

Moral Panic and Gender Ideology in Latin America

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The incorporation of the category of gender into public policy generated strong controversies from the very beginning. Sometimes difficulties of understanding were invoked, yet the concept mostly faced political resistance and attempts to discredit this new perspective. Gender as a social category is indeed one of the most significant theoretical contributions of contemporary feminism, and the social strength of this perspective became evident at the Fourth International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, where gender became an indicator of development for the assessment of countries and women's contribution to the construction of societies was recognized.

In Chapter IV about 'Gender equality, equity, and the empowerment of women', the Program of Action (POA)¹ adopted in Cairo states:

The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development. The full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household' (POA para. 4.1).

This document further sets up important challenges and actions to build equal relations between men and women:

To achieve equality and equity based on harmonious partnership between men and women and enable women to realize their full potential (para. 4.3a); Countries should act to empower women and should take steps to eliminate inequalities between men and women as soon as possible (para. 4.4); Specific procedures and indicators should be devised for gender-based analysis of development programmes and for assessing the impact of those programmes on women's social, economic and health status and access to resources (para. 4.8). [And to establish] mechanisms for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life in each community and society and enabling women to articulate their concerns and needs (para. 4.4a).

At the end during the 4th meeting, on 10 September, the Main Committee approved the amendments to chapter IV (Gender equality, equity and

¹ <http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html>.

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empowerment of women) of the draft programme of action and recommended the chapter to the Conference for adoption as amended, with no reserves².

The first intense debates about 'gender' were unleashed at the time by conservative groups headed by the Holy See. Within these debates, there was much confusion about the term 'gender' – associations with homosexuality and raising fears about different aspects of sexuality expression. This caught the attention of the participants, and required the elaboration of multiple documents clarifying the concepts and thousands of conversations with delegates to highlight the importance of this perspective towards equality.

From then onwards, opponents have tried to discredit and distort the gender perspective, with the reservations submitted to the approved Program of Action as a case in point. These reservations hold that gender inequalities and gender mandates imposed on women and men are not a social construction, but emanate from nature and are considered as divine and as contemplated in the scriptures (Careaga 1995). The role of the Vatican within the resistance against gender should therefore not surprise us. Neither should the collusion between different religions and churches, since this has been their practice in intergovernmental spaces, in order to oppose any advance of women's rights. Their knowledge of the gender perspective is lucid enough that they take up Stoller's seminal analyzes to link the concept with transgender processes and gender expressions and identities. Today, the expression 'gender ideology' is used in Catholicism by clerics or laymen, as well by people not affiliated to any religion.

These attacks also aim at fueling moral panic. In Mexico, for instance, the promoters of the National Front for the Family used the 'gender ideology' rhetoric to oppose the presidential initiative for the legalization of egalitarian marriage presented on the International Day Against Homophobia in 2016. Their arguments also contested homoparental families, and comprehensive sex education. They agitated horrible ghosts arguing that children in schools would be required to define alternative gender identities through the use of clothing of the other sex, and would be told of different sexual practices with the aim of normalizing them.

This moral panic focused on homosexuals, but we know that in the confusion it also harms the rights of transgender people, and we should not forget that they focus on women's rights. 'Gender ideology' was even used to discuss aspects of climate change, as illustrated by Pope Francis's comments comparing gender identity to nuclear weapons:

Let us think of nuclear weapons, the possibility of annihilating a very large number of human beings in a few moments. Let us also think of genetic manipulation, manipulation of life or gender theory, which does not recognize the order of the true custody of creation has nothing to do with ideologies that regard man as an accident, as a problem to be eliminated. Put on man and woman and as the summit of his creation, has entrusted the earth to them. The design of the Creator is written in nature³.

It is evident that these false analogies do not only try to generate panic but clearly seek to locate responsibilities, thus demonizing homosexuals and women.

² A/CONF.171/L.3/Add.4 and 17.

³ <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/02/21/pope-transgender-people-are-like-nuclear-weapons/>.

They also contribute to spread false ideas about important social problems and discredit the possibility of building a culture of rights.

'Gender Ideology' in Latin America

Gender ideology has spread across the world in different ways. In Latin America, although the influence of Catholicism has been constant for many years with a leading role during the colonial period and in the worst moments of military dictatorships, the interest in influencing government decision-making today shows a more complex geopolitical map, characterized by the emergence of new churches which also try to enter politics.

Indeed, as emphasized by Pecheny, Jones, and Ariza in this special issue, the context of religious beliefs and practices in this region denotes a heterogeneity that goes beyond the usual belief that Catholicism is dominant in the region. Today, half of Latin American countries have more than 60% of Catholics. In contrast, the rest of the countries have 40 to 50% of Catholics, with important sectors of the population converted to evangelicalism and only two of these countries opting massively for atheism and agnosticism (Chile and Uruguay) (Corporación Latinbarómetro 2009).

As a result, in the last 19 years (1995–2014), Catholicism and its political influence has dramatically declined. In the early 1990s, the Vatican could influence governments in several countries, such as Argentina and Central America, and the spaces of intergovernmental dialogue revealed not only the Church's pressure but also the cynical approach with which it pushed an agenda or changed decisions during the process of discussion of international agreements on reproductive and sexual rights.

Today, the relationship between religion, democracy, and sexuality can be approached from at least two angles. On the one hand, the study of the ways in which Catholicism crucially permeates decision-making remains paramount. On the other, however, the influence of the evangelical presence in many of the countries in the region must be scrutinized. In the same vein, the incursion of feminist theologies into the traditional discourses of Catholicism, and the development of churches promoting sexual diversity, should not be overlooked.

These recent religious transformations raise interesting questions. For instance, what is the relation between less religious influence in decision-making and the promotion of sexual rights? Here, the example of Uruguay stands out. As a country with 40% of atheist/agnostic citizens, it has recently passed same-sex marriage, has established indicators of protection of sexual and reproductive rights, and does not criminalize the legal interruption of pregnancy.

However, beyond these direct relations between religion and sexual policies, other elements must be taken into account, and crucial transformations of the political ideologies of the governments of the region must be mentioned. The tension between left and right has been diluted or has dramatically transformed over the years, leading to the further blurring of these political categories. The left has historically not been particularly progressive in the field of sexuality, but it has begun to broaden its views after the incorporation of gender in its discussions. Some politicians are now in favor of sexual rights, including the right to abortion, for which they undertook educational policies in favor of a better sexuality for all. This said, these discussions seem to actually divide and

define different lefts. Indeed, different interpretations and necessarily different representations inspire the action of left-wing governments in the region, from an open and firm endorsement of this agenda in Uruguay or Mexico City – which is combined with a clear support of secularism – to positions influenced by archbishops and the most recalcitrant conservative organizations such as the Opus Dei, like in Nicaragua, Ecuador or Argentina (see Pecheny, Jones and Ariza). Most governments will be found somewhere between these two poles.

At the same time, the face of the opposition is changing. Resistance still comes from conservative politicians in countries like Chile, Argentina, and Costa Rica. There, the election of conservative governments has led to a deepening of the predominant neoliberal economic model and a widening of the social gap. This network of conservative politicians, which is tightly linked to groups of businessmen, has also imposed a supposedly developmental agenda that includes the support of traditional values.

In other parts of the region, conservative groups have joined forces with emerging religions, not only to stop any progress in this field, but also to overthrow the agenda of governments that seek to go further with reforms. Brazil is probably the most interesting country when it comes to such alliances because of the mediatic effect the emerging religions have achieved. These religious groups originally sought to act as a substitute for the State in taking care of the most needy, but they simultaneously defined a route to influence the political structure and to occupy positions of popular representation. More recently, Mexico – where the principle of secularism has been recognized for almost 200 years – became another dramatic case. In this country, the party *Encuentro Social*, closely connected to Evangelical circles and claiming to rely on love and the family, has managed to formally register as a political party in 2014. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have indeed expanded their coverage in Latin America, not only geographically but also in strategic terms. They have historically targeted sectors of rural and marginal urban populations, where neither the State nor the Catholic Church and the other 'historic' Churches had a stable presence. They have also recruited professional and strong economic sectors. They now represent more than 60% of the Latin American region.

As Pecheny, Jones, and Ariza have discussed, the Churches' influence has a powerful impact on public life. The promises of the churches appear as an alternative to the vacuum of future and transcendence that the State has been unable to fill. In addition, the lack of confidence in the alternatives proposed by the political parties, and the way the latter have not fulfilled their promises, have led the population in a state of apathy and defenselessness. This makes them easy prey to the religious offer, where they find easy insertion in and membership of a community that gives space to free speech. As they resolve family and community conflicts, they construct protective dykes within a social environment where advances in the recognition of women's rights, sexual rights, and policies to protect LGBTI communities have no place (Herrera 2017). The acceptance by the religious community and the benefits obtained through its membership is thus conditioned upon a faithful following of its moral precepts. Messianic discourses are relevant to support populist proposals that are largely based on traditional values, in which difference constitutes a social threat.

In conclusion, the complexity is vast, and the geopolitical landscape has many edges that also turn and move fast on different routes. The analysis of these regional processes has presented us with enormous challenges and requires us

to be attentive to how these edges are becoming relevant – at what time and for what ends.

The recent emergence of wide social fronts denouncing ‘gender ideology’ and defending so-called ‘traditional values’ reveals where these forces have defined their route. They now constitute a platform through which different religious currents meet in search of the restoration of social order. A social order centered in the most traditional visions about family, women, and sexuality. Such strategic discourse, as they call it, plays a predominant role in delegitimizing important theoretical advances that have marked the trend towards substantive equality between women and men, and the recognition of the various expressions of gender and sexuality. The articulation achieved by these forces clearly shows their international reach and the accumulation of resources that support them.

So the challenge we face today is not minor; we face a force backed by traditional morals that makes sense to many, a force that also becomes relevant in economic and political spaces and that could continue its process of destabilizing the recent advances in terms of sexual rights. Nevertheless, the work carried out over decades of constant discussion and management shows that there are hopeful ways to keep resisting. This does not only mean to maintain what has been conquered but also to move forward and book more progress in the construction of the society we have dreamed of.

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