women's issues a priority.

Similarly, in a 2000 edition of *Latino Leaders*, Huerta discusses her legacy and what it was like to dedicate her life to activism. While discussing the excitement of working in Washington and helping pass important legislation that gave Mexican Americans and other immigrant minorities medical assistance, insurance, and social security, she knew she wanted to go back home and support her roots. Huerta underscores her main focus of the period as she states, "The farm workers were always my first concern ... Our main goal was to give the farm workers a voice, to allow them to demand their rights."⁸⁷ In recent years, she has focused much of her attention on helping women, whom she sees as the last minority,

Latino women are often the last ones to stand up and raise their voices... They are used to being treated as inferior to men and it is hard for them to start being assertive. If we are ever going to have justice in the world, we have to start by balancing the relationship between men and women in our society.⁸⁸

Huerta acknowledges the transition of her focus throughout her years in the UFW. While Huerta's focus has been on women's issues in the last decade, her discussion of her early career acknowledges a lack of dedication to women's rights in her early activism.

Huerta's discussion of her previous years in the UFW reflects the absence of a strong feminist voice from herself in the early 1970s. While there were women who were making room

⁸⁶ Felner, Dolores Huerta: For a lifetime of Labor Championing the Rights of Farmworkers

⁸⁷ Huerta, Dolores, Box 4, Folder, 14, Dolores Huerta Papers, The Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

⁸⁸ Huerta, Dolores, Box, 4, Folder 14.

for their views as Rose discusses, Huerta's priorities remained on the advancement of the UFW. While the 1980s saw the shrinking of UFW membership as well as its national spotlight, Huerta's demanding years were mostly over. The new chapter of Huerta's life post the peak of the UFW provided room for reflection and new pursuits. Without the pressure of the UFW, Huerta was able to prioritize women's rights significantly more both inside and outside the union.

A "Born-Again Feminist"

In a 2012 interview with Ray Suarez on PBS, Huerta reflects on being part of a historic team with Cesar Chavez. After discussing her place in history and being ok with not becoming the face of the movement as Cesar Chavez did Huerta adds,

I also have to say, though, that now, as a born-again feminist, I could call myself, that I realize that at some point many of us in the civil rights movement were out there fighting for our people but we were not fighting for our women. And, so, at some point, I said, look, we have got to get more women to be involved, more women on our executive board, more women on our ranch committees⁸⁹

While in 2012 Huerta saw sees herself as a feminist and acknowledged the lack of effort for women's rights in the movement, her self description as a "born-again feminist" reflects perfectly her evolution. While Huerta did support women's working and volunteering for the union in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the extent to which women's advancement and needs were considered were limited and guided mainly for the benefit of the UFW. While Huerta made some efforts to encourage women to join the UFW and stand up for themselves, her voice in the early 1970s provides little insight into her commitment to the feminist movement that will

⁸⁹ Still and Activist at 82, Dolores Huerta Calls Herself 'a Born-Again Feminist.' *PBS*. PBS, n.d. Web. 03 Mar 2016.

become more significant years later. While Huerta has consistently spoken up for women's potential, it was only after the UFW's peak years that she was able to fully express her complex past with the movement and speak for women's rights both in and outside of the union and become the feminist we think of her as today.

Conclusion

Dolores Huerta is truly a legendary activist. From her groundbreaking work in the United Farm Workers to founding her own foundation that helps empower women and youth, her passion and dedication to helping communities in need is unyielding. Her numerous accomplishments, prestigious awards, and admiring fans, are reminders of her impressive career. While her reputation and list of awards say a lot about her, they do not provide insight into the story behind the legendary labor activist we know today.

In order to fully appreciate Huerta's legacy, it is vital to look at the path that brought her to the place we recognize her in today. The various chapters in her life reflect the development of an individual who was influenced each step of the way by her surroundings. By looking at how her outlook on women's leadership and feminism have changed from the 1970s-2000, it is possible to see and appreciate the process and not just the outcome. Her achievements, regrets, and reflections, throughout the years reflect her growth. Being remembered and discussed for simply being one of the first women of color to take on such drastic leadership in UFW or being awarded the Medal of Freedom and numerous other honors, do not tell the complex story of Huerta's life. As one of the most famous Mexican-American activists, her path throughout her lifetime needs to be further discussed. I hope my work sheds a new light on the evolution of Dolores Huerta as an organizer and a feminist, and on the ways a time period and influential actors can greatly shape an individual's views.

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