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<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i08/08a01001.htm>**A Lone Woman Takes on Columbia****The university may be overmatched in its dispute with a highly regarded economics professor who says she's been treated badly**

By PIPER FOGG

New York City

Graciela Chichilnisky strides through a seafood restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and immediately tells the waiter to change her table. This one, in the back, will not do. She points to the best table in the house. And she needs extra chairs. And the fish, can she have it cooked with a pepper crust, instead of the way it's described on the menu?

Her tone is commanding, her accent clearly Latin American. She drops a slim leather briefcase on the floor. She is chic, dressed all in black under a nubby jacket pinned with a gold brooch. Her cheekbones are high and her lips full. At age 57, she hardly looks the part of a bookish academic.

Ms. Chichilnisky will be the first to tell you that she has two Ph.D.'s, 13 books to her credit, and is a professor of economics and statistics at Columbia University. "In fact, I am a very well-known mathematician," she says. "I publish in top journals."

She is perhaps best known as the first person to propose the idea of the global trading of environmental credits, which became part of the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 treaty to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

The professor is considered brilliant but difficult. She skipped college, nevertheless earned tenure at Columbia in only two years, and has a list of nearly 200 publications. Her list of enemies is long, too. "If this was kindergarten you'd say, 'She doesn't play well with others,'" says a professor who has worked with her at Columbia. "Einstein didn't play well with others. She's a chili pepper."

Some colleagues are less polite. They call her a manipulative prima donna who will go to extreme lengths to get what she wants, whether it's the best table at a restaurant or the best office space on the campus.

What is undisputed is that when she believes that someone has taken advantage of her, she sues, or threatens to. In 1991, Ms. Chichilnisky sued Columbia, arguing that she was being paid 30 percent less than the men in her department. Though the university did not admit discrimination, she won a hefty settlement out of court, including promises of an endowed chair, a large suite of offices, and a lump-sum payment of half a million dollars.

But Columbia, she says, went back on its agreement, froze her research accounts, and attempted to evict her from her offices -- destroying crucial research files in the process. "They feel justified to do all sorts of things to me because I sued the university," she says.

Now Ms. Chichilnisky is suing again, charging that the university retaliated against her. She is asking for a million dollars.

A statement issued by the university says her claims of discrimination and retaliation are "completely without merit." It insists, in fact, that it is the victim. In a countersuit, the university accuses the professor of shirking her academic duties and lying to university officials.

This fight is not about money, Ms. Chichilnisky says, but about how women should be treated in academe. "The higher you get, the more prominent you get, the worse the hostility," she says.

The American Association of University Women, an organization that advocates for equity in education, agrees and is backing her case. "She is an internationally renowned economist who has really hit a glass ceiling and exemplifies what many in academe face," says Amy Houghton, director of the association's Legal Advocacy Fund, which supports fewer than 20 percent of the cases presented to it. "The fact that this has continued for 10 years is appalling."

The stakes are high for both sides. Losing could cost Columbia a bundle, damage its reputation, and make attracting female professors more difficult.

Some of Ms. Chichilnisky's supporters call the case a classic example of an institution's unwillingness to put up with a talented but troublesome woman in the same way it would a man. A university lawyer says that Columbia does not discriminate, and that the countersuit is not about the professor's personality or ability to work with others. Some professors feel that Ms. Chichilnisky is playing the gender card unfairly and brings on many of her own problems.

Unwelcome Atmosphere

Graciela Chichilnisky was born in Buenos Aires into a family of Russian Jewish émigrés. She had a son while she was in high school but was determined to continue her studies. In 1968, after a military coup shut down the University of Buenos Aires, she moved to the United States. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she was accepted by the graduate program in mathematics after just one year of prerequisites. She later transferred to the University of California at Berkeley, where she earned a Ph.D. in mathematics in 1971 and another in economics in 1976.

"I always wanted two Ph.D.'s," she says. Besides, she adds, "I had a feeling women were skirting the mathematics issue." And she liked the idea of using mathematics to create her own economic models rather than adopting someone else's.

She made her first notable contribution to economics in 1976, when she produced the "basic needs" model of economic development. It gauges a society's progress by measuring the fulfillment of such needs as access to clean water and health care. "This concept became revolutionary," she says. It was also controversial, since it shifted the emphasis of economic growth away from gross domestic product, a traditional measure of development. Because of her research, the United Nations hired her as an adviser on a series of research projects.

David Cass, a professor of economics at the University of Pennsylvania, who once wrote an article with Ms. Chichilnisky, says her work is a "mixed bag" and adds, "She's one of the few people in the profession who has very good ideas -- mixed with a lot of ideas that are off-the-wall."

When Ms. Chichilnisky joined Columbia's economics department, in 1977, the conservative, male-dominated faculty was confronted by a feisty, worldly 31-year-old woman who was not afraid to

challenge authority. She rose quickly, earning tenure and promotion to full professor in 1979.

By then she had also developed a reputation for being intractable.

"She was known for monumental fights with her colleagues," says Hervé Moulin, an economics professor at Rice University, who first met Ms. Chichilnisky in the '70s. He says he had a good relationship at first with her and her partner at the time, Geoffrey Heal, who is now a business professor at Columbia. But when Mr. Moulin asked the two to make changes in a journal article they had submitted, they refused, he says, adding that "they took a very aggressive and combative tone." Mr. Moulin refused to publish the article.

Mr. Heal did not respond to telephone messages seeking comment. Ms. Chichilnisky says that Mr. Moulin is a good economist but that "he should be aware that leading economists and their pathbreaking ideas have led to a lot of academic debate."

Myrna Wooders, a professor of economics at the University of Warwick, in Britain, and Frank H. Page Jr., a finance professor at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, also clashed with Ms. Chichilnisky over a matter of publication. In June 1994, when they presented a paper at a meeting in Quebec, "she stood up and said, 'You stole my ideas,'" says Mr. Page. "It was shocking."

Later Ms. Wooders was about to present the same paper at another conference. Ms. Chichilnisky had them served with legal papers on the spot. "She accused me of stealing research, when in fact I had been working on arbitrage, the particular topic, for 10 or 11 years," says Mr. Page.

Mr. Page and Ms. Wooders countersued Ms. Chichilnisky for defamation of character, but dropped the action when she dropped hers, they say. Ms. Chichilnisky says she reached a satisfactory settlement with the two scholars. Mr. Page says he still can't understand her motivation. "She's an intelligent person," he says. "Why not just work hard and get there that way?"

Many colleagues do not want to discuss Ms. Chichilnisky, saying she is notorious for being litigious. "There has been so much damage," says Christine Alfsen-Norodom, an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia. "I don't want to be sued."

"People who are concerned about lawsuits must have something in their conscience that makes them feel vulnerable," says Ms. Chichilnisky, on a blustery September afternoon in her research office in the Interchurch Center, a towering, modern building, one block from Columbia's campus, that also houses a number of religious organizations.

Over all, she has found the atmosphere at Columbia unwelcoming -- because she is a woman, she says: "The gossip and hostility by some of my colleagues started immediately." She wasn't helped by the fact that few of her colleagues understood her specialized research, says one former professor in the economics department.

As her work in international economics became more established, she says, professors in her own department published articles contradicting her work, told students not to take her classes, and even tried to interfere with her grants. "They didn't want me to have courses that were very popular," she says. "They were scared I would teach my own theories."

The animosity increased, she says, after she started a lucrative financial-services company in the mid-1980s with a group of friends, including Mr. Heal, who is the father of her teenage daughter. The company, which offered support for international trading in securities, was sold in 1989 to Japanese

investors for millions of dollars, helping to finance a lifestyle that includes a townhouse on Riverside Drive and a second home in the Hudson Valley.

A Suit and a Settlement

At about the same time, Ms. Chichilnisky says, she discovered that Columbia was paying her 30 percent less than her male colleagues with similar credentials. In 1991, after failed attempts to resolve the dispute internally, she filed a gender-discrimination suit against the university. The university settled in 1995.

The settlement terms were generous. The university increased her salary to \$107,000 from \$62,975; gave her a one-time payment of \$500,000; agreed to accept and partially finance, at \$50,000 a year, an endowed chair in mathematics and economics created for her by Unesco; and agreed to continue supporting the Program for Information and Resources, a research organization she directs. The university provided her with office space for the program and an appointment to the statistics department. In return, she dropped the lawsuit, which had not gone to trial.

Ms. Chichilnisky considered herself vindicated. "I felt they wanted to turn over a new leaf," she says. She moved into an enviable suite of offices in a choice location, Columbia's landmark Low Memorial Library, a granite-domed building that also houses the central administration. She dove into her work at the research group, recruiting economists and mathematicians to study the relationship between environmental changes and economic trends. "I felt I was finally going to reach a positive working relationship with Columbia," she says.

Those feelings were short-lived. Not long after the settlement, new conflicts arose, eventually leading her back to court. She says she learned that Columbia's Board of Trustees had voted to limit the financing for her Unesco chair to five years, despite the settlement's having established permanent support. Then, she says, after just two years, the university stopped making the \$50,000 payments, without explanation.

A lawyer for Columbia says that the university was supposed to provide only matching funds, and that when the United Nations agency stopped supporting the chair because of a lack of money in 2001, Columbia was no longer obliged to continue its support.

Ms. Chichilnisky was further aggrieved in the fall of 1996, when the university created the Earth Institute, a center that not only would focus on much of the same work as her own, but also would take over administering her research program. The institute was just the type of comprehensive research center that she had envisioned for the Program for Information and Resources. Suddenly she found herself answering to Peter Eisenberger, a physicist hired from Princeton University to lead the institute.

Despite some initial tension, Mr. Eisenberger soon became her ally. "I started to hear negative comments about her that seemed to stem from the previous lawsuit," he says. He says that he felt pressure from top administrators to push her out, but that doing so would have been unfair.

"Labeling someone as difficult is a way of isolating people," he says. No one would complain when a talented male professor behaved egregiously or spoke passionately at a meeting, he argues, but "if Graciela did it, they would openly confront her and back-channel complain that she was being destructive."

Mr. Eisenberger is on the Board of Directors of Cross Border Exchange -- a company Ms. Chichilnisky helped found in 1999 to facilitate global trading in securities -- and in 1999 he bought property in

California with her, according to real-estate records.

Charity Hirsch, a longtime friend of Ms. Chichilnisky who is starting a group of economists and scholars to lend support to her case, has a theory about some of the professor's problems. "Graciela, having been raised in Latin America, has a very feminine quality that people react to, so I think it's hard for people to take her seriously," says Ms. Hirsch, a member of We Advocate Gender Equity, an activist group in the University of California system. "It's a 'Latin bombshell' veneer. I think a lot of men, especially academic men, ... see her and react to that rather than reacting to her intellect."

Tensions worsened after Mr. Eisenberger resigned from the Earth Institute -- some say he was forced out -- in 1999. That's when Michael M. Crow, at the time Columbia's vice provost, became the center's interim director. He and Ms. Chichilnisky, says one professor who did not want to be named, "were worse than oil and water. They were like a spark and gunpowder."

Mr. Crow "used every means within his power to try to remove her from her offices; shut down her centers of research," says the scholar, but "he was up against someone who hates any borders or attempts to constrain her."

Mr. Crow, who left Columbia last summer to become president of Arizona State University at Tempe, declined to be interviewed. Jeffrey D. Sachs, current head of the Earth Institute, did not return messages seeking comment.

Ms. Chichilnisky says she told Mr. Crow that she wanted to remove her research program from under the mantle of the Earth Institute. "He blew up," she says. "Any pretense of civility disappeared." That's when Mr. Crow and his subordinates froze her major research accounts, she says, "We could not even buy a pencil." The university denies that it ever froze her grants.

For Ms. Chichilnisky, the last straw came on February 28, 2000, when she walked into one of her program's offices and found desks emptied and computers disconnected and stacked on the floor -- including those containing important research files. "The cables were severed," she says. "They looked like spaghetti." She took out a camera and started snapping photographs. She had retained a lawyer that month, after university officials had told her that they planned to move the program's seven offices into her one academic office, she says.

Among the files Ms. Chichilnisky lost that day, she says, was a model of the world economy that she had been working on for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in Paris. "I was left totally unable to complete the job," she says. "It was the most incredible form of sabotage."

On March 1, 2000, she filed a complaint against the university in a state court. She showed the photographs to a judge, who in a temporary injunction ordered Columbia to stop dismantling her program's offices.

In the complaint, she alleged that the university had breached its 1995 settlement by refusing to allow her and her research group to remain in their offices in Low Library or to provide equivalent space, by stopping the \$50,000 annual payments, and by discontinuing financial support for the research program. She accuses Columbia of retaliating against her for filing her original discrimination complaint and of continuing to pay her less than men of equal rank and experience.

"They created a lynching atmosphere where it was OK to fleece my accounts, to destroy my models, ... not to pay me," she says. "They somehow felt there was no restraint in this case, ... that everything goes."

Secret CEO?

Top administrators at Columbia declined to be interviewed for this article. Some referred questions to a university lawyer. But in its legal response, the university tells a different story. In a counterclaim, filed in February 2003, it accuses Ms. Chichilnisky of moonlighting and of not fulfilling her duties. She violated university policy by serving as chairman and chief executive of Cross Border Exchange, according to the counterclaim.

In court documents filed last month, Columbia alleges that she continued to serve secretly as the company's CEO after telling university officials, who had expressed concern about her outside business ventures, that she had resigned from the job in October 2001. She worked, on average, more than one day a week for the company, in violation of the university's conflict-of-commitment policy, according to the documents.

Columbia also says she lied in obtaining leaves of absence in six out of eight semesters from 1999 to 2003, "ostensibly for research, disability, and family needs."

"It now appears that these leaves were taken on false pretenses, and the real reason [Ms. Chichilnisky] took time off was to devote her full-time efforts to her position at Cross Border," the university's counterclaim says, adding that the professor's annual salary as CEO was \$290,000.

Ms. Chichilnisky says that the university's charges are "frivolous" and "in my opinion, constitute harassment." She insists that she has been no more than a consultant to Cross Border since November 1, 2001, and is currently "non-executive chairman," which she says is permissible under university policy.

Professors at many universities engage in outside consulting, and universities encourage the practice. But Columbia's policies also state that any outside work should not interfere with a professor's university work.

Patricia Sachs Catapano, a lawyer for Columbia, agreed to discuss some of the allegations in Ms. Chichilnisky's recent complaint. Never once, she says, did Columbia freeze the professor's grants: "What she calls her grants are grants to Columbia to cover programmatic activities," Ms. Catapano says. "They weren't funded for year three because she was on medical leave."

The university had granted Ms. Chichilnisky paid medical leave for the fall of 2000, and unpaid medical leave for both the spring and fall of 2001, for an advanced case of Lyme disease. She also took an approved unpaid leave in the fall of 2002 to care for her daughter, who was seriously ill.

In the summer of 2000, Ms. Chichilnisky showed Columbia officials a doctor's note that said she was being treated for "chronic Lyme disease, which has incapacitated her from performing her usual personal and professional work activities." The professor maintains that the university should have released her grant money, since the disease never prevented her from doing research, which required little physical exertion. But Columbia argues that "while on paid disability leave and purportedly incapacitated, [she] entered into an agreement to serve as full-time CEO of Cross Border."

As for the dispute about the offices in Low Library, Ms. Catapano says Ms. Chichilnisky had an academic office in addition to the research-program director's office there. Columbia had other needs for the space, and "we asked her to move to one from the other," the lawyer says. The research group itself "was not asked to move."

When asked whether Columbia had damaged the program's computers or the professor's files, Ms. Catapano says: "There is no answer to that. I know she claims that. I have never been able to discover exactly what happened." What about the photographs that led to the temporary injunction? "I have seen pictures of an office," says Ms. Catapano. "She claimed they were pictures of some space in 405 Low Library."

Columbia has since provided Ms. Chichilnisky and her research program with the offices one block from the campus, which Ms. Chichilnisky says she finds adequate.

From Negative to Positive

Ms. Chichilnisky is spending a lot of her time reviewing court documents, gathering evidence, and organizing meetings with scholars to win their support. She would rather be working on her research and enjoying life with her daughter, she says.

"I cannot imagine anyone liking a lawsuit," she says, but in the same breath adds, "If you don't stand up and ask for justice, ... you are not treating yourself with respect." She even suggests that her lawsuit could accomplish for women what the University of Michigan affirmative-action case accomplished for diversity in admissions.

Ms. Alfsen-Norodom, the adjunct scholar at Columbia disagrees, saying that the case "doesn't resonate with women." Another female faculty member, who asked not to be named, said Ms. Chichilnisky "couldn't care less about the women at Columbia. ... She's never done anything to help them."

But Ms. Houghton, of the AAUW, says that if the professor didn't have a good case, the university would not have settled with her eight years ago.

Ms. Chichilnisky says her experience has made her a better person. "Privilege can make you arrogant," she says. "Columbia has made me humble. They have shown me how other women are treated."

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