

THEMATIC REVIEW

***Feminisms in Latin America: Pro-Choice Nested Networks in Mexico and Brazil.* By Gisela Zarembeg and Débora Rezende de Almeida. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 75 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN: 9781108825962.**

***Fighting for Abortion Rights in Latin America: Social Movements, State Allies and Institutions.* By Cora Fernández Anderson. New York: Routledge, 2020. 204 pp. \$170.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780367355951; \$49.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780367355968.**

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X23000545

Why do some countries in Latin America succeed in legalizing abortion? Why have some countries succeeded in stopping the countermovement to the expansion of reproductive rights? These two relevant questions are answered in *Fighting for Abortion Rights in Latin America: Social Movements, State Allies and Institutions* by Cora Fernández Anderson and *Feminists in Latin America: Pro-Choice Nested Networks in Mexico and Brazil* by Gisela Zarembeg and Débora Rezende de Almeida. Whereas Fernández Anderson's book focuses on rights expansion and why abortion has been legalized in some Latin American countries but not others, Zarembeg and Rezende de Almeida's book focuses on explaining how feminist networks could be effective at protecting reproductive rights against conservative movements. Reading these two books together provides a comprehensive understanding of the expansion and potential retrenchment of abortion rights in Latin America.

Fernández Anderson examines abortion legalization in Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. In explaining the variation in abortion legalization, the author focuses on the cooperation between social movements and governments. Using structured and focused comparisons, the book examines the interactions of four variables: (1) strengths and strategies of social movements, (2) institutional variables (party system, coalitions, divisions of power), (3) executive

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preferences, (4) and the power of the Catholic Church. Fernández Anderson argues that abortion is more likely to succeed when the movement is strong and there is a division of power, a leftist party, and support of the executive.

Uruguay is seen as a successful case, whereas Argentina and Chile are coded as failed cases in legalizing abortion. Studying the case of Uruguay, Fernández Anderson explains the movement's success as a result of its strength: "an open and receptive political system and a highly secular society designed a path of collaboration with sympathetic allies in power that led to a successful, comprehensive abortion reform" (66–67). In contrast, the women's movement in Chile failed to collaborate with allies in power while facing a powerful Catholic Church and an unsympathetic executive before the election of President Gabriel Boric in 2022.

The book certainly incorrectly predicts the case of Argentina, where abortion became legal in 2020 as a result of the pressure of a social movement and a supportive executive. The book studies the abortion campaign until 1997, and it has a section dedicated to Argentina's green wave and congressional debate in 2018 in the conclusion (the book was published in 2020). Explaining the failure of the campaign in Argentina, Fernández Anderson highlights "the lack of a strong left-wing party with roots in society coupled with a non-supportive Executive, a weak division of powers and an influential Catholic Church prevented the establishment of a close collaboration between activists and sympathetic legislators in Congress, reducing the possibilities of abortion reform" (161). Accounting for her misprediction, Fernández Anderson notes that "the significant growth of the campaign can be attributed to the growth of a broader movement: feminism" (181). Yet, we observe the growth of feminism throughout the Southern Cone with different effects. For instance, Chile had significant mobilizations, including an uprising in 2019, in which women played a significant role. However, there have not been any changes in reproductive rights in the country—despite a failed attempt to significantly change existing institutions by writing a new constitution. I argue that the misprediction of the case of Argentina has to do with the fairly unexpected rise of a massive, inclusive, diverse, and intergenerational feminist movement for abortion legalization.

Zarembek and Rezende de Almeida's book shows how feminist movements in Mexico and Brazil leveraged their plurality to respond to attacks from religious and nonreligious conservatives. The authors claim that feminist mobilizations triggered a conservative opposition and focus on feminist responses to protect and expand reproductive rights. The book provides readers with an insightful description and theoretical understanding of feminism in the region and a novel use of network analysis. Building on the concept of nested networks, Zarembek and Rezende de Almeida define feminism as a "flexible umbrella that provides a space for various feminisms (i.e., radical feminism, autonomous feminism, Indigenous or Afro-feminism, etc.), with distinct levels of engagement" (3). They claim that feminist plurality is key to effectively blocking conservative attacks. Yet, the authors astutely claim that beyond the key role of plurality, minorities, especially Afro and Indigenous

women, still struggle for representation within the movement. For instance, “in Mexico, neither Afro nor Indigenous women’s organizations occupy a central position in terms of betweenness or cut points” (33).

Additionally, the authors show how the complex dynamics within the feminist field and between feminism and the state impact feminists’ ability to counter the conservative backlash successfully. Zarembeg and Rezende de Almeida advance the concept of nested feminist networks “oriented toward enabling particular policy outcomes and blocking conservative reactions. They comprise three dimensions in relation to the movement’s plurality across intersectional and sexual identity issues (horizontal), its relationship with the multifaceted state, including its branches, territory, and population (vertical), and the mediating role of political institutions in this relationship (intermediary)” (68).

Whereas most of the literature focuses on how feminists succeed in advancing policies, this book shows how feminists could also succeed in blocking conservative policies at the national and subnational levels. The authors show how feminists succeed when they become a “blocking network” for anti-abortion bills. Studying Brazilian and Mexican nested feminist networks, the authors provide three insights. First, Zarembeg and Rezende de Almeida demonstrate how an inclusive—which they define as plural—feminism contributes to strengthening, not weakening the movement. When feminists work together with other intersectional and LGBTQ+ groups, they are more likely to succeed. Second, the authors focus on state access. Here, they illustrate how Mexican feminists succeeded in building interparty consensus, giving them congressional influence, while Brazilians relied on participatory institutions and worked with left-wing parties to block anti-abortion legislation. Third, their findings support the work of others (e.g., Friedman 2019; Htun and Weldon 2018) showing that left-wing parties are important but insufficient to pass abortion rights.

Both works mention the importance of women’s movements in advancing reproductive rights and successfully blocking conservative movements. Yet, a central actor—the youth, especially the role played by young women—is overlooked in both books. I suspect that young women (loosely defined as high school and college educated) had a lot to do with reenergizing feminist movements in the region and creating spaces for mobilization and resistance. Whereas young women are central actors in the social movements studied by Fernández Anderson and in the umbrella feminism described by Zarembeg and Rezende de Almeida, they are overlooked. I wish both books had recognized the vitality (and emotions) that these young women bring to the movement and campaigns for abortion rights—as well as their role in mobilizing and organizing to protect their reproductive rights against conservative movements.

Together, these books provide readers with a panorama of the state of reproductive rights in the region. Each offers insightful explanations about the causes that led to the expansion or retrenchment of abortion rights in the region and should be required reading for scholars, practitioners, and activists interested in the issue.

References

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