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Ecuador

# The feminist movement

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**This article briefly presents the path taken by the feminist movement over the past 17 years, focusing on two currents present during this period - liberal feminism and popular feminism - and examining their inputs and limits in the perspective of the construction of an emancipatory process for women.**

The two years of the government of Lucio Gutiérrez (January 2003-April 2005) corresponded to a time of crisis in the first current, that of liberal feminism. The latter developed in Ecuador from the 1980s onwards. It won a strong presence in the state institutions during the 1990s. And it succeeded in imposing new rights: in 1993, the code against violence against women; in 1994, the law on free maternity; in 1997, the first law on quotas; and in the Constituent Assembly of 1998 when the collective rights of indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian peoples were integrated into the Constitution, as well as those of LGBT groups.

But at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the country was swept by an institutional and economic crisis under the impact of neoliberalism. This reached its height during the banking crisis of 1999 and the seizure of the savings of thousands of Ecuadorians, causing a wave of emigration to Europe and the United States, including a significant percentage of women.

It is in this context that a popular feminism developed, linked to the struggle of the social movements. Emerged during the 1990s, it grew at the end of the next decade, under the influence of the World Social Forum (WSF) and of the World March of Women, which situated the struggle of women in a global context and imagined "Another World is Possible". This meant that organizations of women related to the struggles of the indigenous movement and organizations opposed to neoliberalism grew politically stronger in the country.

During the period from 2003 to 2005, three factors weakened institutional feminism: the outright machismo of the government of Lucio Gutiérrez; the crisis of political representation that the country experienced; and the difficulty of institutional feminism in enforcing women's rights of women beyond what the government would accept. For its part, popular feminism experienced a social growth on a country wide scale, but found it difficult to assume the political leadership of the women's movement as well as to generate a program which went beyond the institutions alone.

Since 2007 and under the government of Correa, liberal institutional feminism turned into a progressive liberal feminism. It was partly the result of the presence of popular feminism which questioned some of the policies of the government (like extractivism), but also because of the existence of another progressive sector which supported the government's social policies such as "good human development", which were of benefit to households headed by women, the elderly and persons with disabilities living in poverty.

In 2008, the various aspirations of the country's women's organizations managed to make themselves heard within the Constituent Assembly, in particular through proposals for additions of economic, political, sexual, social, cultural and environmental rights. It was also the Constitution of 2008 which led to the strengthening of the collective rights of women, with the notable exception, however, of sexual rights where things rather went backwards.

In fact if the Ecuadorian feminism of the 1990s focused on gender, we can say that by 2008 the focus was primarily on economic rights, with sexual and reproductive rights neglected. Not to mention the fact that the progressive provisions of the Constitution of 2008 have lost their radicalism with the development of secondary laws and this has weakened the constitutional progress made around the redistribution of land, the de-privatisation of water, the rights of nature, food sovereignty and the social and solidarity-based economy.

Popular feminism emphasised economic rights and experienced a certain growth, but between 2008 and 2014 it was increasingly difficult for it to reach agreement with the state and to obtain its support. There was during this entire period not only the growing cooption of popular organizations of women, but also the repression and growing criminalization of social activists. There was also the application of the Integral Organic Penal Code, which did not accept the proposal of the decriminalization of abortion as a result of rape, but penalized it. Which constitutes a setback with respect to sexual and reproductive rights.

## The policies of the Correa government

In fact the policies of the Correa government tend increasingly to impose a certain control on the bodies of women and their sexuality. For example, with the Integral Organic Penal Code, women acting as carers who practice abortion may be sentenced to 2 to 6 years in prison, when everyone knows that women put their lives in danger when abortions are carried out in conditions of clandestinity. Another example would be the replacement of the “National Intersectoral Strategy of Family Planning and the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancies (ENIPLA)” by an “Ecuadorian Family Plan”, headed by a spokesperson for Opus Dei which popularizes a conservative vision of sexual education.

The policies of the Correa government also tend to make women from the popular sectors bear the major part of the effects of the economic crisis. They are in the front line when faced with the increase in the intensity of work, the growth of poor working conditions as well as the development of informal (precarious and part-time) jobs not benefiting from social security. If social insurance has been created for unpaid domestic workers, they do not however benefit from all legal rights, and this system is financed by the employed members of the family and not by the state, despite the fact that we know that unpaid work represents 15% of GDP (INEC, 2014).

Similarly, maternity leave has been extended by 3 paid months, taking it to 9 months, but without any payment for the other 6 months. And civil servants are no longer governed by the Employment Code and no longer benefit from collective bargaining. All these measures which appear as being in good faith are in fact indicative of Correa's willingness to establish better conditions for capital, to the detriment of the rights of workers.

The policies of the government Correa tend in addition to the criminalisation of social movements, including imprisonment of young women accused of terrorism for having held political meetings, or judicial proceedings against peasant women protesting against mining or extractivism and defending Pachamama (Mother Earth).

In fact, the state has learned to instrumentalize feminism. It has done so by granting minimum freedoms to women, but at the same time smothering their voices of protest, which is a form of subjugation of women to the dominant social structure. At the same time it is undeniable that there is more than formal equality for women as regards their political representation and some government programs, even if the major part of Ecuadorian women suffer the negative effects of the productivist model of development imposed by the government.

For its part, popular feminism has worked for the rapprochement of Afro-Ecuadorian, indigenous and mestizo women around the development of common demands and aspirations. The emergence of this new political subject, which demands food sovereignty, an economy for life, full women's rights, the right to full participation, the sovereignty of the body and the decriminalization of abortion, allows the feminist revolution to be presented as a societal alternative. But over these years the resistance of the state has been very strong, making the construction of women's organizations both inside and outside the social movements difficult, with another factor being the complexity of the agreements with social bodies that feminist women have difficulty in controlling.

## The feminist movement

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There is therefore a momentary failure of popular feminism which has not managed to give a feminist response going beyond the institutional and governmental framework. Nevertheless organizations of women and feminists continue their critical interventions, notably by denouncing the macho interventions of the state by supporting the struggles of indigenous women, incorporating into their approach ecological struggles, opposing feminicide as well as defending a law against violence against women. It remains the case that the movement of women - like other social groups – is going through a crisis which is expressed both by fragmentation and by the institutionalization of its demands. The result is demobilization and demoralization. However, until we find a way of formulating women's demands which differs from that of institutionalization, we will not advance. This is what a critical and emancipatory feminism must now work towards.