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feminist activism in Latin America

Julie Shayne

Feminism has a variety of meanings. According to Nikki Craske, despite the often-heated debates about the meaning of feminism, most would likely concur with Rosalind Delmar's assessment that feminism attempts to transform women from object to subject, specifically with respect to knowledge. In other words, feminism and by extension feminist activism is about centering the lives of women. Sonia Alvarez (1990), another leading scholar of Latin American feminisms, defines an act as feminist if it strives to transform social roles assigned to women while simultaneously challenging gender power arrangements, and advancing claims for women's rights to equality and personal autonomy.

From Julie Shayne's research about the relationship between revolutionary and feminist mobilization she argues that in Latin America feminism is most accurately defined as "revolutionary feminism." For Shayne, a revolutionary feminist movement is one born of revolutionary mobilization. Ideologically revolutionary feminists are committed to challenging sexism as inseparable from larger political institutions not explicitly perceived as patriarchal but entirely bound to the oppression of women. Or in the words of Salvadoran feminist activist Gloria Guzman, feminism is:

a political struggle for the eradication ... of women's subordination. It is a proposal for a change in the relations of power between people, men over women, and the relations of power expressed in the different realms of life. We [Salvadoran feminists] believe that it is a

political struggle that will take us specifically to new kinds of relations, economic as well as relationships of power between men and women. (Shayne 2004: 53)

HISTORY OF FEMINISM

One of the most thorough historical overviews of women, politics, and feminism in Latin America is Francesca Miller's *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (1991). Miller (and countless others) argues that, contrary to what many male leftists purport, feminism is not a western import into the region, but rather, an ideology that has emerged over the last century.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, feminists were concerned with three specific issues: gaining women's suffrage, protective labor laws, and access to education. By the early twentieth century, the organization of International Feminist Congresses began with its first meeting in Argentina in 1910. Many of the attendees were members of women's groups and political parties, namely socialist or anarchist parties. Central to the congress was the theme of equality between men and women. A second congress then happened in Mexico in 1916, with several national ones following throughout the next 20 years addressing issues specific to women of different countries (e.g., the issue of race was quite important to Peruvian women).

Miller argues that the typical division of first and second wave feminism as applied to the US context does not entirely fit in Latin America. She suggests that the main reason for this is due to the fact that while first wave feminists in the US were successful in their campaigns to secure the right to vote (as evidenced in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920), parallel goals of Latin American and Caribbean women were not, thus necessitating ongoing mobilization. While women in some countries in the region earned the right to vote not long after women in the US (e.g., Ecuador in 1929), others would not obtain it until the mid-1960s (Belize 1964). In other words, if the end of first wave feminism is marked by women gaining the right to vote, then in Latin America first wave feminism did not end until the 1960s. However, even prior to the region's women

gaining collective suffrage, feminist mobilization was percolating in the context of non-gendered liberation struggles.

WHAT CAUSES THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST MOVEMENTS?

Beyond understanding the meaning of feminism, scholars have also spent time analyzing how feminism has emerged in the region. In the 1970s and 1980s both violent and non-violent revolutionary upheaval consumed the region. Despite many obstacles, women participated in these revolutionary movements in varying capacities (Jaquette 1973; Lobao 1990; Randall 1994; Kampwirth 2002; Shayne 2004). There is a fairly solid consensus among academics and activists that women's participation in leftist movements has been one of the central reasons for the development of Latin American feminisms. Recently, Kampwirth (2004) and Shayne (2004) have expanded the discussion through their combined analyses of Chiapas, Mexico, Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Shayne (2004) proposes a model for the development of feminist organizations in the region. Drawing on the positive cases of El Salvador and Chile, she argues that five factors need to converge during and after a revolutionary struggle to lead to the emergence of what she calls "revolutionary feminism." First, women's experiences in revolutionary movements need to have presented permanent challenges to status-quo understandings of gendered behavior and roles, or, gender-bending. Second, women need to have acquired logistical training vis-à-vis their experiences in revolutionary movements. Third, a political opening of some sort needs to be available in the aftermath of a revolutionary struggle to provide the opportunity for feminists to organize. Fourth, women revolutionaries need to find themselves with many of their basic needs unmet by their revolutionary movements. Fifth, a collective feminist consciousness needs to emerge in order for feminists to have the will to organize.

WHAT ISSUES ARE IMPORTANT TO FEMINISTS?

Once such movements arise, upon what sorts of issues do women focus their collective

attention? According to Peruvian feminist Virginia Vargas (1992), post-suffrage feminism in Latin America was organized around three streams: the feminist stream, the stream of women in political parties, and the stream of women from the popular classes. Some of the issues of greatest concern to feminist organizations are voluntary maternity/responsible paternity, divorce law reform, equal pay, personal autonomy, and challenging the consistently negative and sexist portrayal of women in the media. For some women, the primary agenda lies in the goal of increasing women's access to formal political representation, whereas women of the popular classes tend to focus their agendas on issues of economic survival and racial and ethnic justice. In other words, just as women in the region are a diverse group, so too are their feminist goals.

Though many organizations had only short lifespans, attention to the issues did not necessarily fade away with the dissolution of organizations. The Salvadoran women's *Asociación de Madres Demandantes* (Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support) and Cuban women's *Colectivo Magín* are two such examples (*Magín* means intelligence, inspiration, and imagination in Castilian). The *Madres Demandantes* was a grassroots feminist organization in El Salvador in the mid-to-late 1990s. It worked with feminists inside the Legislative Assembly to pass a series of laws, which mandated that politicians would be unable to assume office if they could not verify that they were up to date on their child support payments. Though the organization eventually disbanded, the laws themselves remain on the books and the issue of responsible paternity, voluntary motherhood, and (implicitly) legal access to safe abortion have influenced the direction of feminism in that country.

Another very challenging issue that Latin American feminists have sought to organize around is the negative portrayal of women in various media outlets, including television, school textbooks, and the like. The Cuban organization *Colectivo Magín* took as its primary goal to challenge this negative portrayal. The organization was rather short lived (1993–96), as the Cuban Communist Party eventually decided its efforts needed to be thwarted. Despite its deactivation, the conversation about

the negative portrayal of women in the media as related to the subsequent negative self-image internalized by Cuban women has remained a topic of feminist conversations, isolated though they may be.

ARE ALL POLITICALLY AND SOCIALLY ACTIVE WOMEN FEMINISTS?

Related to the emergence of post-suffrage feminist activism in the region are political and social organizations of women, which have non-feminist agendas, sometimes quite explicitly. Examples include the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), the various committees of the Mothers of the Disappeared that continue to exist throughout the region, collective soup kitchens, and women's commissions of labor unions and leftist political parties. Such organizations have focused on issues like those listed above. However, more often than not, their actions are articulated in very non-feminist terms.

Because women have played roles in various social and political organizations the tendency is to assume that all politically active women are feminists. However, in Latin America this is not always the case. Though there are many examples of this, perhaps the most illustrative are the Committees of the Mothers of the Disappeared that spread throughout the region during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. The women who organized their committees did so as mothers, wives, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, etc. of the "disappeared" men in their lives; they were in no way making a feminist statement. Rather, their efforts lay firmly in a human rights agenda which called for the end of dictatorships and their tactics of summary torture, kidnapping, and incarceration. In most cases the women demonstrated a political strength formidable enough to in part be responsible for the dissolution of the dictatorships in the region. Regardless of their strength, their goals were entirely separate from feminism. However, despite their lack of attention to feminist agendas, the women in these organizations did offer a model for women's mobilization that in some cases was mimicked by feminist organizations.

The distinction between women's activism and feminist activism is not necessarily articulated, but rather implicit. Maxine Molyneux coined this distinction "practical" (feminine) versus "strategic" (feminist) demands. Molyneux's (1985) classic article argues that a distinction exists between women organizing to meet basic needs which are the result of a patriarchal division of labor and those explicitly organizing to counter systems of patriarchy responsible for such a division. For example, a practical need would be a daycare center. The patriarchal division of labor mandates that women are the caretakers of children and thus institutionalized assistance with childcare would ease this burden. On the other hand, a strategic demand would be that of voluntary motherhood, or access to free and safe abortion. Implicit in this demand is a challenge to the patriarchal division of labor that positions women as caretakers of children and reframes it to argue that women should first be able to decide if they want to be mothers. This later political statement, from Molyneux's perspective, is feminist, whereas the former is not.

HOW HAVE WOMEN COORDINATED THEIR EFFORTS?

In addition to the national developments in Latin American countries that played a part in the evolution of feminism, regional and transnational events have also proved central to the emergence of the ideologies and movements. The most concrete example of regional and transnational influences are the Latin American and Caribbean feminist *Encuentros* (Encounters), which began in 1981 in response to the United Nations declaring 1975–85 the Decade of the Woman. The five meetings of the first decade of the *Encuentros* (1981–90) addressed questions related to the relationship between feminist movements and male leftists, and eventually between feminists and non-feminist women activists. Central to these debates was the issue of feminist autonomy. It was during this period that revolutionary upheaval was fundamental to the political backdrop in the region, as was evidenced by the debates occurring among the feminists.

As the violence in the region subsided and the transitions to democracy began, the debates

that faced feminists changed significantly. Of central concern to the delegates at the 1993, 1996, and 1999 meetings were issues regarding local grassroots feminist efforts versus the increased institutionalization of feminist organizations resultant from what some have identified as hegemonic relationships between international non-governmental organizations and local feminist organizations. The final meeting in 2002 centered on feminist interpretations of globalization and its impact on the lives of women.

The meetings have varied in size, with the first and smallest one in Colombia with only 200 women in attendance, in contrast to the fifth meeting in Argentina where over 3,200 women were present. By now, nearly every country in the region has sent delegates at one point or another, but the demographic makeup still favors the wealthier, whiter, and Spanish-speaking segments of Latin America and the Caribbean.

HOW HAS THE RETURN OF CIVIL SOCIETY AFFECTED FEMINIST MOVEMENTS?

With the completion of the so-called transition to democracy in the region, feminist movements have changed significantly. Because military regimes and conflicts have more or less become a thing of the past, the place of civil society and formal politics are the social venues in which feminist battles are now played out. Furthermore, with the intensification of globalization, national and international non-governmental organizations are a permanent fixture in all aspects of politics. As a result, one manifestation of post-transition feminism is what Alvarez (1998) has dubbed the NGOization of feminist organizations.

Many feminist theorists argue that the transition to democracy in the region has virtually led to the demobilization of grassroots feminist organizations and their absorption by state-centered feminist entities (Waylen 1994; Friedman 1998). On the other hand, some scholars argue that feminist organizations have not demobilized, but taken on different forms to run parallel with the overall political and economic transformation in the region: neoliberalism.

For example, Franceschet (2003) (speaking to the case of Chile) argues that such institutionalization is not in and of itself the problem. She suggests that the National Women's Service in Chile (SERNAM), which basically functions as a ministry of women within the government, has provided an axis for the women's movement with respect to discourse and resources. She argues that the women's movement in Chile is indeed fragmented and heterogeneous, and SERNAM is fraught with problems. However, she maintains that its existence contributes to the strengthening of the movement by providing crucial resources, not the least of which is a discourse of women's rights that organizations can employ to mobilize their members. Though her research and findings speak specifically to the case of Chile, parallels certainly exist in other countries in the region, as so many had strong women's and feminist movements during the dictatorships that have since morphed with the onset of democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of feminist mobilization in Latin America and the Caribbean is largely connected to national, regional, and global changes. When the region was consumed with militaristic regimes and civil wars, feminists and non-feminist women activists had a whole different set of issues to confront (e.g., revolutionary struggles for national liberation and the ongoing search for disappeared loved ones). As the struggles subsided (some more successful than others), women have found themselves in a variety of positions. A common trend has been the virtual dismissal of women's political contributions to their various leftist social movements that consumed the region in the 1970s and 1980s. This often-blatant ignoring of women's participation in many cases served to push women out of formal politics and to start their own autonomous feminist organizations. In other cases, women seized the opportunity provided by the emergence of civil society and new democratic structures to insert themselves into formal political structures that in many cases simply had never existed before. Some have argued that such shifts have resulted in the dissolution of previously vibrant feminist

movements, while others interpret such changes in structure as inevitable and even empowering.

SEE ALSO: Collective Identity; Feminism; Gay and Lesbian Movement; Gender, Social Movements and; Materialist Feminisms; New Social Movement Theory; Political Opportunities; Radical Feminism; Sexual Cultures in Latin America; Third World and Postcolonial Feminisms/Subaltern; Transnational and Global Feminisms; Women's Movements

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feminist anthropology

Helen Johnson

Feminism refers to the awareness of women's oppression and exploitation at work, in the home, and in society, as well as the conscious political action taken by women for progressive social and economic change toward equality and recognition of women's difference. Social anthropology has evolved from a dominant western discourse in which it explores cultural difference and uniqueness, while simultaneously seeking the similarities in human lived experiences. Feminist theoretical critiques entered social anthropology in the 1970s and are vital to ongoing theoretical and methodological developments. Feminist social anthropologists question many of the discipline's basic assumptions and have documented scholars' failure to fully explore the human experience due to the neglect of the organizing categories of "women" and "gender" as significant dimensions of social life.

The first wave of studies in the 1970s assumed universal sexual asymmetry through an assessment of the "global" subordination of women and thence tried to explain the situation