

Political Culture among Latin American Feminists' Collectives: Issues Related to Women's Bodies in Politics

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Abstract—On this paper, we reflect on the relation between the traditional Latin American politics and issues related to women's bodies in current politics. By analyzing the discourses of activists of feminist collectives from Chile, Mexico and Uruguay, we show how the category of “body” is necessary to understand the feminist movement and the way in which the issue of women's bodies appears in politics. Also, we propose that discussions about women's bodies in the public sphere renew ways to make politics and strain the relations between governments and feminist collectives.

Index Terms—Body, women, feminist movement, politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper dwells upon the relation between the traditional politics and issues related to women's bodies in current politics in Latin America. Traditionally, the politics have discussed the issue of bodies in relation to the prohibitions that people should not break (e.g., do not kill). However, the feminist movement has renewed the discussion when women talk about breastfeeding, sexual harassment, motherhood, contraception, abortion, women's pleasures, gentle birth and teen pregnancy. So, what implications do these women's demands have in politics? How does the women's movement strain the contemporary politics? What are the challenges for the governments in relation to the issues of women's bodies?

On this article, we propose responses to these questions by analyzing the preliminary results of a research on political culture of Latin America feminist collectives. We have worked with women's collectives in the region of Araucania, Chile; state of Guanajuato, Mexico; and department of Montevideo, Uruguay, and we have interviewed women activists from every collective. We chose to work with this kind of women's collectives because they produce most of discourses related to the issue of women's bodies. So they gave us information about the present state of discussion in Latin America. We also worked with collectives from three regions because every region presents a specific political

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challenge for collectives. First of all, the state of Guanajuato challenges collectives to act in a traditional and Catholic social environment. Secondly, the region of Araucania challenges collectives to perform not only in a traditional social environment, but also in front of a state that displays its political and police forces against the autochthonous indigenous women. And finally, the department of Montevideo, that has historically valued the citizens' efforts to reach social equality. In these different social contexts, collectives aim to change women's subordination to men and it is our point of view of the feminism: the goal of challenging and changing women's subordination to men [1].

We have a qualitative study with interpretive approach. For field work we have contacted thirteen feminist collectives and we have interviewed women activists by every collective. In total, we have twenty-four interviews (eight by country). The data have been analyzed through Paul Gee's discourse analysis procedure. According to Paul Gee, discourse analysis procedure includes five dimensions: prosody, cohesion, overall discourse organization of a text, contextualization signals and thematic organization of the text [2]. On this article, we present the preliminary results on the five dimension: the thematic organization of the text and we focus on the category of “body” which is a main category to understand the women's discourses.

Our results show ways in which the women's collectives discuss on the issue of women's bodies. By analyzing the results, we suggest on the one hand that understanding women's collectives in relation to the contemporary politics demands to introduce the “body” as fundamental category of analysis; and, on the other hand, thinking about women's bodies in the public sphere renews the ways to make politics and strains the relations between governments and feminist collectives.

We present our argument in two sections. In the first, we look at the theorist basis of traditional politics distinguishing the role of women in this context. In addition, we narrow our focus to present some interviewed women's discourses and to analyze them to show how the body works in politics today. In the second section, we display our final conclusions on the relations between issues related to women's bodies and politics and we note that to introduce the category of “body” produces a change in traditional politics.

II. WOMEN IN POLITICS: PUBLIC BODIES AND POLITICS FROM THE BODY

Politics had its origin in the exclusion of women from the public arena. When Greek men founded the public and political domain, they also established the private and

domestic domain and women were conferred to it. By identifying women with their bodies, the issue of the body was usually thought as private. Indeed, men who were able to discuss in public arena had women and slaves to resolve their domestic problems [3]. Issues of the bodies were conferred to the private domain where women were responsible to take care of body's necessities (e.g., food, body washing, sleeping and health). That is how the issue of the body was thought as private and apolitical.

The modern citizenship did not change this situation and we discuss on bodies only recently in history. The classical citizenship refers to civil, political and social rights, but these rights usually concerns to issues such as private property, political elections and formal education [4]. The feminist movement changed this situation when introduced issues related to body by talking about birth control and contraception in the fifties although feminists were still thinking that woman was mainly mother and wife [5]. But a very important change occurred in the seventies when the feminist movement considered contraception not for the family welfare but as a woman's sexual right. In fact, an incipient critique of patriarchal heterosexuality had grown in the sixties [6] and this new category changed the relation between politics and women.

In Latin America, the introduction of body's rights to politics occurred when social movements were fighting against authoritarian regimes. The feminist movement made alliances with the popular movement to fight for democracy during the 1970s and 1980s. Issues such as sexism, sexual rights and domestic violence were claimed by the Latin-American feminists but also poverty, labor exploitation, unemployment and famine [7]. Although in this social context, the body was still a vague reference.

However, when the democracy returned to Latin America, the feminist movement changed and issues related to bodies appeared as fully political. First, the feminist movement became institutionalized. A group of feminists were employed as government officials whereas other group constituted non-governmental organizations oriented towards feminist goals [8]. Also, there occurred a distancing between the feminist movement and the popular movement. In this social context, the feminist movement diversified appearing new objectives and issues. Of course, demands about women's bodies appeared as one of the most important feminist projects.

In the nineties, the new Latin American feminists rejected the old feminism because it was exclusive for white and middle-class women. Nowadays, the new feminism recognizes that there is not "one" woman but also there are "women": black, white, Latin American and indigenous women; poor, rich and middle-class women; mothers and no mothers; single, divorcee and married women; homosexual, heterosexual and transsexual women; employed and unemployed women. Woman is always a historical category and the new feminism assumes this as a main principle.

Consequently, the issue of the body has appeared in the public arena as body of woman but also as body of a specific woman. At the present, the feminist movement discusses on historical and social bodies of women and adds to the public debate issues such as sexual harassment, sexual and domestic

violence, abortion, labor, breastfeeding, alimony, teen pregnancy and motherhood. However, the challenge for feminist collectives is to build bridges between these general categories and the historical situation of every woman.

One of the most important aspects is to point out that feminists approach to issues of bodies focusing on the relations between public issues related to bodies and own corporal experiences as women. All of the interviewed women agreed on how their feminist interests have grown by "feeling" and "thinking" from their bodies. An interviewed woman, member of the United Group of Single Mothers (Grupo Unido de Madres Solteras, G.U.M.S.A.C., Mexico) said it with these words: "[G.U.M.S.A.C.] is a place where I feel free, where I do not feel labeled, where there are people who are fighting to remove a social label that I also have because people have marked all of us who are single mothers (...) the label of being hookers."¹ By talking about her own experiences as single mother, this woman mentioned her experiences with a labeled body as hooker's body. In Latin America it is still common to judge women according to certain social rules on the "proper" behavior of women. These rules establish that women should be sexually "demure" and people judge women that do not follow these social rules [9], [10]. The cult of Marianism is a common practice in Latin America and involves a notion of women as having semi-divinity and at the same time submitting to their men [11]. So, on the basis of corporal experiences, as Virgin Mary or as hooker, feminist women reflect on their bodies and propose new social agreements and rules to their lives.

The feminist movement has put issues of the women's body in political discussion. According to their corporal experiences, their own and other women's, feminists rethink the body as an issue to debate. It implies rethinking the limits between the private sphere and the public sphere. It is a controversial aspect, because bodies which were traditionally thought as private and apolitical and noted today as "public material" by feminists. So, which are the limits to think about bodies as public issues?

There are rights of women's bodies that the feminist movement has been fighting for (e.g., the right to receive sexual information to prevent teen pregnancies, the right to have a gentle birth and the right to receive medical attention to a safe abortion). But to introduce these issues is not easy, because the structure of politics is only rational and bodiless, and it is one of the reasons to consider that the women's rights are not important enough to politics. In Latin America, it is still being a common problem, according to the interviewed activists. One of them said: "If you are a feminist woman and are a member of a political party, you will be absorbed. It is what happens to many feminists of the leftist party, the National Party and the Colored Party. They meet parties' men, and men say: 'Yes, we agree on legalization of abortion' but then they do not vote in the parliament, because they receive a higher order" (member of Plenary of Uruguayan Women, PLEMUU [Plenario de Mujeres del Uruguay]). So, the feminist challenge is to get a better place

¹ The testimonies of the interviewed women were translated from Spanish to English by the author.

for issues of the bodies in politics, looking that there is not an important place for the body in traditional ways to make politics, such as parties, campaigns for elections or public agenda.

We thought that reviewing these issues related to bodies is problematic, because there is a fine line between the public discussions on women's bodies and the opportunity that every woman should be able to decide on her body. The Latin American states have been challenged by feminist women to publish laws to protect bodies' rights, but also on this topic it is not possible to find a unique solution, because every woman lives particular social circumstances. It was said by an interviewed activist: "The social class is still important according to my experience. It is different to be feminist being rich or poor. According to these aspects, it is different being a woman. Here [in the region of Araucania] we have not been able to get closer to indigenous women" (member of Acacia Women [Mujeres Acacia], Chile). In this way, this woman talked about the social situation of every woman and the implications that it has to talk about women's bodies. In fact, one of the main problems between Latin American feminists is how to get closer to indigenous women, because they not only have other culture, but also other bodies, with other skin color. Also, it is one of the most important aspects of Latin American feminism because feminists must rethink about their own situations as women in third world countries. That is why Latin American feminists have contributed to note that a particular feminism, white Eurocentric and Western, has sought to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism [12].

It is relevant to say that all of interviewed women agreed on the importance of the body as a starting point to produce political projects that improve social conditions of women. This is why the feminist collectives have implemented methodologies for working with other women who are invited to reflect on their own personal condition to produce a personal change. In general, these methodologies invite women to feel and to think about their own bodies. In this context, we find the body as the prior origin of feminist demands. Since the corporal experiences, the rights of breastfeeding and gentle birth and the right to live free of sexual harassment and domestic violence are understandable.

III. CONCLUSIONS

We want to conclude on the relations between issues related to women's bodies and politics. We think that the category of "body" is necessary to analyze the political action of feminists. Feminists' demands are grounded in the corporal experiences, their own or others women's experiences. That is one of the clues to understand why governments and parties usually resist attending the women's necessities: because governments and political parties act according to the traditional politics which is bodiless.

Politics changed in modern times because it was no longer the public arena where rich men discussed on topics unrelated to life's necessities by reason. Instead, the public arena became the sphere in which states manage ways to solve life's necessities [13]. But it was certain that poverty, the lack of houses, labor rights and the rights to education and

health were considered to a universal man citizen, inclusive in Latin America. So, the feminist movement really breaks this illusion by pointing other subjects – women. Beyond this, Latin American feminists have introduced not only the woman citizen: they have introduced a non-universal citizen because women are always a historical subject (black and poor woman; single and homosexual woman; unemployed and mother woman; and so on).

Feminist collectives have done more than to introduce other subject. They have introduced the issues of women's bodies, but also have been one of the political actors that have most changed traditional politics. If labor movements and the movement for housing right have led politics to manage life issues, the feminist movement has introduced politics into families. Today, citizens hope that states manage topics such as motherhood and breast feeding. So, states have implemented public policies on women's bodies.

But there is a warning in these issues. On the one hand, if we fully left bodies into private domain, we do not assumed one of the main contributions of feminism. It is that bodies are political because are produced among political relationships [14]. On the other hand, if states rule issues of bodies, states might control even the last limit of the privacy: the own body. So, answers must be located between state regulation on bodies' issues and the respect to every woman to decide on her own body according to her social and personal circumstances.

The truth is that the "body" is no longer a natural and nonpolitical entity and that politics is no longer a bodiless one. Instead, men and women citizens discuss on bodies and demand to Latin American states to publish laws on bodies. So, politics is changing today and it is the opportunity to rethink our societies according to gender equity and plurality.

On this article, we have talked about how the women's collectives agree with the importance of women's bodies to rethink politics. However, it will be interesting to continue the analysis of the data to find differences between the collectives according the social situation for women in every country.

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