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Spanish State

Feminist practice in the 15-M movement

- Features - Feminism -

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As a protest space created by men and women, 15-M has repeated the mistake of its predecessors, fearing that feminism would divide the movement, instead of strengthening it. 15-M has not developed tools for recognising the patriarchal logic to be found at its heart, and transforming them from a feminist perspective. The result has been to render violence invisible and to silence women's voices.

Since May 2011, the 15-M movement has gathered together a huge and varied group of people who, until just a few months previously, had only observed the crisis from a disaffected distance, and engaged them actively in politics. Its real importance today lies in its unexpected creation of a new generation of critical, activist thinkers by way of reflection, debate and - most importantly - action. In dozens of Spanish cities, 15-M has sparked some of the most diverse, festive, leaderless and hopeful demonstrations seen in a long time. It has contributed to the spread of a feeling that, "Yes, we can" and "United we stand"; and has helped to spread irreversibly a mistrust of the heretofore unimpeachable discourse of capitalist inevitability, its neoliberal formulas and its continuous crises.

Rather than its evolution, successes and failures, the following is a reflection on the specific experience of women in the movement, and on how far the movement has been able to incorporate feminist practice and discourse. I will first situate the movement in its socio-historical context and show how that context has been informed by gender. Secondly, I will ask to what extent the 15-M movement has contributed to the evolution of the feminist struggle, in the realm of discourse as well as that of the practices, dynamics and roles established at the heart of the movement from its inception.

This analysis is rooted in the author's participation in the 15-M movement of Barcelona, but also in conversations with numerous feminist activists from all over the Spanish state, and in the reading of reports and accounts, both individual and collective, of the movement's progress since 15 May 2011. Just as 15-M is characterised by a great diversity and heterogeneity, so are the feminisms that have landed up (or been developed) within it. Although the various feminist experiences of 15-M ranged greatly geographically and even temporally, this survey is an attempt to synthesise the most relevant experiences, in the hope of reflecting as much on their positive dimensions as on their less positive ones, and thus contributing to a path of collective learning that will allow us to keep moving towards a genuinely feminist indignation. [1]

The present through a feminist lens: what crisis are we talking about?

The slogan of the protest that met up on Sunday 15 May 2011, "We are not commodities in the hands of politicians and bankers", had the great advantage of condensing into a single sentence the main triggers of the 15-M movement: on the one hand, a significant decrease in the social and economic rights of large swathes of the population as a result of the crisis; and a growing mistrust of a political class seen as corrupt and incapable of lifting the country out of crisis on the other.

Despite the fact that feminist movements in the Spanish state have done a huge amount of work in recent years to foreground the various ways in which the economic crisis and recent (austerity) reforms have affected women [2], this was not an original element of the denunciations and demands made by the movement. 15-M has by no means been alone in this: since the crisis hit, many movements have tiptoed around the gender implications of the current economic situation. In the face of the dizzying increase in male unemployment rates in the early stages of the crisis,

media outlets of different persuasions have all suggested that one of the peculiarities of the crisis is that it promises to end gender inequality in the labour market. [3]

However, women today remain in an extremely vulnerable position both in the labour market and outside it. An analysis of the crisis from a gender perspective shows that, if 2008 was the year that saw the burst of the real estate bubble and a crisis in industry - both predominantly male sectors - it was only months later that the contraction in demand for labour also reached the service industry, a sector that is currently 88.5% female in Spain. Today female unemployment is at 24.86% and male unemployment at 24.09%. If we split the figures according to provenance, we see that native Spanish men present the 'lowest' rate of all, with 21.54%, while unemployment among foreign women is at 35.06% and foreign men at 41.72%! Considering that immigrant women are concentrated in the informal economy, it is highly probable that their true unemployment figure is much higher than the official one.

The steep rise in male unemployment has meant that more families depend on the woman's salary and that many women have been obliged to join the labour market. And so while the proportion of women in paid work in 2007 was 48.94%, this had risen to 52.91% by the end of 2011. That increase has however not been accompanied by a redistribution of care and domestic responsibilities. All of this, combined with the increased burden of domestic work women have taken on as part of family strategies to reduce costs, has caused an increase in women's overall workload and a reinforcement of our double-length working day.

Gender inequality also continues to be an undeniable reality in the labour market, as manifested in high rates of temporary work and short working days for women. We are also more highly represented than men in the underground economy: we make up 57.3% of people receiving non-contribution-based benefits, and only 37% of those that receive contribution-based benefits. Our average salary is 22% lower than that of men, while 80% of 'economically inactive' people receiving no pension are women.

The absence of a gender perspective on the crisis has also been a constant in the PSOE and PP governments responses to it. Most of the 11 billion euros injected into the system in the first year of the crisis via the famous 'Plan EEE' went to the construction sector which, in 2008, employed 16% of men and only 1.9% of women. And the bailout deal contained no requirement for the hiring of women in the resulting contracts. The cuts in public spending brought to the fore by the famous Tijeretazo ("Chop") of 2010 and constantly updated by the severe austerity policies being instated since then, are having a huge impact on women, as we are concentrated in public sectors like health, education and social services. As a result, it is women who are the main victims of pay cuts and the disappearance of public sector jobs. Our social and economic vulnerability, in turn, makes us feel all the more keenly the reductions in social welfare programmes and, as these disappear, it is women, with our unpaid care work, who make up for the lost public support and services.

The Labour Reforms imposed by the Troika and implemented by both the PSOE and the PP governments between Summer 2010 and Spring 2012 respectively have reinforced the gender dualities of the paid labour market, and the first Pensions Reform, with its increasing emphasis on the 'contributive principle', will have a negative impact on women: given our high representations in the informal economy, short days and low pay, as well as the frequent interruption of our working lives for looking after children and other family members, it will be more difficult for us to reach the required contribution levels to earn a dignified pension by retirement age. The growing austerity stemming from the debt crisis has a particular impact on the welfare state and public services, and allows the state to transfer its obligations of social protection back to families (read: women).

When feminism gets indignant...

All the aspects I have laid out so far point to the persistence, and even worsening, of the subordination of women in the current climate. That subordination has, however, been silenced in most of the economic accounts of the crisis. The 15-M movement is guilty of this too, and initially its slogans featured no acknowledgement of the gender specificities of the economic situation. In the first weeks that the movement existed, concepts such as “feminism”, “oppression” and “gender inequality” struggled to gain any consensus in many meetings, and met resistance grounded in a lack of knowledge of, and even a certain aversion to, feminist discourse, on the part of hundreds of people who associated it with unreasonable, excessively radical or divisive ideas.

In this context, faced with what they perceived as a silencing of women’s voices and despite some accusations of separatism, many of the feminist activists meeting at the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona sought each other out to create a space for discussion, debate and action among women, lesbians and transsexuals: an assembly of *Feministes Indignades*. That group, far from getting bogged down in the noisy arguments that characterised other committees, allowed its members to advance their work and their discourse, making both accessible for the rest of the movement. In the first few days of the movement occupation of the squares, *Feministes Indignades* wrote a manifesto of demands that was approved unanimously in one of the largest general assemblies that the Barcelona movement has seen. The manifesto contained feminist demands for a radical transformation of society and established responses to the crisis from an inclusive point of view that took account of the specific condition of women in the social and economic order:

“We are oppressed by a capitalist, patriarchal society. [...] We want a society with people at its centre, not markets. We want a transformation of the current (capitalist) model of economic and social development towards one that works in the service of people and the planet. It is essential to incorporate a feminist focus into this transformation in order to properly confront the various crises we face – crises of the environment, of food, of energy, of the economy, of society and of care work – and to invest in sustainable social processes for a new model of the city and land management. [...] We demand the redistribution of jobs and wealth. To work less so that all of us can work. Dignified professional and labour conditions. Equal redistribution of paid and unpaid work, equal remuneration and recognition of work between men and women. And wealth in the hands of the people. [...] We demand the recognition of the tasks of caring for people and homes, and its total socialisation.” [4]

The analysis and proposals were designed not just with reference to the crisis but also called for the participation of women, lesbians, transsexuals and transgenders in the search for a participatory and truly democratic system:

“The current democratic system is patriarchal, and does not represent us. We want to organise society along horizontal lines of decision-making and political action.” [5]

The establishment of *Feministes Indignades* as a cohesive, autonomous space, with a universally recognized legitimacy in dealing with general assemblies, helped to promote and make visible the gender perspective in the discourses and mobilisations of the 15-M movement in Catalonia, and to demand a central role for women in debates and actions. And while they have advanced their own agenda with specifically feminist workshops, debates and actions, they have also been present in the numerous spaces that the movement has coordinated, making their voices heard and contributing with their experience to more united decisions and mobilisations. At all these events, the mark of feminism has been clearly visible in the form of blocs with their own placards, symbolic actions against heteropatriarchal oppression, or interventions denouncing the perverse effects that the economic and political crises of austerity are having on women.

... is indignation feminised?

The consolidation of a feminist space, and the task of making its work visible, nevertheless, has not been possible in all of the towns and cities where 15-M has risen up. In places like Bilbao, Elche or Burgos, there has been a certain amount of activity, such as rising awareness of the need for a non-sexist language or the organisation of specifically feminist actions, but there has not been a critical mass of women ready (or able) to export the feminist perspective to the overall group in any systematic way, or to create spaces for feminist action and discussion. An important factor in this lack of progress, in cities like Vigo or Palma de Mallorca, has been the view of feminism in certain sectors as a question of low priority, even as irrelevant. In Cádiz, meanwhile, when the feminism work group went to the general assembly with a feminist manifesto inspired in Madrid and Barcelona as a result of a rich and interesting debate at the heart of the movement [6], the group had to watch as their manifesto was rejected for a “lack of consensus” because of its supposedly exclusive and divisive nature. Elsewhere the confusion between consensus and unanimity, from which the movement still suffers, has meant that at meetings of 300 or 400 people, a single man can block feminist proposals. [7]

Even in places like Barcelona, Madrid or Santiago, where feminist committees and working groups have had important influence and presence, it cannot quite be claimed that those groups have successfully driven the cross-fertilisation of a feminist perspective across the movement. That transfer, had it been achieved, would have meant the comprehensive and systematic incorporation of the feminist agenda in the discursive and practical spheres of 15-M

Feminist discourse

As feminist campaigners in Madrid explain in one dossier [8], some of the obstacles placed on the circulation of feminist ideas in the Puerta del Sol manifested themselves from many protesters in machismo- and homophobia-charged insults, and even in the total refusal to admit any feminist question or proposal in the first general assemblies. For many of the movement’s participants, feminism would continue to be an equivalent of machismo, only in reverse. In other cases, such as in Santiago de Compostela, when the feminist group raised in the general assemblies debates on the gendered effects of European neoliberal policies, they had to hear from fellow campaigners that “we can’t debate these really minor issues” [9]

The (unequal) presence of a gender discourse in 15-M has not so much been the fruit of a significant increase in awareness at the heart of the movement as of the constant presence of activists raising the flag of feminism, something that has resulted in an unsustainable work rhythm and a redoubled militancy on the part of many women. When they have introduced these ideas it often seems that they have been accepted, but if they didn’t do this, hardly anyone else will take the initiative, since, as the Feminist Grup in Sevilla, Las Setas Feministas, argued, “our fellow-revolutionists only saw half of the injustices: those which affect them directly” [10] In a sense, the presence of a feminist discourse in 15-M continues to depend on the physical “omnipresence” of feminist militants to give the discourse its voice, through criticism, actions, documents, workshops, interventions and by following up on specific developments. However, as the campaigners of Sol put it, “we want to be understood, we want to be infectious”. [11] A sustained, lasting incorporation of feminism that can provoke a generalisation of gender-consciousness, or the transformation of the collective framework of a movement, needs to come from a sustainable and extensive intervention. And in the 15-M movement, up to now, this has not taken place.

Feminist practice

If the movement still has some way to go in the area of discourse, the practical sphere has also been the site of numerous difficulties. We only need to recall the jeers of “Out, out!” or “The revolution belongs to all of us!” shouted at

feminists when, during the first few days of the occupation in Madrid, they hung up a banner that read, “This revolution will either be feminist, or no revolution at all”. [12] A “macho-man”, as they dubbed him, showed his contempt for the message by tearing it down in front of thousands of people. A similar event took place in Acampada Obradoiro, in Santiago de Compostela, when a banner claiming “The Revolution will either be feminist or will not be” was provocatively torn down. [13] Such episodes made it abundantly clear that there was no consensus around 15-M being a meeting point of all struggles, including the feminist one.

During the first few months of protests, important advances were made in the practical sphere, such as a growing awareness of the inherent androcentric slant of our language. While many groups introduced non-verbal communication to denounce the use of certain aspects of vocabulary and heterosexist or discriminatory terms, there were also increased efforts to avoid the recurrent use of the masculine linguistic forms. Independently of the words used, however, while the motivation of the general assemblies was mostly driven by women, who worked on the collective methods, logistics and dynamics of the debate, it was men who continued to make most of the interventions and political proposals. Those men also took the floor and dominated the platform of speech, automatically being accorded the moral or intellectual authority, or the authority of experience, and showing little respect for, among other things, the right to that same platform of speech for women or non-alpha-males [14]. In clear contrast, women, particularly young women, often had a hard time talking in front of massive audiences about issues that “they knew were usually not warmly welcomed or where they were expecting to be discounted merely because they are women” [15]

And so while there may have been positive steps taken with regard to some of the forms in which sexism manifests itself, the background to that sexism was hardly tackled. The absence, for example, of a comprehensive debate around the gender dimensions of language was part of a greater absence in the internal dynamics of the movement: gender was not a central category of analysis at the point of distributing tasks, managing relations or defining spaces. To put it another way, despite gender being the basic organising principle of human societies, as well as of roles, relations and inequalities within them, and despite the fact that the day-to-day reality of sexist episodes and aggression demands a strategy for confronting this [16], the 15-M movement at large has not politically problematised gender as an axis of division and oppression at its heart. This resulted in the lack of proper protocol for incidents of sexist aggression in whatever form, or for the abuse of power by men. As women in Obradoiro put it, “the presence of invisible behaviors and attitudes of sexist violence and domination has been a constant reality in various realms of everyday life in #AcampadaObradoiro” [17]. One symptomatic episode of this among many, arose when a (male) mediator in a committee in Barcelona heard a complaint from a woman about being the victim of physical aggression by a man. Faced with the awkwardness of the situation as he no doubt experienced it, the mediator took refuge in the false equanimity that claims to give equal voice to the aggressor and the victim and, arguing that he couldn’t be sure who was telling the truth and who was lying, washed his hands of the matter and remained silent. By doing this he denied her, and other women, the power of definition that states unequivocally, and with no relativism at all, that an incident of aggression exists from the moment a person feels threatened.

Another episode revealing the gender dynamics of the movement took place at the beginning of June when the Madrid committee for feminisms announced that its members were going to stop spending the night in the Puerta del Sol because of the sexual, sexist and homophobic aggression that they were experiencing or that they had witnessed, as well as the silencing of these incidents and the absence of a collective will to address them [18]. While many media outlets used the declaration to discredit 15-M at a moment when the occupations were going through a moment of delicate redefinition, the efforts of the legal committee and other voices in the movement to deny the existence of the incidents in legal terms, and thus to minimise the dimensions of the problem, showed once again the great political challenges that face the movement in knowing how to approach the existence of aggressive dynamics and abuses of power by some men [19] A problematisation of gender in this context would have shown that the important question is not whether the incidents were legally punishable or not, but rather that there were women campers who attested to not feeling safe in a supposedly emancipatory space like the Puerta del Sol. The absence of a political approach to the situation also meant that instead of developing collective responses to the existence of sexist aggression, many women had to opt for individual solutions. And so in practice, instead of throwing out or

rejecting the aggression or the aggressors of the camp (when they were members of the camp), the victims were theoretically or even practically excluded. Curiously, while the movement has never hesitated to state that “what is legal is not necessarily right” [20] (as its numerous actions of civil disobedience demonstrate), in the present case, the notion of gender justice was subordinated to a discourse of legality and the conservation of the public image of the movement.

15-M has not developed tools for recognising the patriarchal logic to be found at its heart, reflecting on its effects and overhauling them from a feminist perspective. The result has been to render violence invisible and to silence women’s voices. In both cases an opportunity has been missed for collective learning, damage limitation, reparation and ensuring that these situations are not repeated in the future. Political correctness and denial have been accompanied by an understandable but unjustifiable concern that the publicising of these incidents could stigmatise and weaken the movement. As a protest space created by men and women, 15-M has repeated the mistake of its predecessors in fearing that feminism would divide the movement by denouncing its internal contradictions, instead of hoping to be strengthened by approaching and resolving these issues.

Towards a truly feminist indignation

While 15-M represents one of the most unexpected and significant phenomena in the Spanish political arena in recent decades, we must bear in mind that it was characterised by its consolidation of discontent on a huge scale rather than by proposals for coherent, comprehensive and transformative alternatives to the incumbent social, political and economic systems. 15-M is not a compact movement with a defined analysis of existing inequalities and with concrete proposals for their resolution so much as an ethereal space without established borders, whose main function up to now has been to provide ways to express and share a generalised and growing social unease. This does not mean that there have not been tensions, debates and even fights at the movement’s heart to try and concretise and radicalise its discourses and practices, but the result of all this depends on a process which is still under way in the movement.

Attacks on social rights and women’s rights have grown exponentially since the birth of the movement and, particularly, since the electoral victory of right wing Partido Popular in November 2011. After the dizzying speed of mobilisation in the first months of the movement, the movement has had time to reflect on its priorities, its organisation and its direction. While this text has underscored the great value of feminist analysis and practice for the 15-M movement, on the one hand, and its undeniable limitations on the other, it is impossible to say categorically what steps will be taken from here. We can only hope that they will be positive ones.

The course of many social movements throughout history shows that it is no easy task to prioritise, question and transform the gender relations that define our societies in mixed-gender spaces of protest and dissent. Despite some welcomed exceptions, like the group ‘Indignados Against Puerta-del-Sol Machismo’ (Indignados Contra el Machismo de Sol), feminism and feminists continue to meet great resistance in the present climate. Rather than become despondent, though, we can use the expression of these difficulties as a reminder that any step we take towards eliminating the inequalities we suffer, however small, is a positive step.

If the thousands of people who turned out in our city squares in May last year to engage in politics for the first time in their lives have so quickly conquered their fears and apathy in order to take part in mass debates; to stop dozens of families losing their homes; express skepticism about numerous political, religious and judicial decisions; and, among other challenges, to denounce police violence, this might also remind us that the tireless, critical and pedagogical work of feminist groups can ensure that the indignation of the whole of this new, politicised, irreverent generation turns out to be a feminist indignation too.

Feminist practice in the 15-M movement

Ultimately, it can mean that instead of being content to just point out the injustices and abuses coming out of the economy, the world of politics and institutions, the men and women who have gone, who go and who will continue to go out into the streets and squares will also dare to confront these abuses and injustices that they, we, all reproduce, suffer and help to render invisible.

* Source: [Open Democracy](#).

* The first original Spanish version of this article was published on-line by [Fundacion Betiko](#).

* This article was translated into English by Ollie Brock.

[1] Ezquerro, S. "29S: a les dones també ens sobren els motius". PÀblic. 16/9/2010, p. 5; Ezquerro, S. "Crisis e igualdad". PÀblic, 19/11/2010, p. 9; Ezquerro, S. "Rostros ocultos de las pensiones". PÀblic. 7/2/2011, p. 5; Gálvez, L. & Torres, J. (2010) Desiguales. Hombres y mujeres en la crisis financiera. Barcelona: Icaria; Harcourt, W. (2009) "El impacto de la crisis en las mujeres de Europa Occidental". Larrañaga, M. (2009) "Mujeres, tiempos, crisis: Combinaciones variadas". Revista de Economía Crítica, 8; Otxoa, I. (2009) "Anticapitalismo: algunas razones desde el feminismo". Viento Sur. 104; Pérez Orozco, A. (2009) "Feminismo anticapitalista, esa Escandalosa Cosa y otros palabros". Article taken from the book Jornadas Feministas: Granada aquí y ahora. Ed. "Coordinadora estatal de organizaciones feministas", Madrid, 2010; Sales, L. (2009) Informe de Recerca. Dones en crisi. Barcelona: Institut Català de les Dones.

[2] Ezquerro, S. "29S: a les dones també ens sobren els motius". PÀblic. 16/9/2010, p. 5; Ezquerro, S. "Crisis e igualdad". PÀblic, 19/11/2010, p. 9; Ezquerro, S. "Rostros ocultos de las pensiones". PÀblic. 7/2/2011, p. 5; Gálvez, L. & Torres, J. (2010) Desiguales. Hombres y mujeres en la crisis financiera. Barcelona: Icaria; Harcourt, W. (2009) "El impacto de la crisis en las mujeres de Europa Occidental". Larrañaga, M. (2009) "Mujeres, tiempos, crisis: Combinaciones variadas". Revista de Economía Crítica, 8; Otxoa, I. (2009) "Anticapitalismo: algunas razones desde el feminismo". Viento Sur. 104; Pérez Orozco, A. (2009) "Feminismo anticapitalista, esa Escandalosa Cosa y otros palabros". Article taken from the book Jornadas Feministas: Granada aquí y ahora. Ed. "Coordinadora estatal de organizaciones feministas", Madrid, 2010; Sales, L. (2009) Informe de Recerca. Dones en crisi. Barcelona: Institut Català de les Dones.

[3] 3. This sort of claim can be found, among other news, in the following press articles: "Medidas especiales para los parados. El Gobierno llevará propuestas nuevas al diálogo social" (Diario PÀblico, 25/10/2008); Hidalgo, S. & Valmorisco, C. "Los mileuristas son ahora los cabezas de familia" (Diario PÀblico, 27/4/2009); Peirón, F. "Los empleos son para las mujeres" (Diario La Vanguardia, 12/9/2009); ESCRIBANA, N. "Sabe la crisis de sexos?" (Diario La Vanguardia, 12/9/2009); Moreno, J. "El paro sube en 98.906 personas en octubre" (Diario PÀblico, 3/11/2009); Moreno, J. "El paro sube otro escalón: marzo deja 25.988 desempleados más" (Diario PÀblico, 6/4/2010). Spain has not escaped this phenomenon, and media in other countries have also asserted that the economic recession affects women less than men in the labour market (see Daily Mail, May 2009) as well as "The Death of Macho" (Foreign Policy, September 2009) and "The End of Men" (The Atlantic, Agosto 2010).

[4] Feministes Indignades blog: <http://feministesindignades.blogspot.fr/>

[5] Feministes Indignades blog.

[6] Wiki of the work group Feminismos Cádiz 15M. <http://comisionfeministacadz15m.wikispaces.com/>

[7] FeminismoSol website: <http://feminismosol.net/>

[8] FeminismoSol website.

[9] VVAA (2012) R-Evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M. Barcelona: Icaria, p.53.

[10] VVAA (2012) R-Evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M. Barcelona: Icaria, p.27.

[11] FeminismoSol website.

[12] FeminismoSol website; Cervantes, LI. "Y las indignadas? (Libertad de palabra, 22/11/2011)

[13] VVAA (2012) R-Evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M. Barcelona: Icaria, p.51.

[14] FeminismoSol website.

[15] R-Evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M. Barcelona: Icaria, p.53.

[16] Fanzine "Torres más grandes hemos visto caer", p. 17: <http://es.scribd.com/doc/protected/44147443>

[17] R-Evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M. Barcelona: Icaria, 49.

[18] They explained in their communiqué that they understood this aggression as "sexual intimidation, touching, looks, gestures; denial and abuse of power; physical insults and aggression; non-consensual sexual or non-sexual contact; paternalistic attitudes." FeminismoSol website.

[19] Europa Press, "Los acampados de Sol aclaran que legalmente no hubo agresión sexual" (La Vanguardia, 3/6/2011).

[20] This was one of the principal arguments put forward by the movement in Barcelona as they announced their intention to block the debate scheduled for 15 June 2011 in the Parliament.