

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

"I am not a feminist!!!" Feminism and its Natural Allies, Mexican Feminism in the 70s/80s

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7c7114jz>

Author

Mariscal, Sonia

Publication Date

2014-04-01

“I am not a feminist!!!” Feminism and its Natural Allies, Mexican Feminism in the 70s/80s

One of the themes of the conference is “the perils of “post-feminism” (backlashes against feminism, hypo/hypersexualities, and the redefinition of feminist activism) but I wondered if we can have a “post-feminism” if backlashes prefigure in feminisms beginnings? Feminist backlashes are not simply a natural consequence of the ending of a “post” in “feminism” but they coincide alongside it and continue to this day. My own particular research focuses on Mexican transnational feminism in Mexico during the 1970s through the 1990s using as an archive one of the longest running feminist magazines in Latin America titled *fem. fem.* was published from 1976 to 2004 and came to have an important presence all over Latin America. Looking at some of the interviews conducted in 1970s/1980s of famous female heroes of Mexican contemporary culture and society, the interviewed women would continually abstain from calling themselves feminist. Common defensive answers when women were hailed as feminist pioneers, or strong women leaders in general were ardently responded to with “I am not a feminist!”. “I am not a feminist!” would become a consistent rebuff for a long time amongst women that were interviewed by *fem.* and other news media outlets.¹

My own research on feminism in Mexico and Latin America shows how similar and dissimilar responses to feminism could be in any given context whether it is a first world or third world when it came to feminism. Of note, is how women have been feminisms most radical proponents alongside similar strong female peers that were not compelled by the tenets of feminism even though they embodied a solid feminist praxis. And then there were those interviewed who viewed themselves through the lens of exceptionalism that emphasized inherent natural ability rather than analyzing the unspoken and silent rules for gender oppression within

¹ Lita Panigua. “las mujeres de America latina,” *fem.* Vol. 1, No. 1 (octubre-diciembre,1976):61.

Mexican society. This presentation will briefly look at why there were strong backlashes from women when it came to identifying as feminist, especially when these women could be feminism's strongest allies.

Briefly, *fem.* became an important personal political project by Guatemalan exile and founder Alaide Foppa. Alaide Foppa along with other important Mexican journalists and intellectuals would also help co-found the magazine. *fem.* would go on to endure a successful and at times challenging tenure as a feminist/journal magazine in Mexico. No less so because it was produced in a part of the world where intellectual curiosity was the norm but where the tenancies of such small political projects were difficult to financially sustain. *fem.* survived the first four years of its financial infancy to establish a larger foothold in Mexico's newspaper industry by establishing a relationship with the left leaning newspaper *unomasuno* that boosted *fem.*'s circulation to 14,000 in the capital city by 1982.² The broader scope of this project discusses the significance of the transnational connectivity that *fem.* was able to establish vis a vis its collaboration and partnerships with Chicana and Latin American feminists in the continent. The collaborations served to bring changes in how gender and women were viewed and bring positive changes to Mexican society while at the same time *fem.* became a learning blueprint for other Latin American feminists.

From the very beginning, Mexican and Latin American women described the encounters regarding their positions as feminist, in general, did not go well. For example, *fem.* contributor, Lita Panigua, found a discouraging apathy towards feminism by educated elite women that refused to be labeled as feminists. They were definitely "Not a feminist!" Lita Panigua's concerns voiced frustration and exasperation that feminism continued to be treated

² "En Pocas Palabras, Comunicación alternativa: Cuatro revistas femenistas. II," *fem.* Feminismo en México, Antecedentes, Vol. VIII, No. 30 (octubre-noviembre, 1983): 63-64.

with condensation and derision. Personal encounters with men turned into underhanded jokes that segue way into sexual propositions over Lita Panigua's supposed sexual appetite as a "libertine." This type of pigeon holding served to curtail women's participation in a women's movement by collating feminism with taboos of sexual morality so marked within Latin American culture.³ Prominent political figures as well as members of political parties would also make piecemeal gestures to questions of gender and would offer some policy changes but would not go as far as labeling themselves as feminist. For instance, the first female governor of Mexico was interviewed in 1983, and was repeatedly asked by the media and *fem.* as to whether she was a feminist, to which Griselda Alvarez responded that she was "not a feminist" but rather, a "humanist" elaborating that women were unfortunately still a "weak" constituency and they most certainly needed help in enforcing legislation on their behalf. Despite not labeling herself a feminist, she had already changed and enhanced the situation of teachers who were required to drop out of teaching school if they became pregnant or married. In addition, Governor Griselda Alvarez opened a center for battered women that would go on to have national recognition for its services to women.⁴ Others, like future governor of the state of Zacatecas and militant communist Amalia Garcia, was interviewed regarding her experience as an organizer for the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) to which she replied that she was upset with the communist party for assigning her to women's contingent because she felt she was going to be ostracized by them. Because of this, she wanted nothing to do with being assigned to women's duties which prompted fights with her male colleagues. Amalia Garcia recalled that the secondary status of women within Mexican society was such that women within the party could not recognize how they had internalized their low worth and esteem of having "no value" and as not having the

³ Lita Panigua. "las mujeres de America latina," *fem.* Vol. 1, No. 1 (octubre-diciembre. 1976): 61.

⁴ "Griselda Álvarez, primera gobernadora*" *fem.*, Volumen VII, No. 28 (junio-julio 1983): 53-58.

“capacity” to be able to do things. Amalia Garcia finally accepted the task of being in charge of women’s issues on the condition that she would only hold the post for four months and if she was unconvinced by what she read or found out about feminism she would renounce the post. After “saturating” herself with all things feminist, nothing short of “an internal revolution” began for Amalia Garcia. Embracing feminism as a “process” was not unique not just to Amalia Garcia but to others as well.⁵ Reactions towards feminism were not simply a manifestation of outward responses of backlashes but internalized ones as well. By the same token, *fem.* editorial member Elena Poniatowska did not identify as a feminist. This was in spite of the fact that Elena Poniatowska had a solid feminist practice in her writings, in her interviews, and work on behalf of working class women and more importantly shared feminist project with *fem.* and other collectives. During the early 80s, a new feminist group called the *Movimiento de Liberacion Anatomica de la Mujer* (Molam) or the Anatomic Liberation for Women Movement emerged in Mexico City that was making headlines due to their feminist positions that entailed “liberating” themselves by actually removing their breasts and uterus as a radical feminist act to expunge themselves from all of the maladies that affected women and to rid themselves of men’s “machismo” and “aggressiveness.” Several well-known feminist were interviewed by left leaning newspaper *La Jornada* regarding these radical new feminist positions. Elena Poniatowska was among those questioned and was asked if she would change anything about her body what would it be? Poniatowska answered that if she could change anything it would be her brain so that she could have one similar to her male contemporaries. The journalist interviewing Elena Poniatowska asked her if she wanted that comment to appear in print and Elena Poniatowska replied that yes, but, that her colleagues at *fem.* have asked her to stop making

⁵ Sylvia Tirado Bazan. “retrato de una militante comunista: Entrevista a Amalia Garcia,” *fem.* No. 19, Vol. V (junio-julio 1981):71-73.

declarations of such kind because she is always saying “stupid” things.⁶ Although the retort was very characteristic of Elena Poniatowska and despite her prominence, she evoked the feelings that plagued many women of her generation that had to face the contradictions of feminism with the cultural standard that promoted self-denial or self-sacrifice. Thus, Elena Poniatowska feelings about her own intellectual capacity extended to her ambivalence as a feminist. Feminist activists, Marta Lamas commented that Elena Poniatowska did not refer to herself as a feminist even though she had a thorough commitment with ending women’s inequality and oppression. Elena Poniatowska’s own family dynamic was proof of how feminism created dissent within the confines of her own home as her husband was a staunch anti-feminist.⁷ Feminism did not simply operate within an explicitly intellectual or political culture but in the home where it was more contested. Elena Poniatowska’s own family dynamic as well as those that wanted to join popular organizations that catered to women encountered similar dynamics of opposition. Resistance to feminism is not easy to pinpoint because at the end of the day the power in maligning feminism resulted from the infringement upon very real privileges that were held by men in one of the most important places, the home. Eagerly avowing that one was not a feminist safeguarded that the individual did not pose a threat or was viewed as an enemy. Feminism no longer held the same currency it had during the 1970s but the feelings and emotions it elicited still remained the same. Not identifying that one was not a feminist ensured that one was not ostracized within the home and society. In a conversation dated in 1985 between feminists Graciela Cervantes and Adriana O. Ortega for *fem.*, both feminist activist wondered whether feminism held any value in 1985 anymore since feminisms second beginning nearly 15 years ago. But they also saw how contradictorily the strength of feminisms ideas remained a threat that needed to be manipulated,

⁶ Luis González de Alba. ““No Siempre La Cirugía es Necesaria,” La integridad corporal debe ser respetada: Nancy Cárdenas,” *La Jornada*, Año 1, No. 49, sec. 25, 6 de Noviembre de 1984.

⁷ Guillermo Sánchez-Cervantes. “Poniatowska: la Princesa Roja,” *Gatopardo*. No. 125 (Octubre 2011):108-119, 138.

be it by the state, politicians, media, and even the right wing. For example both fretted over how feminism in its current form was being used by the state to manipulate feminism to its own ends and that feminism was being attached to empty meanings of success that portrayed a feminism that was defined through a young professional woman meeting her obligations, and that the liberal media treated feminism as a bygone social movement without taking into account its present and current transformations, and finally that the right wing continued to view feminism as a precursor to the destruction of the nuclear family.⁸ “I am not a feminist” responses and ambivalence towards feminism even from its most natural allies was complex, difficult, and challenging because ultimately dealing with feminism or even embracing it was a “process” and did represent a challenge to internalized patriarchy in a society that placed a high value of self-sacrifice as the norm. To be a feminist represented a challenge to authority and patterns long cherished and established. To be a feminist required a paradigm shift that that defied personal held values by those that embraced it, those who held feminism in ambivalence, and those that resisted it. For writers such as Guadalupe Loaeza, *fem.* “totally changed her life” and jump started her path to become a much more committed progressive journalists and later activist.⁹ For other writing contributors like Guillermina Pagani, feminism caused the breakup of her marriage. For *fem.* founder Alaide Foppa, feminism brought a clarity previously un-accessible to her that gave her the courage to make the decisions that would eventually lead to her death. Becoming a feminist in some cases came with life altering consequences that did not preclude domestic violence, death threats, and even death.¹⁰

⁸ Graciela Cervantes y Adriana O. Ortega. “feminismo en 1985?,” *fem.* Año 8, No. 38 (febrero-marzo 1985): 6-7.

⁹ Alejandra Parra Toledo. “Nacio hace 29 anos: Fem publicacion feminista pionera en America Latina se convierte en revista virtual.” *La Triple Jornada*, Octubre 3, 2005. http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/10/03/informacion/cont_reportajes.htm (accessed March 31, 2014).

¹⁰ Gilda Salinas. *Alaide Foppa: El eco de tu nombre.* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2002).

