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Open Forum – Gender critical feminism in Mexico:  
Origins, particularities, attributes

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**Gender critical feminism in Mexico: Origins, particularities, attributes**

The rise of gender critical feminism in Mexico began in the year 2017 with the publication of the now-infamous essay *Cuando lo trans no es transgresor* ('When Trans Is Not Transgressive') by Laura Lecuona (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2021a). In retrospect, trans-exclusionary feminism became prominent in a context in which two important developments were already occurring. On the one hand, in 2017, the Fourth Wave of Mexican feminism was already gaining influence on young women and LGBT+ populations. On the other hand, a year before, the Mexican anti-gender and anti-LGBT movement made a public demonstration of force with a national protest in which the Frente Nacional por la Familia (National Front for Family) expressed its opposition to what they described as "gender ideology" (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2016b). These two situations have since then become central in the particular rhetoric that we observe in this regional variety of gender critical feminism.

Regarding the first of these developments, the Fourth Wave of Mexican feminism shares many attributes with other feminist movements around the globe. It tends to be massive, more or less organized in a grassroots fashion, strongly influenced by digital cultures and hashtag activism—like #MeToo—and, finally, molded by affects such as anger and rage against patriarchal institutions, discourses and values (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2016a). In the case of Mexico, the high rates of femicide and other forms of patriarchal violence such as street harassment triggered an upsurge of protests that rapidly led to the creation of hundreds of small groupings all around the country that, through social networking, were able not only to coordinate themselves but also to produce a narrative that served as a hermeneutical tool for explaining the prevalence, intensity and malignancy of violence directed against women.

Sadly, precisely because of these attributes, the Mexican Fourth Wave was prone to be co-opted by essentialist understandings of violence, feminism and gender. Indeed, the lack of literacy in feminism and gender studies among young women who had only recently embraced the feminist label allowed common sense notions regarding what it means to be a woman and/or a feminist to become entrenched in most of these Fourth Wave groupings; this, in turn, allowed the movement to be co-opted by individuals who already had an exclusionary agenda. Moreover, given the anger brought about by the femi-genocide currently occurring in Mexico, the political subject of feminism narrowed thanks in part to the success of a series of simplistic discourses that linked patriarchal violence to biological sex, thus categorizing every cisgender woman as a potential victim and every individual assigned male at birth as a potential aggressor; this eventually led to the exclusion of trans women and, in general, trans people from most feminist groups and places. Highly simplistic narratives and memes swiftly communicated that to be a biological male was sufficient to be taken as an accomplice to patriarchy. As might be expected, this completely disregarded how cis-heteronormative structures of oppression have historically affected trans and intersex people, gay and bisexual men and women (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2019).

The actual co-optation of the Fourth Wave was a complex process. First of all, while there has been a branch of Mexican lesbian feminism that was trans-exclusionary since the 1970s, its influence had been negligible up until the last five years. This changed thanks in part to the colonial legacies that have also been present within Mexican feminisms. Here, it's important to note that both academic and intellectual/political circles in Mexico are heavily influenced by cultural productions from the United States and Europe. This process is certainly not new and is the result of centuries of subordination to major metropolises. Specifically, in the case of feminism, the influence of Spanish thought is undoubtedly significant. Many Mexican feminists who have come to adopt a trans-exclusionary discourse, both in academia and politics, have deep connections with their Spanish counterparts. In many instances, Mexican feminists have studied or been educated under the guidance of Spanish feminists. Thus, the rise of gender critical feminism in the U.K., but most importantly in Spain, led to the spread of transphobic ideas within certain academic and political circles. Although the movement was organized in a grassroots fashion, the influence of small but deeply connected groups gave rise to an explosion of transphobic tropes coming from Spain

and the U.K. We must keep in mind that some of the motivations for spreading transphobic ideas are circumstantial and opportunistic. This becomes particularly evident when we consider that a significant and active faction within the trans-exclusionary feminist movement in Mexico is openly critical of left-wing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his party, Morena. For these feminists, López Obrador's agenda is clearly against women's interests, as it has led to significant budget cuts in gender-related matters, resulting in the closure of programs aimed at cisgender women. This has meant a diminished influence for many of these feminists within the government, and they have even been labeled as part of an old neoliberal regime that AMLO consistently discredits. It is not surprising, therefore, that these feminists found a space within opposition parties. While at least one of these parties, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), was clearly a left-wing party, the rest of the parties in the opposition alliance openly belong to the center - Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) - or the right - National Action Party (PAN). The latter is a party with strong ties to the Catholic Church and the more conservative sectors of Mexican society. For these gender critical feminists, radicalization was strategic and allowed them to claim that women were being erased by the LGBT lobby, queer theory and the López Obrador administration. This eventually led to the rise of a discourse that paradoxically tended to recycle some tropes coming from the anti-gender movement - for instance, the assertion that subjective ideologies like queer theory should be rejected in favor of a scientific and objective discourse based on biological facts. This convergence would ultimately crystallize into the emergence of a hybrid discourse that incorporates elements from the right-wing anti-gender movement, positioning itself as pro-life, while simultaneously drawing from trans-exclusionary feminism by opposing the so-called "erasure of women." The above, of course, should not be understood as if all critical gender feminists shares these positions, although undoubtedly some of its most representative voices do.

At this point we need to pay attention to the second development mentioned above—the public debut of a more secular anti-gender movement in Mexico. It is important to remember that historically the Mexican right was deeply connected with the Catholic Church. This entailed that the traditional opposition to the feminist and LGBT+ movements tended to be expressed in religious terms. Nevertheless, by 2016 it was becoming clear that a deep transformation within the right was taking place. First of all, evangelical churches were growing in power and influence. This had two major consequences. One of these was the creation of a coalition between Catholics and evangelicals that was unheard of in a country like Mexico; this coalition was central for the eventual foundation of the Mexican Front for the Family. The other consequence was the birth of the Social Encounter Party, an evangelical organization with an open agenda of defending "traditional values" and opposing "gender ideology." Even though this party foundered in the national election of 2018, it was part of the alliance that took Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency of Mexico. For our concerns, the relevance of these transformations can be appreciated if we pay attention to the novel rhetoric of the anti-gender movement and how trans-exclusionary feminists, at least in Mexico, have tended to replicate it (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2016b, 2021b).

There are a number of discursive coincidences between these two movements that we would like to review. First, the anti-gender movement has embraced, at least since 2016, but undoubtedly during this administration, a more secular discourse and we no longer see an appeal to the Bible or any other religious text. Their current strategy involves the cooptation of the language of human rights and science—especially biology. It is common to find a trope in which they position themselves as defenders of religious freedom and the rights of parents to educate their children as they see fit. Less common, but not totally infrequent, is that they invoke freedom of speech as a value that is under attack by what they describe as the LGBT lobby. Regarding the cooptation of biological theory, they tend to affirm that traditional nuclear families as well as gender roles are natural and deeply entrenched in human history. Second, the affective rhetoric of their discourse has also changed. Although it is not uncommon for them to still describe LGBT people as disgusting

and unnatural, it has become much more frequent to present themselves as the threatened victims of a totalitarian left that seeks to destroy traditional families. Their strategy is therefore to elicit compassion and sympathy by misrepresenting their own situation as if they were vulnerable victims, heroically resisting the imposition of a regime of values that will eradicate the traditional nuclear family. Third, social networking has also become a fundamental tool for spreading their ideas and reaching a new demographic: the youth. By employing simple slogans and strong images that can easily become viral, this so called “Nueva Derecha Anti-derechos” (New Anti-Rights Right) has been able to foment the idea that to be politically conservative is a new romanticized way to rebel (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2016b, 2021b).

These three aspects are also present in Mexican trans-exclusionary feminism. Curiously, as we will see below, the coincidences between the New Right and gender critical feminists are not merely discursive. But it is quite clear that the anti-trans movement within feminism also alludes to the discourse on human rights; they also present themselves as defenders of the rights of women and, finally, as defenders of truth, science and freedom.

This repositioning has come in the context of a feminist movement that had become increasingly militant and separatist, its break with the rest of the left symbolized by the Dahlia de la Cerda text “Yo No Soy Ayotzinapa” (De La Cerda, 2014), which denounced the double standards of activists who mobilized across the country for the disappeared (male) Normal School students but not the country’s many victims of femicide, from Ciudad Juárez to the working class suburbs of Mexico City. In the wake of what was called the “Glitter Revolution” of 2019, sparked by the glitter bombing of the Mexico City Chief of Police in response to the gangrape of a teenage girl by police officers (Algo Que Informar, 2019), direct action became commonplace across the country and police stations (Excelsior, 2019) and even state supreme courts (Infobae, 2020) were subjected to arson attacks. Although trans people had been present from the beginning, and the glitter bombing itself the work of the collective Resistencia Queer (Flores, 2021), the Fourth Wave in Mexico quickly took a trans-exclusionary turn, with the radical feminist-occupied National Human Rights Commission used as a base for organizing attacks on nearby gay bars and the Sexual Dissident Market (Ulises, 2020; Frezapatistas con Crema, 2021).

This turn was not accidental. An independent, militant social movement had emerged years before the election of left-wing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018 but inevitably found itself in conflict with López Obrador’s so-called Fourth Transformation of Mexico due to its inability to resolve the country’s long-standing femicide crisis. Conservative opposition parties have sought to co-opt this movement for their own ends, as have political operators close to López Obrador who have attempted to create a defanged, official feminism that is loyal to the president and his political project. In both cases, this has involved the promotion of trans-exclusionary radical feminism; introducing divisions into subversive movements has been a classic tactic for neutralizing them and making them easier to control, going back to J. Edgar Hoover’s instruction to “prevent coalitions between militant Black nationalist groups” (National Lawyers Guild, 1980). On the side of the conservative opposition, the 2020 National Women’s Strike had been organized by feminist collectives with ties to the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and a radical feminist black bloc in Mexico State notorious for its violence against trans women and their allies was employed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) governor to infiltrate and disarticulate the local feminist movement (Neuhouser, 2023a). On the side of the government, in the wake of the Glitter Revolution then-Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum met with a group of feminists that included Laura Lecuona, who had advised her to break with the historic (trans-inclusive) feminist Marta Lamas (Cruz Flores, 2019). In the years since, Capital 21, a television channel owned by the Mexico City government, has featured interviews with members of the local branch of the transphobic LGB Alliance (López Pérez, 2022) and Sheinbaum’s attempts to repair relations between the feminist movement and the Mexico City police involved the creation of a group of (trans-

exclusionary) feminists known as *Mujeres en Resistencia Pacífica* that has organized to give flowers to the police during International Women's Day protests and is currently active in supporting her presidential ambitions (Neuhouser, 2023b). In the meantime, the *Ejército Espía* leaks have revealed that the Mexican military has engaged in illegal surveillance of many feminist and LGBT collectives, including *Resistencia Queer*, whose actions had originally helped spark the *Glitter Revolution* (Barragán, 2022).

Mexico's traditional right had recognized the value of an alliance at least since early 2018, shortly before the election that brought López Obrador to power, when a think tank associated with the National Front for the Family, known as the Early Institute, began to collaborate with the anti-surrogacy group *Feministas Mexicanas Contra Vientres de Alquiler* (FEMMVA), led by Laura Lecuona. According to former members of FEMMVA, this alliance led to a change in the organization's politics and a framework which had contextualized their opposition to surrogacy within the struggle for reproductive rights was dropped, particularly all references to abortion (Neuhouser 2022). According to internal documents published by WikiLeaks, the Early Institute is the point organization for the issue of "parental rights" in Mexico for the Political Network for Values, an international organization that includes such far right organizations as Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Family Watch International and *Novae Terrae* (ibid). Lecuona has since gone on to lobby against Mexico City's proposed Law on Trans Children and is the local representative of *Women's Declaration International* (WDI), an international alliance of radical feminists that oppose trans rights which was founded by the British academic Sheila Jeffreys. Following the cancellation of the presentation of her book at the 2022 Guadalajara International Bookfair, and the very publication of her book by its original press, forcing her to self-publish, Lecuona has also adopted the same rhetoric of censorship by the totalitarian left and her talks have come to be sponsored by the PAN.

Mexico's anti-gender/trans movements, both feminist and conservative, albeit increasingly intertwined, are occurring in a polarized context involving attempts to both shore up as well as undermine support for a leftist government by co-opting the memory of a militant, direct-action-based street protest movement. This also occurs in the absence of the rule of law, in which anti-trans rhetoric is deployed in a country with one of the highest (recorded) transfemicide rates in the world. In our view, the major challenge facing trans activism in Mexico is to resist this dual attack while maintaining the alliance between certain supportive academic spaces, human rights organizations that are part of the state apparatus, and various NGOs dedicated to defending trans people's human rights. Regrettably, these three realms are presently embroiled in disputes, and it remains unclear whether this harmful assault can be halted before it erodes the alliance.

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