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Chile

# Feminism in the South: a systemic critique

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**In the space of less than a month, the Chilean feminist mobilization has installed and stimulated an intense public debate about the role and potential of feminism today in the refounding of a left for the 21st Century. This is undoubtedly a major experience of systemic projection and ideological irruption in the field of anti-capitalist politics.**

It is part of the wave of mass mobilizations that has led to the experience of the feminist May in different regions of Latin America and Europe.

This process has had an accelerated political trajectory. From a university mobilization against gender and sexual violence and harassment in educational institutions, in Valdivia on 17 April, it has succeeded in bringing together and leading a large part of the social forces for change in the most important cities of Chile, by interpreting in a feminist way the precariousness of life caused by a mercantile economic system and the privatization of social services.

The intensity of this mobilization, the multiplication of occupations and strikes by women in the main universities of the country, have had the result that even President Sebastián Piñera, who is a reference point for right-wing Chilean employers, said that he had "made mistakes" as a man and that he was a feminist to the extent that this denomination implies "believing in full equality of rights, duties and dignity between men and women". And until the end, the extensions of this unprecedented uprising by women of the South have spread like so many small breaches, producing cracks in the entire education market in Chile – a vast enterprise, in which a whole series of lucrative activities (services, real estate, technology) converge, and which has suddenly become one of the new spaces for the development of new subjectivities among young people.

Since its construction in the course of experiences that began at the beginning of this century, anchored in the new and already long tradition of student revolts, in the uprisings of women and LGBTI people (2000-2017), Chilean feminism has consolidated and offers new reflections on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy, involving a consistent revision of the old monolithic dogmas of Marxism-Leninism in the field of reproductive and care work. In this way the creative examination of the role of women is proposed in a process of advancing socialism; the accelerated neoliberal integration of women into work is understood as an unprecedented factor in the history of Chilean capitalism, as well as an excellent field for the expansion of feminism as a tool for combat at a general level. Chilean feminists organized in the course of mobilizations since May 2017 – a unitary action despite its heterogeneity – have largely identified themselves as part of a longer local and global struggle, while reverting to their history to look for moments when political practice and the feminist ideological horizon focused their action towards a unitary and integrative posture in the struggle for socialism.

The present moment of this trajectory corresponds to an interpretation of this history, starting from the constitution of a protagonist political subject: women as part of the most deprived social base in a system based on the commodification of life and the privatization of what is public, in a country where the education market is one of the most important providers of services and one which – taking advantage of the social aspiration to education as a road to upward social mobility – has left many young Chileans in debt. The majority of these young people are women of working age, because of the long-term dependency to which they are subject and the growth of the labour market associated with tasks of care – a collateral effect of the increase in the female workforce.

In this sense, it is not wrong to say that the heart of this mobilization is the demand for a total reform of public education, in the interests of all and with a feminist orientation, in order to establish gender-neutral education at all levels, at the same time as the denunciation of the precariousness of women's lives as a pillar of economic growth in

Chile. We are far from the classical social structure and the image of university women as privileged in relation to their proletarian peers, as being part of the middle class or intellectuals – a conservative image of feminism conceived in the Chilean case as the product of an exemplary process of "neoliberal modernization". In Chile, students are the main targets of a debt-based market for obtaining certificates for access to a highly professionalized world of work which, after decades of mercantile growth of higher education, imposes low wages on those who do not have a university degree. In this way, Chilean universities – marked by privatization and indebtedness – have been converted into a scene where different generations of feminists, united by their experiences, sometimes struggling from their secondary education up to their lives as teachers, have been able to intervene. This has consolidated the struggle for equality in public education as a seed-bed for the transformation of society and also for the defence of the university as a space that should integrate feminist demands as a model: an element that has marked political action since the first demands for total eradication of practices of abuse and harassment in universities.

By approaching its heterogeneity as a strength, and as something different from the rigid political identities that characterized the Chilean left of the previous century, it is possible to see in the building of this new force the result of a long resistance to the policies practised in the post-dictatorship period. One of the main features of this movement is its rejection of essentialism, its ability to integrate sexual diversities and its strong left-wing ideological identity. Emerging from the impoverished sectors of neoliberal society – but also from what remains of the struggles of the past – the feminist movement is seen as a laboratory of the new politics for subjects marginalized by the political exercise imposed by the subsidiary state, which – in the market economy as well as forced activity in a political movement that summons them – is saving women from being reduced to poverty.

## **In the street, in lecture halls, at home and in bed**

By challenging the right to education and valorising its accelerated privatization, from the 2000s decade education in Chile has become a well-established "market for social opportunities". This has paved the way for the development of new universities whose massively lucrative character has maintained the capitalist tradition of building on old structures of oppression to ensure the expansion of new markets. The feminist movement that emerged in these universities, where the number of students has increased, as has their more popular origins, considers that the anti-democratic and commercialist conditions that govern them are the foundation for the reproduction of violence and gender inequality, both in higher education and subsequently in the labour market.

In pursuing struggles of resistance – under the dictatorship and at the beginning of the democratic period – the feminist thinking that developed in universities over the last decade has had an echo in the media from the time of the social movement for education in 2011, which demanded free and quality public education. As the movement in the faculties has developed, the feminist movement has argued for the need to create a new, gender-neutral education, a condition of genuine democratization of the universal right to education. As a result, feminism in the various organizations, co-ordinating committees and university collectives has defined its aim as overcoming patriarchy, by going beyond the framework of the university as an institution and projecting itself throughout society, and has taken up the demands of the student movement in defence of public education.

The reflection popularized in this domain by the feminist movement aimed to make women visible and legitimate, and to challenge, from a gender perspective, social relations, practices and the production of knowledge, within the various communities where it developed. This allowed for a radical questioning of historical structures of domination within the universities. An example of this is the denunciation of the sexual division of labour, which prevails in the programmes of study that are offered in the public and private higher education institutions of the country, and which reproduce and project in the world of work the gender roles imposed in the private sector (care, parenthood and

teaching). The fact that women have become a majority in mass universities does not in any way imply a greater democratization of these education spaces, but on the contrary the creation of new niches for the expansion of the university staff that reproduce existing forms of segregation. For feminism this is therefore a field of action and of concrete conflict within the student movement. The emergence of a radical critique of the reproduction of sexist content and attitudes in universities thus puts the qualitative aspects of teaching as the driving force of change at the centre of the debate. The idea of the right to education as a mechanism for social integration and an indisputable pillar for the construction of a non-patriarchal society has thus been taken over by feminism. This process of becoming conscious and of the spread of feminist politics in universities made possible a multiplication of structures dealing with sexuality and gender from 2011 on, as well as the organization of various national meetings for non-sexist education, which, since 2014, have facilitated the dialogue between various feminist trends within and outside the educational space.

The public appearance of this university feminism, whose extension and discourse have been reinforced by the student movement which emerged in 2011, allowed the feminist movement to take over the streets and thus to associate itself with the various sectors of women who had been up to then excluded from politics, while giving expressing to the growing precariousness of women. Thus, organisations fighting against gender violence, against harassment in the streets and at work, for the decriminalisation of abortion and the legalisation of the "morning after pill", for equal pay and for a law of gender identity, confront the same enemy: the neoliberal economic system whose expansion feeds on the conditions accorded by patriarchy to a precarious integration of women into the world of work and to the control of women's bodies, both in formal work and in tasks associated with gender in private space and in reproduction.

And the creation of the Chilean Network Against Violence Towards Women (2004) and the organization of the first march against violence against women under the slogan "Machismo Kills" (2008), as well as initiatives which, starting from 2013, were aimed at setting up a horizon for the liberation of bodies, against the absolute prohibition of abortion, which lasted in Chile until 2017 [1]. The debate leading to the vote of a first law allowing abortion in three cases (risk to the life of the mother, pregnancy as a result of rape and unviable foetus), which had established a conflicting space of dialogue between the organizations of feminism – radical, student, social and governmental – was an important turning point towards the current massification of this movement. Around the demand for freedom of abortion, radical organizations [2]), although especially present in the academic sphere, have initiated a powerful critique of the stereotypes inherited from the dictatorship and embodied in the Constitution of 1980, which the state reproduces: the sovereignty of women over their lives and their bodies is still denied, they have the right to abort only as "victims", that is to say that public policies remain conservative and paternalistic in the field of female sexuality, thus avoiding by a medical discourse the valorisation of reproductive work. Despite the tensions between the various interests, origins and ideological orientations, the establishment of the Chilean coordination #NiUnaMenos in 2016 – a unitary space for the diversity of feminisms – has made possible an unprecedented process of dialogue and elaboration between policies and activists, between the organizations defending a unitary posture and those of intersectionality, beginning a cycle whose ambition is the refoundation – starting from feminism – of a new left for Chile.

It is significant that in this so diversified movement the discourses – social, political and intellectual – are asserted in a more or less strong way as the thinking of a third wave of feminism, initiated at the end of the twentieth century, refounding its knowledge from its global character, recognising the multiplicity of forms of being a woman under capitalism, integrating the perspectives of class and race as fundamental axes for any construction of a political subject for emancipation. The rereading of the works of Latin American feminists, such as Julieta Kirkwood Bañados [3], developed within the third wave and in social mobilizations facing the brutal economic conversion to neoliberalism in the authoritarian context of the Southern Cone, opens up before the Chilean anti-capitalist left an unprecedented space to build new identities, which integrate contemporary feminism into the modernization of its ideological principles and social relations. Similarly, in a text signed several months before her election by the Chilean Member of Parliament and former President of the University of Chile Student Federation, Camila Rojas Valderrama [4], the vision of this Latin American trajectory of feminist learning imposes on the present left "rebellion

and the criticism of an order that sees us and treats us as inferior" and analyses the reproduction of the patriarchal order as the "dark side" of the Chilean economic boom and of the country being admitted to the OECD. Heritage of the cycle of student mobilizations (2001, 2006 and 2011), contemporary Chilean feminism draws its power from its critique of the system in its entirety by showing that the neo-liberal economy and the policies of the subsidiary state are aimed at the precarisation of life and at social segregation.

# Pauperisation and/or modernization? The present debate on feminism

It is this heterogeneous and affirmed trajectory that collides with the "Women's Agenda" of President Sebastián Piñera. His response to the feminist mobilizations of the last few weeks aims to prepare a conservative posture for the second post-dictatorial government of the Chilean right: strengthening the role of the state and an essentialist conception of woman "naturally different from man", with mercantile measures aimed at framing social rights, including those of health, education, housing and pensions. The organizations of the left have also denounced the continuing tendency of these "pro-women" measures to consolidate a female subject in such a way as to maintain an economic system that perpetuates the precariousness of women's Lives [5]. Sebastián Piñera is making the choice of ignoring the social demands of non-sexist education, forgetting concrete measures both to deal with precarious jobs and to prevent the increase of gender violence and the pauperisation of broad sectors of women in the country and in the region. He does not take into account the reproductive and domestic care tasks that represent work that is fundamental for any production.

In this sense, the biggest feminist uprising in the history of Chile is faced with a challenge that goes beyond the debate on its origins and the present aim of mobilization: the construction of an anti-neoliberal political leadership that, starting from the feminist movement as a spearhead, will deepen the struggle for all social rights. This is where the potential of this southern feminism lies: In its critical questioning of the unfulfilled promises of democratization and freedom after the dictatorship; and this is clearly expressed in all the reforms that turn their backs on the mobilized society, and in the lack of questioning of the institutions inherited from the dictatorship, the hegemony of the market and the continued privatization of what is public.

That said, it is no less important to take into account – as a context for the emergence of the present Chilean feminist movement – the profound crisis of legitimacy of the so-called transitional democracy, which affects the entirety of the formal system of parties, from the right up to the recently-formed Frente Amplio (Broad Front).

Looking for points of reference to imagine a new democracy that would take on the task of social integration in one of the most unequal countries in the world, citizens are now experiencing the first space for this purpose that is creative and open to society: feminism – which has launched an appeal to the historically excluded sectors. From there comes the fact that the Chilean feminist movement is perceived less as the result of two decades of market modernization of the country, and more as a forum to demand and re-establish lost social rights. Not forgetting a refounding of relations between men and women in the Chilean left in order that they can converge together towards a transformation of society. This reminds this left of its successes and mistakes as regards the political participation of women and becomes a tradition of struggle that is inescapable for all the transformative forces in Latin America.

Coming back to socialism as a collective horizon of defence against the dehumanizing advances of the market and reforms, today's feminism represents in our region a real possibility of ending a social order based on the generation of a second-class humanity. In this way, the advent of feminist demands would make it possible once again, this time in an authentic and integrative way, to rethink democracy in Chile so that it offers everyone, whatever their gender, equality and freedom.

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[1] Chilean women had earned the right to abortion in 1931, but it was taken back from them in 1989, the last year of the dictatorship of the Augusto Pinochet established by the coup d'état of 1973. There then followed 28 years of struggle before on August 21, 2017 the Constitutional Court finally validated (by 6 votes to 4) the law adopted by the parliament which decriminalises "therapeutic abortion".

[2] For example [LÃ-nea Aborto Libre](http://infoabortochile.org/?page_id=549), an organization that fights for medical abortions: [http://infoabortochile.org/?page\\_id=549](http://infoabortochile.org/?page_id=549) .

[3] Julieta Kirkwood BaÃ±ados (1935-1985) was a Chilean theoretician, a founder of the Chilean feminist movement of the 1980s and one of the forerunners of gender studies in the country. She was a founder in 1983 of the feminist movement in opposition to General Pinochet's dictatorship, whose motto, proposed by her, was "democracy in the country, at home and in bed". She wrote many books which have become theoretical references for feminism in In Chile and Latin America.

[4] Co-signed with Daniela Lopez, another former student leader, currently a lawyer and a leading feminist. Cf. *Lucha feminista: Aportes de la izquierda militante*: <http://www.nodoxi.cl/wp-content/up...>

[5] SofÃ-a Brito, *El feminismo volvi3 para quedarse*: <https://www.frente-amplio.cl/notici...>