IPS

LATIN AMERICA 08.12.2017 | Maxine Molyneux

The battle over 'gender ideology'

Religious conservatives are trying to thwart gender equality in Latin America

Latin America has received much praise for its advances in gender equality in recent years. Between 1960 and 2010, Brazil saw women's participation in the labour market triple to 60 per cent. In Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador and Nicaragua, over 40 per cent of elected representatives are women. Meanwhile, the peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC rebels has been lauded for giving specific guarantees to women.

Further efforts to raise the status of women, however, are being thwarted by an increasingly vocal movement that rallies against so-called 'gender ideology'. Supported by a hodgepodge of reactionary groups, including conservative politicians, evangelicals and the Catholic Church, the movement supports traditional roles for men and women, and claims that efforts to depict gender as a cultural construct, rather than merely biological, will destroy the family and the very fabric of society.

Maxine Molyneux, a sociologist of Latin America at University College London, tells Mariano Schuster that while popular campaigns against equality are discouraging, the feminist movement in Latin America is gaining significant momentum.

This year has seen a number of protests and campaigns calling for greater gender equality and denouncing sexual harassment. Is the feminist movement becoming more assertive?

Feminism has aquired a new dynamic with a re-energising of protest movements across the world. A new generation of activists is taking to the streets calling for an end to social discrimination and violence against women. As well as the large demonstrations against gender-based violence in Latin America with the 'Ni Una Menos' (Not One Less) campaign, the various Women's Marches that took place across the globe in January this year, and the ongoing global campaign 'Million Women Rise', we have seen street protests elsewhere – for example in India and even in Afghanistan – after the brutal murders

of women. Most recently there has been the viral #MeToo campaign, notable for the strong media reaction to allegations of sexual abuse and rape by prominent figures including some British parliamentarians, actors and the movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. However, it has not escaped notice that Weinstein has been stripped of his honours while Donald Trump, who bragged about sexually assaulting women, not only won the US presidency but has escaped censure so far.

This moment is significant for several reasons. It marks a new phase in feminism where young women are confronting the limits to the various social and legal changes of the last few decades that they thought would bring them equal opportunities.

Girls often do better than boys in school and women excel at university; they fully expect to earn their own income, and to be treated with respect. But they still find many of the old discriminatory structures and attitudes in place, with wide gender pay gaps and poorer promotion prospects. At home they still do the vast bulk of carework.

In everyday life the double standard prevails in sexual mores. Popular culture still disparages female equality. Meanwhile, men occupy key positions of power and authority. They suffer few sanctions for sexual harassment, or even for sexual abuse and violence. It's not surprising that women are angry.

For young feminists these protests are significant as expressions of a new solidarity that collectivises the negative experiences they often endure alone and in silence. It's only once these issues are identified as social problems that they will command attention and action.

These protests have also helped win some important victories for the LGBTIQ community. Is there a link between feminism and LGBTIQ rights?

These are clearly two separate movements. However, from the beginning of second wave feminism, there have been points of connection and solidarity between feminist and gay – later LGBTIQ – activism. They share a common opposition to prescriptive norms, laws and practices that derive from an immutable conception of sexuality and gender roles and relations, often seen as ordained by biology and/or religion.

LGBTIQ and feminist activists instead tend to see these relations as powerfully influenced by social institutions, norms and practices including state policies, laws, culture and religion. They share a critique of the discriminatory and damaging aspects of these norms,

and support legal reforms that extend human rights principles of equality and respect for difference. This has implied shared struggles for cultural change as well as for legal change to remove discriminatory and oppressive laws, and to provide adeqate protections to those who need it.

The new feminist wave has drawn criticism from a sector of society opposed to what it calls 'gender ideology'. How can today's feminists tackle this popular backlash?

There is no coherent entity described by 'gender ideology'. The term is an amalgam of what opponents of feminist ideas don't approve of, encompassing LGBTI rights (especially same-sex marriage) and women's equality and autonomy (especially over their own bodies and sexuality).

Opposition to the term 'gender' was initially propogated by the Vatican as part of its push-back against the great advances in international law achieved by second wave feminism and the global women's movement, in terms of women's rights. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of 1995 were landmarks in women's equality legislation, and many Latin American countries incorporated these frameworks into domestic law.

Those who campaign against so called 'gender ideology' resort to fundamentalist thinking, often evoking scriptural authority to support their campaigns, and seeking to promote moral panics over the alleged effects of women's equality and autonomy, claiming it brings nothing less than social and moral decay. This odd vision of destructive female power is accompanied by the fundamentalists' claims to be the guardians of societal stability, expressed through their support for the patriarchal family, firmly based on women's place in the home as carers of men and children.

This is not merely a question of opposing views, however. The battleground is the domain of human rights. You ask how to deal with this backlash. My answer is to stand up and defend the human rights already encoded in domestic law, or campaign to have them instated and observed.

When evangelicals in Brazil call for legal provisions allowing psychologists to 'treat' homosexuals, or governments deny women contraception and abortion, they must be challenged as violators of human rights.

I'm not saying the law is the only instrument to be used in resisting these attacks on women's and other people's rights, but it can be a

powerful one. Remember that in 2006, Colombia's Supreme Court overturned its severe penalties for abortion on the grounds that they violated women's human rights. This was the result of a successful campaign by women's rights advocates and their allies.

What role can and should men play in contemporary feminism?

There is a mixed picture here which needs to be acknowledged. On the one hand we are seeing young men on demonstrations actively supporting women's demands and being cheered on for so doing. More men today understand that some forms of masculinity are self-limiting, even harmful and dysfunctional, just as some forms of femininity are. The brutal hyper-masculinity that's associated with narco-gangs is a particularly negative manifestation of this.

For four decades or so, various men's groups have met up to debate the oppressive characteristics and effects of patriarchal or masculine privilege. One is reminded of Hegel's brilliant treatment of the master-slave relationship, in which the oppressor is also in some ways damaged by the power he exercises over others.

This questioning of masculinity by men is entirely positive because gender is relational. To treat it only as a women's issue is like one hand clapping. However, whilst some men are aware of this, others see [this questioning] only as a personal journey of self-realisation, rather than a societal problem which places them under an obligation to try to change the structures, behaviours and attitudes that oppress both men and women and perpetuate masculine privilege.

As a collective, men have been remarkably passive in this regard. They have left women to fight their struggles largely on their own. I am always struck by the lack of men at meetings that discuss women's rights, and as an academic I see how few men read the work of feminist academics or cite them, are interested in feminist history, or engage with feminist ideas in any serious way.

Your readers may think that is a harsh statement. We all know and appreciate the many laudable exceptions, the genuine indispensable allies of women's struggles. But men could do a great deal more than they do in changing everyday behaviours such as sexual harassment and discrimination. They could push for gender equality in their workplaces, do a greater share of domestic work and care and challenge 'locker room talk'.

Your current research focusses on modern-day feminist movements in Uruguay, Chile and Argentina, and the role leftist movements have traditionally played in supporting women in their struggle for equality. How do the trajectories of feminism differ in each of these

countries?

We are looking at Uruguay, Chile and Argentina because they led the charge in terms of women's rights and activism in Latin America. All three countries have had feminist movements since the late 19th century.

In Chile and Uruguay feminism was more closely allied with socialism, whereas in Argentina, Peronism took a different path with a fraught relationship between a populist appeal to 'feminine virtues' and socialist/liberal feminism.

Our research focuses on some specific campaigns that continued across the cycle of second wave feminism – from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards – to see what conditions, institutional and political factors, forms of activism and allies may account for the differences in outcomes.

Uruguay has achieved remarkable progress in some respects, in part because of the nature of the party system, the character of the ruling coalition, and the alliances that were built between a very active feminist movement and legislators. The absence of a strong religious institutional influence was also significant.

The Argentine and Chilean cases, with their closer relationships with the Catholic church, have seen slow progress on reproductive rights but have extended some LGBT rights. Argentina has been successful in mobilising women around certain social and political rights. In Chile 'institutional feminism' was able to make some headway under the Concertación administrations (a coalition of center-left political parties in power between 1990 and 2010) on key issues including wider dissemination of the morning after pill and a relaxing of abortion laws.

In most Latin American countries, abortion has not been fully legalised, even under progressive administrations. Why is this?

Abortion is an emotive issue, especially in contexts where it has become politicised by right-wing movements and governments, and where conservative religious values and institutions are influential. Today, some very harsh laws persist in Latin America – for example in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua – despite evidence that such laws do little to diminish the incidence of abortion. Indeed, by making abortion illegal and unsafe they greatly increase maternal mortality. They can lead to gross injustices, as in cases of child rape leading to the victim's unwanted pregnancy, with no remedy offered at all. Some young women are jailed merely on suspicion of carrying out abortions when they may have miscarried, as in El Salvador [link

in Spanish].

Yet there is still reason to hope. Decriminalisation of abortions has moved up the international agenda, partly because of changing attitudes. In Latin America some serious abuses of these laws have gained fairly widespread publicity.

The availability of the safe and self-administered morning-after pill is a breakthrough, but we also need to focus on the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. Making contraception available to young people on demand, as UNICEF recommends, is an important step that some countries are taking.

There is now a greater acceptance of the need for good quality sex education. That means not only helping young people develop an understanding of sexuality but also of relationships built on mutual respect. Latin America has made some progress on sex education. However, it's proving difficult to implement in contexts where conservative lobbies promote the view that sex education encourages irresponsible sex, when in fact good educational programmes indicate the contrary.



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