

From the “first” to the “second” feminism in Latin America. Continuities and Changes

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RESÜMEE

In Lateinamerika – ebenso wie in Europa und den USA – können wir grob zwischen zwei feministischen Wellen unterscheiden: eine zu Beginn, die andere gegen Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts. Das Hauptziel des Aufsatzes ist es, die verschiedenartigen Kontinuitäten und den Wandel zu erklären, sowohl im Hinblick auf die Methoden, mit denen Frauen versuchten eine Anerkennung ihrer staatsbürgerlichen und zivilen Rechte zu erreichen als auch im Hinblick auf weitergehende Forderungen. Der Beitrag beginnt mit einer kurzen Beschreibung der ersten Feministinnen sowie ihren allgemeinen Zielen und zeigt einige Beispiele auf. Anschließend behandelt der Artikel die Diskussion eines zweiten, „neuen“ Feminismus, der Mitte der 1970er Jahre ihren Anfang nahm. Abschließend verweist der Beitrag auf die großen Kontinuitäten und den Wandel, die sich zwischen den beiden Bewegungen ausmachen lassen.

Feminist ideas and activities at the beginning of the twentieth century

The origins of feminist movements and ideas can be traced back to Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century, where some forerunners became active during the first half of the century, and a broader movement developed in the second half.

In Latin America, feminist ideas had followers mainly in the Southern Cone, Southern Brazil and Mexico, whereas in countries like Peru or Bolivia, only a few and isolated women questioned the traditional position of women in society. This situation follows from the fact that in the first group of countries, industrialisation and (mostly European) immigration had led to economic and social modernization and the formation of an educated middle class which asked for political changes in the old oligarchical republics.

In most of these countries, the constitution granted universal or qualified suffrage to the male population, but only about ten percent of the male population exercised the right to vote. In addition, most elections were manipulated. With the rise of a new middle class, men from these sectors began to demand the opening of the traditional political system, and women took the opportunity to address the question of their political rights. The defects of democracy, namely the exclusion of large sectors of the population, revealed itself even more dramatically if one includes the women and especially those who by this time had received a good education and thus could not be dismissed on the bases of not being prepared to enter into public debates. The early feminists skilfully linked general social and political problems to their role in society, and they achieved several aims by this tactic, though not all of them. The connection between defects of democracy and the role of women became visible again during the second wave of feminism when women played a crucial role in the resistance against military regimes and the transition to democracy.

Social Reform and Feminism

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, politicians became increasingly concerned about the consequences of working women and children for the future of their respective nations. Industrialisation had increased the number of women and children working in factories or in home industries under miserable conditions and for equally miserable salaries. Housing conditions were terrible and infant mortality rates alarmingly high. Bad hygienic conditions helped the spread of diseases which had almost been overcome before. The modern Latin American metropolises were infested again by cholera or yellow fever, but politicians and doctors were equally concerned about the high number of patients with syphilis, which was linked to the growth of prostitution.¹ The future of the nation seemed to be endangered because of the lack of healthy and orderly workers and soldiers, so that not only doctors and hygienic reformers, but also politicians saw the necessity of reforms. These reforms were linked closely to the perception of women who were considered responsible for the upbringing of the children – and for the spread of syphilis. Social reform ideas, as they came up in Latin America, were thus mainly directed towards lower class women, as they were seen almost exclusively in their role as mothers. This brought women into the focus of public debates and gave the more educated amongst them an opportunity to demand changes. For this reason, political and social reform ideas had many things in common with the feminist ones.

1 See D. J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina*, Lincoln 1991; C. Schettini Pereira, *Políticas del sexo en el Río de Janeiro Republicano*, in I. Morant (ed.), *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina. Del siglo XX a los umbrales del siglo XXI*, Vol. III, Madrid 2006, p. 933-943; S. Hepke, *Prostitution in Havana (1850–1925)*, Stuttgart 2008.

Latin American feminists were, of course, as diverse as society, but we can broadly distinguish between three currents.² At the beginning of the century, numerically and politically most important were the so called liberal or bourgeois feminists, which pursued mainly the right of education for women, as well as political and civil rights. Secondly, there were socialist feminists, who also advocated civil and political rights but saw a closer connection of the gender question with economic and class problems. Thirdly, in many countries, especially in the Southern Cone, the anarchists also addressed feminist issues by insisting on personal and social rights, freedom from all kinds of domination. Some of them even talked about “free love”. The political and social impact of these ideas was however limited, not only because of its radicalism but also because the anarchist movement was violently suppressed at the beginning of the twentieth century.³

Motherhood was the common denominator of all these movements and helped to bridge other ideological differences, but it was also the most important tool for initiating women’s topics in the public debate. All feminists highlighted the role of mothers as the educators of future citizens and nurturers of future workers and soldiers. But in order to fulfil this task, women needed to be conditionally enabled to do so properly. On this bases, feminists demanded better education, protection against harmful working conditions and ultimately political rights for women. “Motherhood eventually redefined the relationship between women and the state, which would owe them protection for their nurturing of new lives. Motherhood was a key asset in supporting women’s claims for empowerment. [...] It is not surprising that Southern Cone feminists opted for a feminism that would fit into their social milieu and be acceptable to other women as well as to the men who held the reins of power. Feminism oriented toward motherhood was more than a strategy to win favourable legislation. It was an essential component of their cultural heritage: a tune that feminists not only knew how to play but wished to play.”⁴ Given this cultural heritage, the feminist discussion about the relationship of equality with and difference from men was led in a different way than in Europe. Latin American women always stressed the difference and demanded special rights and protection parting from this position. They argued that women needed laws that would protect them as mothers as well as compensate their biological and social disadvantage. This approach should not, however, be compared with contemporary quota laws in favour of women or other measures of “affirmative action”. Early twentieth century feminists did not think that the differences between men and women existed due to the social construction of gender roles but due to a “natural” biological difference between the sexes. For this reason, they did not question gender roles. Some of them even celebrated a feminine mystique of women as gentle and selfless persons with a higher moral standing than men.

2 F. Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice*, Hanover/NH 1991; As. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890–1940*, Lincoln 1995.

3 For the anarchist women see S. Menéndez/B. Pottthast, *En búsqueda de las mujeres. Percepciones sobre género, trabajo y sexualidad*. Buenos Aires 1900–1930, Amsterdam 1997, p. 53-56, 129-134; A. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change* (note 2), p. 264-266.

4 A. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change* (note 2), p. 38.

They propagated a vision of women as social redeemers and demanded civil and political rights on this basis.⁵

The early Argentine feminist movement

Many of the characteristics of Latin American feminism mentioned above can be traced clearly in the case of Argentina, which will serve here as an example. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the country, and especially its capital, had gone through a process of rapid economic modernisation and mass immigration. The number of inhabitants of Buenos Aires rose from 300.000 in 1880 to 1.2 millions in 1910, with about one third of all inhabitants being immigrants. The city could hardly absorb so many newcomers and had to struggle with severe problems concerning housing and working conditions. As described above, this resulted in high rates of child mortality and the spread of epidemics, which started to alarm the traditional elite. In addition to the medical questions, many politicians also were concerned about so many women working in factories and feared not only for the reproduction but also for the traditional family that was seen as the base of the nation. As a result, a social and political discourse emerged that connected the role of women and family with the future of the nation and addressed topics like hygiene, "scientific" child care, medical prevention and the conditions of working women. This debate not only involved academics and politicians but also many female doctors – who in the course became feminists.⁶

At the beginning of the twentieth century, economic growth and welfare, mainly through exports, had led to the rise of an Argentine middle class, among which second and third generation immigrants formed an important group. They had access to a modern public educational system which was open to both sexes, and women were even admitted to universities at an early date. For this reason, Argentina as well as other countries in the Southern Cone, counted on a group of educated women, mostly teachers and doctors, who participated in these debates, assisted in congresses about hygiene and child care and gained the respect of their male colleagues in this discussion.⁷

5 Ibid., p 13.

6 D. Armus, *El descubrimiento de la enfermedad como problema social*, in: M. Zaida Lobato (ed.), *Nueva Historia Argentina*, Vol. V, Buenos Aires 2000, p. 507-552. The most important books on this topic are A. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change* (note 2); D. J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires. Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, Lincoln/London 1991. For a more general view see N. Leys Stephan, *The Hour of Eugenics. Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*, Ithaca 1991, as well as several articles in: I. Morant (ed.), *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina* (note 2), Vol. III., p. 765-796, 813-914.

7 A good example is C. Grierson. Born in Argentina as the child of immigrants from Ireland and Scotland, she became the first woman in Argentina to graduate from medical school in 1899. She presided the "Feminine Congress" in 1910 and became one of the pioneers of Argentine feminism. Others like Elwira Rawson and Julieta Lantieri have a similar biography. See D. Barrancos, *Inclusión/Exclusión. Historia con mujeres*, Buenos Aires 2002. For examples from Brazil see J. E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex. The struggle for women's rights in Brazil, 1850–1940*, Durham 1990; S. K. Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy. The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914–1940*, Chapel Hill 1996; B. Potthast, *Vom Kinderschutzbund zum Völkerbund. Die internationalen Aktivitäten lateinamerikanischer Feministinnen in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: E. Schöck-Quin-

A crucial step in the formation of the feminist movement in the Southern Cone was the “First Feminine Congress”, held in Buenos Aires in 1910, the year in which the centennial of independence was celebrated in Argentina. This was an excellent timing, since politicians wanted to demonstrate the modernity of their country, and the educated women who debated about social and medical reforms became a symbol of progress and modernity. They served as a proof that Argentina could claim a position among the most progressive countries in the world. The women debated topics like educational, medical and civil reform, but also stressed the need of political rights for women. The congress brought many different women from different countries together, gave them a platform for their ideas and eventually led to the foundation of the first feminist associations by participants of these congresses.⁸

The women who attended the different congresses soon demanded not only protection for working women and children, education and medical care for the poor, but also political rights. In Argentina, as well as in all other Latin American countries, there existed several obstacles for women’s political rights. The most important one was the submission of married women to their husbands in Spanish civil law, which had not been changed after independence. Because of this subordination, an independent political vote seemed impossible, and several suffrage projects supported by male politicians wanted to grant political rights only to single and widowed women, but not to married ones.⁹ The legal subordination also explains why many women groups, especially the liberal ones, initially demanded only changes in the civil codes, and only later addressed political rights.

Another common feature was the fact, that practically all early Latin American constitutions were gender neutral. They stipulated the conditions for the exercise of political rights by the citizens, sometimes with restrictions on certain groups like priests, servants, illiterates etc., but did not define citizenship in terms of gender. Since women were not explicitly excluded, some of them started to claim their right to vote on the basis that they were Argentine, Mexican or Brazilian citizens, a fact that nobody would deny. In Argentina, the debate became especially important when political pressure from the middle classes led to an electoral reform in 1912. The so-called Sáenz-Peña law tried to end the electoral fraud and include more men from the middle and lower classes into politics, since there were no formal restrictions to citizenship in Argentina. The new law

teros / A. Schüler / A. Wilmers / K. Wolff (eds.), *Politische Netzwerkerinnen. Internationale Zusammenarbeit von Frauen 1830–1960*, Berlin 2007, p. 155–182.

- 8 D. Barrancos, *Inclusión / Exclusión* (note 8); F. Miller, *Latin American Women* (note 3); A. Lavrín, *Women, Feminism and Social Change* (note 3); Paulina Luisi, *La mujer en la Democracia*, Buenos Aires 1938. Brazilian feminists organized a similar congress in 1922, the year of the Brazilian Centennial, with equally good political results. See J. E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex* (note 8).
- 9 This tradition was so strong that even after changes in the civil law codes in most countries, the idea of the male head of the family persisted, and the constitutional project of the Brazilian president Getulio Vargas in 1931 aimed at granting political rights only to single and widowed women as well as to married ones with their husbands permission. After strong protests from the Brazilian feminists, however, all women were finally granted political rights. See J. E. Hahner, *Emancipating the Female Sex* (note 8), p. 160 / 161.

wanted to achieve this by linking the voters' registers to the ones of military service. This, of course, meant the exclusion of women, and the new, well intended law, complicated the question of women as voters.¹⁰

One Argentine feminist, Julieta Lantieri, especially tried to exploit the ambiguities of female citizenship in order to further the suffrage question. Julieta Lantieri, a daughter of Italian immigrants, had received a doctoral degree in medicine from the University of Buenos Aires and was appointed as a professor in 1911. In order to take the position, she acquired the Argentine citizenship. With the official document in hands – the document that declared her a citizen of Argentina – she tried to vote in the next election. She was, of course, not admitted because of her sex and because she did not figure in the voters register. Lantieri then presented herself at the barracks and asked to be drafted in order to be able to vote.¹¹ Together with other feminists she later organized public female elections in a Buenos Aires park in front of the official election hall. These provocative actions were accompanied by political lobbying, and between 1919 and 1930, several women's suffrage projects were presented in the Argentine congress. Some of them even were approved in this house, but not debated in the senate, so that in the end, all motions failed until a military coup in 1930 ended this period of intense feminist activity without achieving political rights.¹² The women had, however, gained some battles regarding their civil status, educational and professional possibilities as well as in the legislation directed towards the protection of working women and children.¹³

The international platform

The Argentine, as well as the Brazilian, Chilean or Uruguayan women also had close connections to women's rights movements in the United States and Europe. They collaborated with the International Council of Women and participated in several international conferences, which addressed the problems of women's work and children whereas others dedicated themselves to the civil and political rights for women. At the beginning of the century, the most important was the Pan-American Organization, which organized not only several of the conferences mentioned before, but also gave a platform to a conference on women's suffrage in 1922 in Baltimore, which strengthened the inter-American female connections and led to the foundation of the Pan-American Association for the Advancement of Women, and, in 1928, to the foundation of the Interamerican Commission of Women / Comisión Interamericana de Mujeres (CIM), which has been cha-

10 See H. Sabato/A. Lettieri, *La vida política en la Argentina del siglo XIX. Armas, votos y voces*, Buenos Aires 2003; A. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism and Social Change* (note 3); Waldo Ansaldi, *La trunca transición del Régimen oligárquico al Régimen democrático*, in: R. Falcón (ed.), *Nueva Historia Argentina*, Vol. VI, Buenos Aires 2000, p. 15-57.

11 A. Bellotta, Julieta Lantieri. *La pasión de una mujer*, Buenos Aires 2001; D. Barrancos, *Inclusión/Exclusión* (note 8).

12 Something similar happened in revolutionary Mexico. See A. Macías, *Against all odds. The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940*, Westport/London 1982; Sh. Soto, *Emergence of the modern Mexican woman. Her participation in Revolution and struggle for equality, 1910–1940*, Denver 1990.

13 A. Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change* (note 3).

racterized as “the first governmental organization in the world to be founded for the express purpose of working for the rights of women.”¹⁴ The CIM, which interestingly enough is better known in its Spanish abbreviation, has been and still is important for the feminists’ cause, especially because it gathers data on the situation of women that otherwise would never have been collected, and it raises issues that other political institutions would have never addressed by themselves.

Latin American women also participated actively in the commission of the League of Nations against the trade of women and children, the so called “white slavery”. These activities in international organizations gave them prestige in their home countries. Even conservative politicians praised these women as symbols of the modernity and importance of the nation, which in turn gave the feminists a better chance to be heard when they addressed other topics, like for example political rights for women.¹⁵

As a consequence of the economic crisis in 1928/29 and the consequent social upheaval, many Latin American countries, among them those with the most active feminist movements like Uruguay and Argentina, turned into military or authoritarian rule which made feminist activities much more difficult or useless. In most Latin American countries, women had to wait until after World War II before they were granted full political rights. After the war, however, inter-American pressure as well as a general public acceptance of a more active role of women in public affairs obligated those Latin American countries which had not yet done it up to that moment to grant full political rights to women.

Country	Year	Country	Year
Ecuador	1929	Chile	1949**
Uruguay	1932	Haiti	1950
Brazil	1932	Bolivia	1952
El Salvador	1939	Mexiko	1954
Cuba	1940		
Rep. Dom.	1942	Colombia	1954
Panama	1945	Honduras	1954
Venezuela	1946*	Peru	1955
Argentina	1947	Nicaragua	1957
Costa Rica	1949	Paraguay	1967

*1945 municipal suffrage ** 1934 municipal suffrage

14 J. B. Scott, *The international conferences of American States 1889–1928*, New York 1931, VII, cit. from F. Miller, *Latin American Women* (note 3), p. 95. See also L. S. Rowe / J. B. Scott (eds.), *Conferencias internacionales americanas 1889–1936. Recopilación de los tratados, convenciones, recomendaciones, resoluciones y mociones adoptadas por las siete primeras conferencias internacionales americanas*, Washington D. C. 1938, p. 404/405, 425.

15 B. Pottthast, *Vom Kinderschutzbund zum Völkerbund* (note 8).

With legal political equality and many more civil rights¹⁶, the first step was done, although cultural tradition and socio-economic obstacles to women's participation in politics persisted. To overcome those is the subject of the second wave of feminism. Before we turn to this movement, we will summarise the most important characteristics of the first wave of feminism:

1. Feminist movements developed mainly in countries which had undergone social changes through modernisation and industrialisation, which had developed a modern educational system open to both sexes, and had received a considerable amount of immigrants, mainly from Europe.
2. In these countries, the question of women's civil and political rights was linked to a general debate about progress and modernity, and men as well as women considered education, health and some kind of social welfare as important for the future of the nation.
3. The first generation of feminists were middle- and upper class people, often second generation immigrants, many of them doctors and teachers.
4. Participation in scientific and international conferences provided an important platform for the discussion of women's problems and led to political activities.
5. All women stressed the reproductive function of women and their role as mothers and educators. They used the identification of women with motherhood to claim more rights for women and to demand their position in politics and society, but not on the basis of equality but because of "natural" differences.
6. The debate about political rights for women was often embedded in a more general discussion on the exclusivity of Latin American politics and the necessity to broaden political participation of men from other social sectors.
7. Debates about the protection of working women and children, health care or educational and political rights did not question gender roles in general and excluded taboo topics like sexuality and a double standard of sexual moral.

The second wave

At the beginning of the nineteen-sixties, all Latin American women had been granted equal political rights, although there still persisted many restrictions in the civil and social sphere. Furthermore, big social differences still characterised Latin America, and especially rural and lower class women suffered from these inequalities. It was again a combination of international and national pressure which led to the conviction of many politicians that reforms were needed in order to maintain order and economic prosperity. Some of these reforms deeply affected the role of women. The most important one can be characterised as a silent "revolution" in female education, especially in higher

16 Especially married women were still in a subordinated position in many respects due to the notion of the man as the patriarch.

education. Interested in these topics, the Organisation of American States, the Alliance for Progress and the UNESCO started a mayor educational offensive in Latin America in the nineteen-sixties which resulted in an enormous increase in the number of school-children. In 1950, there was an estimated number of about 16 million, in 1980 about 85 million (with the general increase in population already taken into consideration). Even more telling in terms of gender are the figures for university students which rose from 2 percent of all women and 4 percent of all men in 1960 to 17 percent of the women and 20 percent of the men in 1985. These figures indicate that the impact was stronger in the case of the female population. Nowadays, there are almost as many female students in Latin America as male ones, in some countries (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay) the number of female students even exceeds the one of male ones, although the former can mostly be found in typical “female” careers. Nevertheless, there are big regional differences, and countries like Bolivia can not really be compared with neighbouring Argentina or Brazil. Also, there is still a big difference between the rural and the urban situation, and the gap between literate men and women constitutes about 12 percent in the country-side, compared with only 6 percent among the urban population.¹⁷

The increase in university students, especially in female ones, had strong long-term consequences for gender relations. Latin American students were influenced by the 1968 student revolts in Europe and the anti-Vietnam and hippie-movements in the United States, but even more by the Cuban Revolution (1959) and the activities of Che Guevara in Bolivia (1966/67), the “option for the poor” proclaimed by the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín in 1968 as well as the “Theology of Liberation”, and by the Pedagogy of the Oppressed developed by Paulo Freire at the end of the nineteen-fifties. Whereas socialist and communist ideas spread at the universities and within other political groups, at the popular level new ideas were propagated in so-called “comunidades de base”, church-based groups who worked with a mixture of these new theories and methods. The concept of “conscientización”, that is the creation of a critical awareness of society as a human and therefore changeable product, became important in pedagogy as well as in theology and influenced these popular communities. In these groups, women made up the majority, and many poorly educated rural and urban women started to develop political ideas that eventually led them to question not only their class based subordination but also the patriarchal structures in society and family. In the meantime, many young male and female students turned to active political opposition, and some of them joined the guerrilla movements that spread during these years. In these guerrilla movements, women for the first time represented an important minority. Exact figures are impossible to get, but it is estimated that in the urban guerrilla of the Southern Cone as well as in the Central American guerrillas about one third were women.¹⁸ The hope for

17 B. Pottthast, *Urbanisierung und sozialer Wandel in: W. L. Bernecker/M. Kaller-Dietrich/B. Pottthast/H. W. Tobler (eds.), Lateinamerika 1870–2000. Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Wien 2007. p. 113–129. For actual data see J. W. Wilkie (ed.), *Statistical Abstracts of Latin America*, Bd. 38, Los Angeles 2002. For long-term developments see F. Miller, *Latin American Women* (note 3).

18 See K. Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements. Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas. Cuba*, University Park,

the creation of a better society ended, however, in military dictatorships in Brazil (1964) or Peru (1968), and, especially brutally in Chile (1973) and Argentina (1976). These dictatorships ended not only left-wing but also some feminist activities which afterwards could not be resuscitated easily, due to exile and death of its most important protagonists. The political experiences of this time changed the surviving women, however.

The women who participated in left-wing movements and in the guerrilla in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies had not done so because of feminist convictions. Due to orthodox Marxist theory, the gender antagonism was mostly seen as a "minor contradiction" ("Nebenwiderspruch") which would be resolved automatically after the creation of an equal socialist society. In addition, since most of the early feminists were liberal bourgeois women with sometimes even paternalistic attitudes towards working class people, feminism in Latin America came to be seen as a middle or upper class phenomenon, a "luxury problem" of "bourgeois" women. This vision led to considerable tensions and animosities between feminists and left-wing female activists that could only slowly and gradually be overcome up to the nineteen-eighties.

A crucial event for women, not only in Latin America, was the proclamation of the United Nations "Decade of Women" along with the celebration of the first International Women's Conference in Mexico-City in 1975. In Latin America, the conference was prepared by women of the CIM and the International Labour Organisation, both important institutions yet for feminists of the first wave. On this background, the conference focused strongly on legal and labour-related questions. But, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, it also involved a considerable number of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO). Due to this structure and the good preparation, several thousand Latin American women, official delegates as well as activists from different female groups, attended the conference. International funding had helped most Latin American countries to prepare for the meeting with workshops and conferences, and this international support directed the attention even of conservative male politicians towards women's problems, even if this occurred partly only due to the fact that prestige and money were involved.¹⁹ But the UN conference also brought light the division between left-wing activists from Third World countries, mainly Latin Americans, and "Western" feminists. Symbolic for this division was a clash between the Bolivian labour union activist Domitila Barrios de Chungara and the North American feminist Betty Friedan.

Domitila Barrios was the speaker of the so-called "Housewives Committee" of a Bolivian mine who fought against privatisation and neo-liberal economic reforms in her country which eventually led to the unemployment of thousands of miners. She was brought to Mexico by a Brazilian film maker who had made a documentary on the struggle of these

Pennsylvania 2002; I. A. Luciak, *After the Revolution. Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala*, Baltimore 2001. For the urban guerrilla in the nineteen-seventies in the South see F. Miller, *Latin American Women* (note 3), p. 169-174.

19 We can draw a parallel to the use women made of the Commemoration Celebrations in 1910 or 1922.

women, and through her appearance at the conference and the following publication of the story of her life in the form of a “testimonio”²⁰ which became a best seller in Europe and the US²¹, she became the symbol of oppressed poor working class women in Latin America and beyond. The debate revealed a considerable amount of misunderstandings between the Latin American labour-union activist and the US-American feminist. Whereas the latter were concerned about the right of birth control, abortion and the control of women over their own body and life, the former considered birth control a capitalist mechanism in order to weaken the working class and stressed the need to fight alongside with men.²² This social and ideological gap dominated the conference and the meetings of Latin American women during the following years, but with the beginning of the nineteen-eighties feminists and left-wing female activists reconciled. While the first encounters in the newly created conferences for Latin America and the Caribbean from 1981 to 1987 were still dominated by the conflict between revolutionary struggle and the fight for women’s rights, between lower and middle or upper class women, between capitalism and socialism, the second half of the decade brought along more mutual understanding and acceptance. Women of all political orientations began to accept plurality and the fact, that there could be several different approaches or priorities.

In order to explain this development, we have to look at what happened in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, especially under the military dictatorships. On the one hand, military dictatorships had eliminated (literally and/or metaphorically) most left-wing, revolutionary women’s groups. On the other hand, the state terror and the disappearance of many activists, mostly young people, led to the appearance of women on the political scene. Simultaneously, the economic crisis that resulted from the disastrous economic politics of the regimes led to the organization of women’s groups in the marginal quarters who tried to alleviate their daily problems through new kinds of organizations. Many of these groups sprang from the earlier “comunidades de base”. Later on, and partly also due to the political oppression in their country under military dictatorships like the one in Guatemala, indigenous women appeared on the scene and started to demand political as well as cultural changes within their communities. These groups which do not consider themselves as feminists nevertheless became important actors and helped both to

20 The so called “literatura de testimonio” is based on the life story of a person from a marginal group (subaltern) who would normally not have the possibility to express himself or herself. For this reason, the story is written down by an anthropologist or journalist who gives this person a voice. The genre was practised first by Mexican anthropologists but has since then become prominent also as a political statement. Other prominent life stories are those of María Carolina de Jesús, an Afro-Brazilian, or Rigoberta Menchú. See C. M. de Jesús, *Beyond all pity*. Translated by D. St. Clair, London 1990; R. M. Levine / J. C. Sebe Bom Meihy, *The Life and Death of Carolina María de Jesús*, Albuquerque 1995; E. Paulino Bueno, *Carolina María de Jesús in the context of “Testimonio”*. Race, sexuality, and exclusion, in: *Criticism* (1999) Vol. 41, p. 257-284; R. Menchú, *Rigoberta. La nieta de los mayas*, Buenos Aires 1998; A. Arias (ed.), *The Rigoberta Menchú controversy*, Minneapolis 2001.

21 D. Barrios de Chungara, with M. Viezzer, *Let me speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Women of the Bolivian mines*. Translated by V. Ortiz, New York 1978 (1977).

22 F. Miller, *Latin American Women* (note 3).

change women's role in society and the feminist movement in Latin America as well as to confer on them important roles in the process of transition to democracy.

The most famous of this first type of organisation are the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They opposed one of the most violent and brutal Latin American authoritarian regimes: the military dictatorship in Argentina, which lasted from 1976 to 1983. Between 10.000 and 30.000 people, most of them young students, labour union members or socialists were abducted, tortured and killed. About one third of the "disappeared" were young women. The first group of the Mothers was founded in 1977, at the peak of the "disappearance" of young people, and soon spread from Buenos Aires to other cities. Every Thursday, the mothers joined on the central Plaza de Mayo in front of the seat of the government, held up posters with photos and names of their children, demanded to know about their fate – and to get them back alive. They wore white scarves which symbolized the diapers of their children. All of these women were housewives from different social sectors who had not been in politics before, and most men, even their own husbands, thought that what they were doing was quite naïf. At first, the military regime did not consider them an important threat to their rule, underestimating them until the movement grew and received attention from abroad. The women had become the most visible and effective opposition to the military regime in Argentina.²³ They denounced the violation of basic human rights committed by the regime, and they did this on the basic principle that they, as mothers who were responsible for the family and the children, had the right, even the obligation, to do so. By insisting on the still widespread notion of women's, especially mothers' moral superiority they revealed the amorality of the military rule. Their radical critique, based on moral principles and the principle of non-violence, also became important in the process of transition to democracy when they insisted on the investigation of the crimes and the punishment of the responsible officers.²⁴

What I would like to stress at this point is the fact, that these women were no feminists, but that some of them became feminists during the course of their activities. Others did not, and if we read the proclamations of the Mothers today, we find a notion of motherhood and feminine peacefulness and morality that sounds far too pathetic and one-sided to us. The Mothers' adherence to traditional gender roles has led to some critique from a feminist perspective. On the other hand, the Mothers and their actions revealed the necessity of women to get involved in politics and were a proof of the "western" feminist credo that "the private is political". The underlying reasons, however, are quite different in the case of the Argentine Mothers. They got involved into politics not because of gender issues but because of their notion of motherhood: when the state not only fails to protect the family but destroys it, the mothers are obliged to intervene. Through their

23 M. Guzmán de Bouvard, *Revolutionizing motherhood. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, Wilmington 1994; S. Bianchi, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, in: I. Morant (ed.), *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina* (note 2), Vol. IV, p. 675-700.

24 For further information see www.madres.org.ar and www.madresfundadoras.org.ar.

actions, however, the Mothers publicised, although unwillingly, that there was no clear division between family and state and that the private is also public and political.

In the following years, other groups of mothers who protested against state and other forms of terror were formed in several other Latin American countries, and some of them followed a more feminist line than the Argentine example.²⁵ Nowadays, there are still several groups of mothers against violence, for example in Columbia or El Salvador, who protest against violations of human rights on the basis of their role as mothers. They identify with the ideal of motherhood, which is their base of power and which legitimates their actions. But they also make use of it in order to resist, and through their actions they subvert the traditional notion of the public as a male and the private as a female realm.

These recent women's groups, may they be based on the idea of the holiness of motherhood or not and may their origins stem from economic or political crisis, quite often can be traced to female activities in the church during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. This is particularly visible in Chile, where the so-called "arpilleras" became an important and well-known symbol of resistance against the violation of human rights under the military dictatorship. Women had started to gather and talk in parish groups, which seemed unsuspecting to the military and in the course of their activities primarily directed to practical daily needs and survival they developed a new political consciousness. The Chilean women who joined against the state terror and the impossibility to fulfil their role as mothers, nevertheless, were more conscious of gender problems than many other groups. They eventually combined feminism, opposition, and democracy in the slogan "Democracy in the country and democracy at home", which was adopted by women throughout Latin America. At that moment, and contrary to traditional feminism, these women began to question not only the position of women in the public but also in the domestic sphere and to draw parallels between the two realms. The underlying conviction of these women was that a true democratisation of national politics was impossible if power and gender relations within the families remained unchanged.²⁶

Equally important, and also not feminist in the narrow sense, were women from the marginal quarters of São Paulo, Lima or Mexico, who started to join in the nineteen-eighties and early nineties in order to survive in the slums of the metropolis. They tried to get fresh water, electricity or kindergardens for their communities, they organised "ollas communes" (communal cooking pots) and "vasos de leche" (glasses of milk) in the mostly illegal settlements in the rapidly expanding cities. In their case, it was not so much the violence of state organs but the absence of the state that politicised them.

25 L. Helfrich/B. Pottthast, Citizenship und „Frauenbewegungen“ in Lateinamerika, in: J. Mittag/G. Ismar (eds.), Soziale Bewegungen in Lateinamerika im 20. Jahrhundert. Soziale Konflikte, politischer Protest und Demokratisierung [in print].

26 A. C. Toledo, Partizipation von Frauen während der Militärdiktatur in Chile (1973–1990) (Spektrum Politikwissenschaft, Band 18), Würzburg 2001.

Women were important in the construction of many of these settlements, therefore it is logical that they also became prominent in organising the slums.²⁷ They organized so called "Clubes de Madre" or "Clubes de Ama de Casa" (Mothers' or Housewives' clubs) and started to get in contact with welfare organisations and NGOs who provided them with food, but sooner or later also started "cursos de capacitación and conscientización". Women learned certain skills that helped them to master the problems of daily life and in the course became aware of their situation as poor females. Sooner or later, subjects like the problem of men who did not show responsibility for their children and partners or the hitherto taboo of familial violence entered into the discussions. The activities of these subordinate women also influenced the organization itself. They had mostly started as hierarchical groups with a president who channelled the contact with NGOs and the state organizations, but in the long run became democratic neighbourhood groups who questioned power relations in their private home as well as in the public sphere. In the end, many of these organisations which started as groups of (economic) survival became feminist in the sense that they addressed topics of gender-related power relations and violence.²⁸

The importance of NGOs for feminist consciousness is another Latin American peculiarity. It started with the United Nation's conference for women in Mexico which promoted the subject of women's issues, primarily in relation to their economic situation. This gave women a more powerful role in the political debates on development, but the collaboration of women in NGOs with women's groups in the slums or in the countryside ultimately led to the inclusion of these women in the scene. In the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, the relevance of women's issues in development programmes – a generally accepted idea at the beginning of the twenty first century – rose in this Latin American context, and even though it also targeted mainly at economic growth, it can also be described as a silent revolution that is still under way.²⁹

The Church and NGOs also played an important role in the rise of ethnic consciousness and the mobilisation of indigenous women, which has been one of the most remarkable developments in the last years. Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan Maya who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992, is another example of a prominent Latin American female activist who cannot be characterised as genuinely feminist, but who nevertheless is important in this context. Rigoberta Menchú first entered the public through the church, later through participation in the organisation of "campesinos", but ended up fighting mostly for the political and cultural rights of her people. The symbolic meaning of the Nobel Prize laureate, her being a woman of indigenous origin, was lost on no one, and it was taken up again two years later by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas. The Maya women who participated in this movement addressed general political and

27 St. Schütze, *Die andere Seite der Demokratisierung. Die Veränderungen politischer Kultur aus der Perspektive der sozialen Bewegung der Siedlerinnen von Santo Domingo, Mexiko-Stadt*. Berlin 2005

28 L. Gutierrez Guardiola, *De Bartolina Sisa al comité de receptoras de alimentos de "EL Alto". Antropología de género y organizaciones de mujeres en Bolivia*, Cuenca 2000.

29 L. Helfrich/B. Pothast, *Citizenship und „Frauenbewegungen“ in Lateinamerika* (note 26).

gender questions simultaneously and developed an indigenous feminist agenda.³⁰ With the transition to democracy in many Latin American states during the nineteen-eighties and nineties, and as a consequence of the debates after the conference in Mexico, the two groups of women, the mostly left-wing or liberal feminists and the lower class activists from the slums or the ethnic movements, established contact and began a dialogue. Again, the slogan was that the private is political, but this included other implications in a democratic context. Following their European and North American sisters, feminists in Latin America publicly started to discuss even more private things, namely their body and sexuality. They started to talk about and to denounce domestic violence and undesired pregnancy, subjects that were important for marginal women as well, although they had hesitated to pick up the topic for a long time. The new groups also entered a dialogue with the state. Due to the political situation, this happened earlier in Brazil than in Argentina, Chile or Mexico. At the beginning of the nineteen-eighties, the city of São Paulo established the first council for women and female police stations where women who had been violated or mistreated would find the assistance that they did not get from male policemen.³¹ The subject of violence against women, on the street or at home, is now discussed in most Latin American states, although male domination and violence remain a big problem, as the recent unpunished serial murders of women in northern Mexico or Guatemala show.

Another big problem is sexuality and abortion. Lower class women still have problems in getting medical assistance, contraceptives or even sufficient information about their bodies and sexuality. Abortion remains illegal in almost all countries, but it remains, nevertheless, a frequent praxis and one of the main causes of death among young women.

Changes in comparison with the first wave

During the nineteen-seventies and eighties, new female actors appeared on the public scene which had had no access to politics before. Many of them did not pursue feminist aims in the first place, but in the long run, however, they changed the ideas about the role of women in public. The scene has become more complicated, as we have to look at popular feminists, organised in neighbourhood or ethnic organisations, women within left-wing parties who also have become aware of the fact that changes in gender roles will not come automatically, women in academic, professional or other organisations who also pursue feminist agendas, autonomous feminists who do not want to organise in any

30 Comunicación e información de la mujer, see <http://www.cimac.org.mx>; <http://www.nodo50.org/raz/ezln/ley-mujeres.htm>; <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~geneve/zapwomen/enter.html>; K. Kampwirth, *Women and Guerrilla Movements* (note 19), p. 83-115; S. Kellog, *Weaving the Past. A history of Latin America's indigenous women from the prehispanic period to the present*, Oxford 2005.

31 S. Nelson, *Constructing and negotiating Gender in Women's police stations in Brazil*, in: *Latin American Perspectives* (1996) 88/23:1, S. 131-148; S. E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil. Women's Movements in transitional politics*, Princeton 1990.

of those groups. They all have helped to spread new notions of what feminism is or can be in Latin America.

Contrary to the early feminists, the ones of the end of the century do question male superiority and power in gender relations in the public as well as in the domestic sphere. They also address sexuality and the female body, a subject consciously avoided by their earlier sisters.

But there are also strong continuities. The most obvious one is the persistence of the notion of motherhood as an essential female characteristic and as a legitimisation for public action. Although one can see, that the exaggerated praise of motherhood and the idea of female moral superiority are waning, they still persist. Sometimes it is also still used as an effective strategy against military violence.

Secondly, class and / or ethnicity are still important lines of division, although the plurality of the new feminist movement has brought a better mutual understanding in most cases. On the positive side, we can see that many women's movements still successfully link their aims to those of the state or society in general and thus receive male support. International organisations are still of great importance for the women, not only because of their material aid but also because they bring in new ideas and help to gain respect and political support within the country.