

## Feminism and Conservatism in México

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Mexico is usually described as a secular country with a Catholic following that remains above the regional average. In this context, a strong presence of feminist institutional activism and a relatively weak performance of Evangelical religious conservative activism have developed (Pérez Guadalupe 2017). This essay reviews these usual descriptions in order to adjust this image, undertaking the task of avoiding both overestimating and underestimating the scope of these activisms. The essay also identifies emerging challenges for research on politics and gender in Mexico and Latin America more generally.

### FEMINIST ACTIVISMS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Feminist movements accompanied the struggle for democratic transition in Mexico (Martinez 2001). During this process, feminist activists accessed positions in all three branches of government. During the LVII Legislature (1997–2000), they built a Bicameral Commission and a participatory mechanism called the Women's Parliament. During the LVIII Legislature (2000–2003), an active relationship between congresswomen and the National Women Institute's Consultative Council in the executive branch was developed to defend the implementation of a genuine gender equality agenda in that institute. During the LVIX Legislature (2003–2006), a strong coalition of congresswomen approved the General Law for Women's Access to a Life Free of Violence (Martinez Medina 2010). These and subsequent women legislators continued to improve the design of the gender quota in the electoral codes, finally achieving parity reforms in 2014 and 2019. They also secured budgets earmarked for women's advancement policies (Tarrés and Zarembeg 2014).

Meanwhile, women also took positions inside the judiciary that were crucial on several strategic occasions. One of them was the historic ruling of the Federal Electoral Tribunal preceding the 2012 election, which forced political parties to follow the quota rule (Alanís Figueroa 2017). Something similar happened when a conservative reaction to the Law of Legal Interruption of Pregnancy (ILE in Spanish) in 2007 in

Mexico City included a challenge to the ILE that reached the Supreme Court of Justice. Despite the pressure, in 2008, the court upheld the contested norms, constituting a triumph for feminist activism in the judicial field (Pou Jiménez 2009).

Despite the strength (offensive and defensive) shown by activist networks at the federal level, these types of networks at the subnational sphere are much weaker. An eloquent event in this regard was the aforementioned reaction that followed the approval of the ILE, to the effect that today, 19 states (out of 32) have passed legislation in favor of the right to life beginning at conception.

As Reuterswärd (2018) shows, these reactions were carried out by pro-life groups that were masked as autonomous organizations but actually were linked to the Catholic Church. Given the prohibition in Mexico on church interference in political activities, these countermovements established overlapping forms of collaboration that allowed mobilization through the ecclesial parish structure.<sup>1</sup> The relationship with the church also enabled access to economic and social elites connected with parties in government and encounters with pro-life conservatives in the United States. Reuterswärd concludes that unlike Catholic conservative networks, local feminist networks act more like “small cliques” with occasional ability to negotiate but not to mobilize large numbers of people. Comparing the states of Querétaro and Aguascalientes, Zaremberg and Guzmán Lucero (2019) report similar findings.

The heterogeneous influence of feminist institutional activists can also be observed in relation to the various situations reached in the states by the so-called Instances of Women in the Federative Entities (IMEFs in Spanish) and the Municipal Instances of Women (IMMs in Spanish).<sup>2</sup> While horizontal and vertical parity rules have extended to the subnational level in Mexico (Caminotti and Freidenberg 2016), the scope of the institutional framework for carrying out gender-perspective policies varies widely across the country. Since their creation, IMEFs and IMMs have reported multiple institutional designs, including secretariats, institutes, programs, and councils created by decree of the state executive or the legislative branch, and have been conceived as deconcentrated government units (with relative autonomy but under budgetary dependence within a public administration sector) or as

1. The norms establishing separation between state and religion date to the Reform Laws of 1859 and their reinforcement after the Mexican Revolution. In 1992 and 2013, new reforms made this normative framework more flexible.

2. On the concept of institutional activism, see Abers and Tatagiba (2015).

decentralized bodies (with more autonomy of functions and budget) (Gamboa Montejano 2012; Tarrés 2006; Zarembeg, Salas, and López Jara 2019). In this context, the weakening and even the capture of these state and municipal institutions by “conservative coalitions” is not surprising (Avila Hernández 2018).

Finally, while feminist activism in Mexico is quite institutionalized (especially at the federal level), an important wave of protests connected to global developments has also emerged. The progressive laws advanced by feminist institutional activists have faced crucial implementation problems. The gap between the promises of progressive legislation and the regressive realities of daily life for Mexican women is constantly feeding protest. In this scenario, Indigenous and Afro-Mexican feminist activists have claimed greater recognition of their demands (Hernández Castillo 2016).

## THE CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS PRESENCE IN MEXICO

At this point, it is possible to describe some features of the progress of activist networks connected with conservative religious groups.<sup>3</sup> The evidence shows that the Catholic Church takes precedence over other groups in Mexico. Unlike other Latin American countries, according to Latinobarometer measurements, the percentage of those declaring themselves Catholic remained stable from 2000 to 2017, at around 80%, while the regional average decreased from 76% to 59% during the same period (Zarembeg 2019). However, there are important differences between the regions (see RIFREM 2016).

In this context, the diversity of groups usually referred to as Evangelicals make up 7% of parishioners. On the other hand, following information provided by the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB 2018), an unexpected presence of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal religious associations has been observed within the evangelical segment. While there are 3,446 Roman Apostolic Catholic associations, those related to Pentecostalism total 3,439, nearly equal to the number of Catholic ones. Even more surprising are the figures concerning religious ministers. While Catholic priests total 22,447, there are 43,873 Pentecostal ministers (SEGOB 2018).

The growth of neo-Pentecostals in the world of Mexican politics can be observed in the appearance of the Social Encounter Party (PES) in 2014

3. There are also nonreligious conservative groups; however, they are not preponderant, and addressing them exceeds the possibilities of this essay.

and its participation in the electoral coalition that led Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) to the presidency in 2018. Having won 10 seats in the previous legislature and 30 in the current one (although it lost its registration as a party),<sup>4</sup> the PES has promoted, in coordination with Catholic sectors, a legislative agenda against secular education, in favor of donations to churches being tax deductible, and allowing private funding (from churches) to political parties (Delgado-Molina 2019). During 2018, these actors were very active in boosting the National Front for the Family's campaign against a legislative proposal in favor of LGBTQ+ rights that includes equal marriage recognition. Comparing this countermobilization to those in Colombia and Mexico, López Pacheco (2018) observes in both cases similar strategies incorporating street-electoral and institutional-legislative activism. As a result of these strategies, the Mexican proposal in the federal legislature was defeated, on the basis that it was the responsibility of each state congress to resolve the matter. Currently, only 11 states (out of 32) have passed equal marriage laws. Where it has not been legislated, those interested can request a judicial protection (*amparo*) from a federal judge, since the Supreme Court established that it is unconstitutional to deny marriage to same-sex couples in the country.

At the same time, a network of associations that has found resonance in the current government has been strengthened. Proof of this is the unusual Ministry of Interior regulation approved on May 31, 2019, which enables a deep and explicit collaboration with churches. Specifically, article 86, section XIX proposes church participation in "social reconstruction and peace culture projects" all over the national territory. This action undermines the historical secularism of the Mexican state in an unprecedented way (Nassif 2019). New organizations, such as the National Confraternity of Evangelical Christian Churches (CONFRATERNICE in Spanish), led by the Christian pastor Arturo Farela Gutierrez (who blessed AMLO in the 2012 election campaign and has participated — and prayed — in several meetings with the president) is one of the most important actors involved in this cooperation. Recently, CONFRATERNICE has distributed its "Moral Booklet" in 7,000 temples related to the organization, in addition to disseminating it at mass events

4. In Mexico, parties lose registration if they do not receive at least 3% of votes. On this occasion, the figure of AMLO strongly capitalized the votes directly toward the MORENA list.

and house by house.<sup>5</sup> These developments have occurred alongside a growing withdrawal of public resources and legitimacy toward civil society organizations that promote gender and LGBTQ+ human rights agendas.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed the field of feminist activism vis-à-vis the activism of old and new conservative religious groups. To do this, we examined the actions carried out both at the federal and the subnational levels. In Mexico, feminist activists have made progress at the federal level but not at the subnational level to the same extent. Simultaneously, countermovements have gained increasing institutional access. The analysis of the emergence of old and new conservative religious actors in Mexico indicates several research challenges for the study of both the Mexican case in particular and the Latin American case as a whole.

To face these challenges, it will be important to employ theoretical and methodological perspectives that make visible the submerged, pragmatic, and flexible networks that the new religious conservative groups have established in the territories and with local and national elites. Similarly, it will be crucial to analyze feminist activism beyond the metropolis and the federal level. Finally, it will be important not only to focus on the equality agenda built around the classic man-woman binarism but also to include the obstacles that arise to the intersectional and LGBTQ+ agendas.

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5. See Rivera (2019). The Moral Booklet has been emphatically promoted by AMLO. It was written 75 years ago by Alfonso Reyes Ochoa (a Mexican diplomat and writer) and aims to spread cultural, moral, and spiritual values with a conservative message that exalts the family and the nation.

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## Antigender Activism in Peru and Its Impact on State Policy

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In Peru, the adoption of a new school curriculum based on gender equality and nondiscrimination against sexual minorities led to the mobilization in 2016 of organizations connected to conservative churches under the slogan *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (Don't Mess with My Children). This new countermovement uses street protests, the courts, and Congress to disseminate an antigender agenda that goes beyond its initial opposition to sexual education. Organizations in the countermovement consider the concept of gender to be a dangerous imperialist ideology, arguing that the state violates individual freedoms when it uses gender as one of the pillars of public policy.

This essay analyzes this movement through its actors, activities, and links to party politics. It shows that the movement is part of a transnational dynamic that benefits from Peru's political context of weak institutions, instability, and a high degree of legitimacy of religion in the public sphere.

### TRANSNATIONAL ANTIGENDER ACTIVISM IN LATIN AMERICA

As the birthplace of one of Latin America's strongest transnational antigender organizations, Peru is a central case to study contemporary conservative politics and its negative impact on women's and sexual minorities' rights. The transnational religious right movement called #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (Don't Mess with My Children or Leave My Kids Alone) was created in Peru in late 2016 by some nongovernmental