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**Feminism, Time and History:
Latin America and Beyond¹⁾****Maxine MOLYNEUX Ph.D****Abstract**

Young women have taken the lead in a new wave of feminist and democratic protests that have erupted across a wide range of countries, North and South. These movements raise a range of political and analytic questions: to what extent can this activism be identified as Feminism's Fourth Wave? How different is this 'new' Feminism from earlier forms, and what differences and continuities divide and unite feminisms across time and space? These questions are explored through analysing the characteristics common to contemporary feminism with reference to the Global South, with Latin America occupying an important position within the global feminist movement.

Key Words: Feminism, Fourth Wave Feminism, global social movements, women's human rights.

In recent years we have seen a startling upsurge of political activity by young people. Protests against authoritarian governments, campaigns for rights and environmental justice have seen young people in key roles and on the streets in a great range of countries—Turkey, Brazil, Argentina, Armenia, Algeria, Russia, the Ukraine, Sudan, Thailand, Belarus, Taiwan and the Chi-

nese special administrative region—Hong Kong—among others. In the United States, young people have been at the forefront of protests against migration policies and racist violence, while in Europe, the teenage Greta Thunberg has inspired a host of environmental movements.

What is also striking is how young **women** have been key actors and leaders in many of these movements. In the US, Afro-American women founded and led the Black Lives Matter campaign which has focused on racist police outrages, and in 2020 became a global movement. Young women have also brought a new dynamism to feminism in both North and South. More than a decade ago feminism was pronounced ‘over’ yet we have seen growing international support for movements like the ‘Me Too’²⁾ campaign, which have galvanised untold numbers of women across the world to denounce gender-based violence, misogyny and sexual harassment. Across Latin America tens of thousands of women have taken to the streets in the *Ni Una Menos*³⁾ (Not One Less) campaign to protest the lack of government response to high levels of violence against women and femicide. In India, angry demonstrations against gang rapes and police sexual violence are frequent occurrences. Insurgent campaigns around reproductive rights in countries where abortion is illegal are other instances of these recent mobilisations. In Latin America feminist activism brought reforms to laws on abortion in Colombia, Chile and Argentina (Sutton 2020). In Poland, thousands took part in the protests against the ruling party’s attempt to remove women’s access to legal abortions, something that is certain to find an echo in the United States with the Supreme Court decision to remove the constitutional ruling allowing legal terminations known as *Roe v. Wade*.

The research that forms the basis of this talk on what I call the Fourth Wave of feminism is the result of a project that began as a background paper⁴⁾ commissioned in 2020 by the UN’s Committee of the Status of Women

and UN Women to mark the 25 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in 1995 in Beijing (UN Woman 2019). It was that landmark conference, attended by some 30,000 delegates from across the world, that set the new policy agenda for the UN and member states on women's equality. Given the objective of marking 25 years after Beijing, it was important to reflect on how to think more broadly about the history of feminism and its impact across the world.

History matters: a historical perspective helps to understand this recent wave of feminist activism. It sharpens an appreciation of the differences and continuities in movements across time, as well as how different generations shift their tactics and priorities. Feminist ideas have appeared across history, — in Latin America we have the extraordinarily prescient writings of the 17th century Mexican nun, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz who denounced gender inequality in feminism's pre-history, but feminism's origins as a movement of collective action, based on demands for women's citizenship rights can be traced to the time of the French Revolution. It was an actress called Olympe de Gouges who wrote the Rights of Women in response to the Declaration of the Rights of Man that appeared in 1789. A critic of the Jacobins she was sent to the guillotine. In the late 19th and early 20th century feminists in many different parts of the world began engaging in collective action, campaigning on a wide variety of issues. In effect, feminism formed part of a much wider struggle for rights, equality and citizenship that we see gathering force in the course of the 20th century (Jayawardena 1986; Molyneux 2002).

There is clearly no one account of feminist history and as with all social histories it is a fertile terrain for dispute.⁵⁾ Here I will focus on two key questions that feminist historians have drawn attention to. The first is that of periodization, how we think about the different times or waves of feminist activism; the second is how to characterise these different phases of feminism as a

movement: To address these issues I will look at 2 specific empirical questions, — is there a fourth wave of feminism? And in what ways does feminist activism today differ from earlier waves? I'll draw on Latin American examples and my own research on women's movements to illustrate some key points.⁶⁾

How feminism as a movement or collection of movements has changed across time, and how to periodize its evolution, are questions that have long preoccupied historians. In analysing feminism, the metaphor of 'waves' is often invoked to identify its peaks of activism and to capture its significant features at different times.⁷⁾ But as any historian knows, periodization is always a contested endeavour: When does one epoch of history end and another begin? How to characterize the distinguishing features of a particular era or time? What is the territorial reach of a social movement? How do we think of the transnationalisation of ideas? Each one of these questions invites different responses.

Let's look first at the question of waves. How many waves of feminism are there? The research on feminist history identifies two with a possible third. But this history of feminism has been written largely from a Western focus, and that has influenced how it is characterised as a whole. It is necessary then, to adopt a critical and transnational perspective when we examine these analytic questions and doing so might produce different answers.

While it is generally accepted that there's been a first and second wave of feminism, there is little agreement on how to define these waves and even less on what currents of feminism (liberal, nationalist, socialist, anarchist) were active or dominant within them (Ewig and Ferree 2013; Hewitt 2010; Heywood and Drake 2006; Snyder 2008).

If the metaphor of waves for social movements indicates intense *periods of activism*, it is important to recognise that the time of social movements is

neither linear or synchronous. Movements like feminism can experience periods of latency and inactivity and can appear in different parts of the world at different times. Some forms of activism continue for a while others fade away. This complicates the question of periodisation of identifying waves.

A wave signifies fluidity and motion and is made up of multiple currents, each with its own momentum. For one historian (Rupp 1996), this makes feminism seem less like waves and more like ‘choppy seas’. Let’s consider another issue: feminism has national, regional and global dynamics, — given by political opportunity and material resources. Here we need to take account of the internationalization of feminist ideas, as a movement that crosses borders in constant interaction with other actors, contexts and political ideas, creating what Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as a ‘boomerang effect.’

This is important because if modern feminism drew on the demands for rights and citizenship that had inspired the French Revolution, feminism was never exclusively confined to, or defined by, the Northern industrialized world. It always had an international, universalist vision appealing to ‘all women, everywhere,’ and from the outset activists sought to develop connections with other movements and supported their campaigns. Newspapers, leaflets and articles circulated on networks and were translated into many languages; and travellers crossed continents to address feminist meetings and debate campaign strategies. International associations gathered followers from different parts of the world, such as the Pan American women’s movement that had its first meeting in Baltimore in 1922 and brought women from over 30 countries into dialogue over tactics and priorities (Hewitt 2010).

Feminist ideas certainly travelled but with mutually interacting effects — non western feminisms more often than not had a clear sense of their own identities and struggles, and they were confident enough to disagree with their western counterparts and develop their own agendas (Jayawardena

1986). Some tendencies within feminism have always resisted what they experience as Western, colonial and white hegemony—even early on in the movement's history. Cuban feminists in the early 1900s resisted making suffrage their priority arguing in international feminist meetings that civil rights were more urgent for Latin Americans than the vote (Stoner 1991).

This last example points to some common misconceptions that appear in generalisations that have characterised debates over feminism. Feminism's first wave is often identified with the campaign for suffrage. Suffrage was indeed a key demand of many of the first feminist movements going back to the Seneca Falls convention agreed in Baltimore in 1848⁸⁾; later in the United Kingdom, suffrage was associated with a particularly violent campaign which saw many activists tortured and imprisoned. Suffrage was also a demand of first wave Argentine feminists some of whom travelled to Britain to meet campaigners there. But suffrage is not the whole story, feminist campaigns of the first wave also included demands for equal rights in the family including to property, the end of patriarchal privilege and authority, equal work, access to higher education and the professions and the rights of women workers.

Moreover, while first wave feminism has been seen as a movement of elite white women this also needs nuancing. The first wave included activists from different walks of life and with different politics. It included working class women and even some, albeit a minority, of women of colour. There were also some movements that rejected demands for suffrage and rights as reformist as did the anarcho-feminists in Europe and Latin America at the end of the 19th century. Their radical demands included the abolition of the bourgeois family, while they supported free love and denounced religious double standards (Kaplan 1977; Molyneux 1985).

THE SECOND WAVE 1970s–1980s

With a few exceptions, these early movements were small in scale compared to later developments and most appeared to lose their dynamism in the decades that followed. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that a more expansive and gradually more international movement began to unfold. Second wave feminism was part of a wider youth movement that grew out of the expansion of higher education. This generation of activists was open to radical ideas, was impatient for social and political change and brought international issues into their politics. They were inspired by the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the opposition to Apartheid and the movement against the Viet Nam War, while some feminists applauded the Maoist slogan ‘Women hold up half the Sky’. Many young people were brought into political activity at this time, and the ferment of the student uprisings in 1968 was not confined to Europe but spread to Latin America, the Far East and to other parts of the world.

Many of these activists were sympathetic to socialist ideas; others were active in peace movements, revolutionary groups, workers’ rights and anti-racist struggles as well as campaigning for women’s and gay rights. An important principle common to many feminist currents was the embrace of the principle of autonomy: an insistence on women’s right to determine their own agendas, even if working within political organizations and parties. A recurrent theme in interviews with feminists active at this time was the failure of the organized male-dominated left to respond in any adequate measure to their demands. This encouraged them to set up women’s caucuses or to work in women-only settings and activities—whether, as in the United Kingdom, supporting fair wage and reproductive rights campaigns, creating women-only journals and publishing houses, founding women’s art collectives and women’s non- governmental organizations (NGOs) or setting up refuges

from violence and women's health advisory groups. Latin American feminists tended to be members of left organisations and parties but were critical of the *machista* culture of the 'compañeros' and talked of practicing 'double militancy': working for change in their left organization and in their feminist practice. Those outside left organisations developed their own all-women activities, whether working against dictatorships or founding NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs).

The practice of 'consciousness raising', where women met to talk about their experiences of discrimination, abortions and patriarchy, found expression in the idea of 'sisterhood'. While this idea under-played tensions between Black feminists and their white sisters, the work of Black feminist groups and the writings of bell hooks, Angela Davis and Audre Lord among others brought the different experiences and priorities of Black feminists into focus and paved the way for a greater appreciation of the unequal power dynamics that were sewn into early second wave feminism. In Latin America similar inter-group tensions were expressed in the differences that separated the white and mestizo activists from their indigenous or Black sisters who lacked sufficient representation in the movement. These groups began to organise around their own demands and to expand the reach of feminist ideas into new sectors of society through popular and indigenous activism from the later 1980s.

THE THIRD WAVE

If there exists a body of research and debate over the features of the second wave, this is not true of the period covered by the third wave, roughly spanning the 1980s and 1990s. We have an even more partial and uneven picture of this period with contrasting assessments of feminist activism at this time. While there are some continuities with the second wave, three sig-

nificant elements stand out in the third period: the importance of policy-related activism; the strengthening of feminist movements and rights advocacy in the Global South; and the consolidation of women's studies as a discipline.

A notable feature of the third wave in many parts of the world was that it coincided with the gradual and still very partial entry of feminists and feminist ideas into mainstream politics. This was in part due to young feminists and older second wave activists entering public life. They became journalists, joined national and international NGOs and took up posts in universities, trade unions, government departments and international agencies. Greater awareness spread in the 1970s and 1980s of the need to represent women's interests more securely in law and policy and although not recognized as such, this focus is arguably a core feature of the third wave, one that was replicated in many parts of the South, especially Latin America.

Although sometimes rather disparagingly called 'femocrats,' women worked in institutional spaces to change policy and laws in civil, political and grass-roots organizations. At the same time, we see the growth of an extraordinarily active international women's movement engaged in 'gendering' the United Nations human rights frameworks following the adoption in 1979 of the landmark Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

A renewed focus on rights marked this period of feminism, and for many activists in the non-Western world, the United Nations' four world conferences on women were an important stimulus for policy work and for global feminist interaction. The UN Decade for Women, inaugurated in Mexico in 1975, started a process that acquired a growing momentum at successive events in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000).

THE FOURTH WAVE

If the heyday of third wave activism and policy dynamism was in the 1980s and into the 1990s, it was followed by a period of relative movement quiescence. Some saw this as the result of ‘institutionalization,’ a creeping bureaucratization and/or ‘NGOization’ as activists termed it. What critics saw as the ‘abandonment of the street for the office’ was associated with the loss of autonomy and creativity that came with an increased dependence on funding from governments and NGOs. However, others saw the entry of former activists into policymaking arenas as positive and necessary for capturing the policy process to bring about results. Debates over the pros and cons of ‘institutionalizing’ feminism, ‘working with or against the state’ divided movements and some disillusion set in. In universities, meanwhile, post-structuralist ideas gained wider acceptance, displacing most remnants of Marxist structuralism and opening up generational tensions.

Yet, new currents of thought were developing around identity and sexual politics. As so often, politics and theory moved in tandem with social actors—Black feminists, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) people, Adivasi and indigenous women in the Americas were bringing new voices to feminism, organizing to demand their rights and recognition, each with their distinct perspectives and priorities, many critical of what they saw as ‘white mainstream’ feminism’s weak commitment to intersectionality and inclusivity. The 1990s, dubbed “the decade of difference”, made a lasting imprint on women’s movements everywhere.

The Fourth Wave of feminist activism emerged in the new Millennium as a visible and active social movement, not long after feminism was said to scarcely exist, with unsympathetic commentators—especially in the North—all too eager to pronounce it as ‘over’ or unnecessary. Yet, if there was less street activism, one of the features characteristic of the third wave, there

were lively debates in universities and in popular culture as new currents of thought and new actors gained voice and presence⁹⁾. In the United States, the seeds of the fourth wave were evident in the publications by young feminists that appeared declaring themselves to be a “new generation’ celebrating diversity and ‘girl power’, publishing articles and personal testimonials and engaging in general cultural critique (Heywood and Drake 1997).

In the countries of the South, with their very different conditions, after the high point of Beijing, feminism was also seen as having entered a period of latency or retreat (Molyneux and Razavi 2005). Yet, activists continued to work, pushing for further reforms and with some notable successes. In many parts of Latin America, coalitions of feminist jurists, NGOs, politicians and women’s movements activists saw their long campaigns finally making progress: Femicide, for example, was recognized as a specific offence in law across the region in the 2000s (Macaulay 2021). And in 2006, feminist lawyers in conservative Colombia succeeded in decriminalizing abortion on human rights grounds (Reutersward et al. 2011).

The young feminists of the Fourth Wave were presented with new challenges and opportunities that shaped their alliances, priorities and forms of activism. They grew up in a different world to their mothers and a very different world to that of their grandmothers. While the generation that was politically active from the mid-1960s often clashed with their mothers over their social norms and values, young feminists today will have had a markedly different experience of family life. Their mothers may well have been feminists—or have accepted ideas of gender equality, and encouraged their daughters to get educated and have a job.

Young women, and hence young feminists, are the most educated of any previous wave and, as education everywhere has expanded to broaden intake across social classes, feminism has become both more socially diverse with a

larger base while containing a significant representation of young professionals. The great majority of young women today expect to work: even in the Middle East—The Arab Youth survey for 2020, for example, found that three quarters of young Arab women (76 per cent) and almost as many young men (70 per cent) agree that a woman can benefit her family most if she works, if only part time.

Gender relations have also changed to allow women more autonomy, even though this has not brought anything like full equality in either the private or public spheres. Women's roles have diversified more than men's, even if they retain the major responsibility for care. The meaning of masculinity—what it means to be, behave and look like a man—has also diversified if to a lesser extent. More young men want more equal relationships with women and greater involvement with their children. That said, young women today face high levels of misogynistic abuse and violence.

Technological change, notably the global spread of the Internet, has had a major impact on politics, enabling new forms of activism and giving voice to new actors. Those born in this century, 'Generation Z', are the first to have grown up entirely in the internet age. Young activists are tech and communications savvy. They have at their disposal an array of social media and global networks, which they have deployed to often great effect. These technologies shape their forms of collective activism and participation: Social media can secure extensive grass-roots engagement as well as reaching ever greater numbers. Blogging and citizen journalism has democratized information, allowing previously silenced voices to be heard. Flash demonstrations and viral videos—such as the Chilean song 'The Rapist Is in Your Path'¹⁰—can be put together in minutes rather than days and disseminated globally.

But the world of young feminists is one marked by a high degree of existential insecurity. Liberal economic reforms that transformed labour markets

and conditions have eroded many former securities and welfare support that their parents (mostly fathers) enjoyed if they worked in formal employment. The 2008 economic crisis affected young people more than adults and with lasting effects: In Latin America, the unemployment rate for those aged 15–24 years had reached nearly 20 per cent by 2016, leaving one in every five young people unemployed. In the Arab world, two in five of those between 18–24 have considered migration to escape adverse economic conditions and political corruption. Deepening inequality, indebtedness and economic hardship impact on communities, driving the narcotics economy, crime and insecurity and increasing the risks to which young people are vulnerable. The future does not look rosy for the many living with the new precarity, and has become even more precarious as a result of the global health and economic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, whereas former generations had more attachment to political parties and trade unions, this is far less the case among younger people today, many of whom experience disenchantment with political institutions and formal politics. Globally, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining not only in absolute terms but also relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life.

Some young feminist movements today, notably in Latin America, echo earlier expressions of the Left in describing themselves as anti-politics, feminist anarchists and anti capitalists, rejecting organizations as manifestations of patriarchal power and advocating revolutionary social and cultural change. Generational divides can make a difference to politics. In some countries, young people are more radical at *both* ends of the left-right spectrum and more critical of liberal capitalism. In the United States, around half of millennials have a favourable view of socialism and are also more progressive on other issues than the ‘Boomer’ generation (born in the 1940s and 1950s)

taken as a whole. Yet, generation can be less important in determining political leanings than college education and class.

This points to differences within feminist generations, as some young people may be less committed overall to engaging with states and in seeking legal change, making rights demands or engaging with the work of organizations such as the United Nations that were so much the focus of previous activist generations. Earlier gains in equal rights, for example, seem to many young feminists to be limited in their real effects or, until the recent threats to them posed by rightist mobilizations, were simply taken for granted. But the picture is mixed and ever-changing: a widespread demand for democracy and human rights in many parts of the world belie this view; and at the individual level we are seeing young feminists running for and achieving high office in numbers not seen before. Moreover, many activists who become politicized through street politics find that this experience can be a prelude to entering other more formal political spaces rather than a stark alternative to it.

CONCLUSIONS

Feminism is a form of contentious politics, a global social movement that has spanned three centuries, and is one which continues to show enduring vitality. While some critical differences mark out feminisms of different historical periods, a glimpse at the diversity that exists within the 'new feminism' of the fourth wave, allows of no easy contrasts, or monolithic typologies. Some new feminist movements work in counter-cultural spaces, some are still active in political parties, some work with or within the states. For all this plurality there are still many continuities in feminisms' core demands, and struggles around rights continue to be important for activists wherever they happen to be.

The politics of the street is not the only form of activism undertaken by

young feminists today, as the *Ni Una Menos* and Pro-Choice campaigns show with their emphasis on both activism *and* legal change. Campaigns around gender-based violence, identity and reproductive rights predominate today, but equal pay and job opportunities still constitute key areas of feminist organising, and feminists still promote radical transformative visions of the good society in challenging the dystopian trends of the present. Street protests and social media campaigns are component parts of a rich repertoire of activism and advocacy in a variety of spaces—governments, trade unions, grass roots organisations.

Should we be speaking about the new activism as a ‘new wave’ or a ‘new generation’ of feminism? At the time of writing, it seems clear that feminist activism has seen a remarkable revival in a good number of regions and that a new wave can be identified and might still be under way. Feminisms have a significant presence at the global level given effective transnational networks and the shared nature of contemporary concerns such as gender-based violence, sexual rights and struggles to defend feminist gains that are now under threat.

In focusing on the new activism, two points stand out. It is clear that despite varying priorities and interpretations, there are some striking similarities in feminists’ demands that span countries, regions and decades. This speaks to the enduring character of gender inequality and the slow progress made in achieving feminist demands. A quarter of a century on from Beijing, it is not only surprising, but also deeply worrying to see the unaddressed problem of high levels of gender-based violence, the lack of adequate sexual and reproductive rights and services in many countries, the continuing wage gap, and the very limited progress in acknowledging the need for affordable and gender equitable care. This is not to deny that progress has been made in many areas, but it has not been sufficient to warrant dismissing feminism as ‘over’.

A second point concerns human rights frameworks. Feminist movements have always engaged in rights demands, and feminists were active in the drafting of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Beijing process. Over time, human rights frameworks have been adapted and extended to be more comprehensive and inclusive, they have been tested in the courts, and they have been challenged by those who oppose them, but more often than not it is women's movements and their campaigns, allies and resources that have played a critical role in securing and defending advances in women's rights. These, in turn, have served as a lever to advance further gains, raise awareness, and challenge discriminatory norms.

While the human rights movement has lost some momentum and some of its more radical champions within human rights' institutions, feminist activists continue to work within their respective domestic and regional spheres to advance (and preserve) women's rights. Their work in defending human rights and democracy has become particularly urgent at a time when authoritarian states seek to undermine and roll back rights and the global architecture on which they rest. As the new wave of activism has shown, rights have continued to be central to all forms of justice claims—whether in regard to feminist or many other forms of contemporary youth activism. No longer reliant only on international agencies for authority, struggles around rights are owned and directed by local movements, by new actors and by a new generation that has embraced ideas of gender, race and sex equality, along with environmental justice, as integral to their struggles for social change.

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cas Series. She has led research on multi country projects on social policy in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East for a range of international development organisations and government departments including several United Nations organisations. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.

Endnotes

- 1) This text is a transcript of the talk given by Maxine Molyneux to the Japanese Latin American Society conference held in June 2021.
- 2) The phrase 'Me too' was first used by Tarana Burke in 2006 to raise awareness of sexual harassment and abuse in the US film industry. Her case animated a campaign in social media which grew into a global movement.
- 3) The 'Ni Una Menos' campaign began in Argentina in 2015 as a protest against the crime of murder of women in acts of violence perpetuated by men known as 'femicide.' The movement, without question the most numerically significant of Latin America's Fourth Wave, spread to more than a dozen countries in the region as well as having a global resonance.
- 4) The background paper was later expanded to include a section of case studies of India, Latin America and Africa. For full paper see: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw64-2020/preparations/expert-group-meeting#background-papers>
- 5) It is impossible to do justice to the extensive literature on feminism, but the following is a sample list of some of the texts that are useful. For histories and discussions of feminism see, among others, Alvarez 1990: Basu 2010: Beckwith 2013: Collins 2005: Einhorn 1993: El Sadaawi 1977: Ferree and Tripp 2006: Friedman 2016: Hahner 1990: Jayawardena 1986: Jelin 1990: Lanfranchi 2014: Macaulay 2021: Maier and Lebon 2010: Mohanty 2003: Molyneux 2002: Rowbotham 1992: 1997: Sneider 2008.
- 6) The research also draws on an oral history project at Florida University that I founded called 'Intergenerational Dialogues', working with feminists in Chile and Mexico to record the conversations between feminist activists of different generations.
- 7) On feminist waves, see also Dicker and Piepmaier 2003; Henry 2004.
- 8) The first campaign for suffrage was in the United States. It grew out of the abolitionist movement and included some Black women activists in its ranks. See Hewitt 2010; Sneider 2008 for discussion of the tensions around race in the early

suffrage movement.

- 9) In the US some of these young feminists saw themselves as a 'third wave' of feminism whereas in my analysis the trends that they were associated with appear more closely aligned with what I have identified as fourth wave feminism.
- 10) The title mocks an old public information slogan portraying the police as 'a friend in your path.'

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