POWER, AUTHORITY AND FEMINIST REPUBLIC

# Imagining a Feminist Republic

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Historically, as well as mobilising for their recognition as full citizens under law, women have also had to fight for the right to participate in defining the political community or social contract, through either liberal or revolutionary projects. Even today, male over-representation in social and political institutions and organisations and androcentrism in the definition of topics of debate and forms of deliberation all result in the exclusion of women. Any transformational political project must start by identifying the causes and effects of inequality and injustice and steer clear of positions based on a supposedly universal citizen in terms of gender, social class, race, sexual orientation and functional diversity. Only on this basis can the definition of the common good in the new project avoid the continued reflection of the life experiences, expectations, needs and interests of persons in the position of privilege in different areas of oppression.

The feminist movement has accumulated an enormous amount of baggage in redefining this new common project which we here term republic and which goes beyond the model state defended by Catalonia (independent, federal or confederate). Proposals from feminisms envisage public action in which ideals of freedom and equality are finally given meaning: equality in the distribution of socioeconomic resources, recognition of the equal value of difference to guarantee freedom from domination for everyone and parity in spaces of decision-making and participation. The feminist republic we imagine requires a paradigm shift that affects the social, political and economic environments inseparably, as a new, truly liberating project cannot be instituted without abolishing patriarchal and racist capitalism. By way of illustration, though by no means exhaustive, the basic foundations of a feminist republic are discussed below in terms of economics, health, education,

culture, and social and political participation.

## A feminist economy that places life at its centre

Patriarchal capitalism is an economic and social system in which social reproduction resides with women. Care work to meet the most basic physical and emotional needs for our subsistence is mainly provided free in the home. The state and companies are freed of this responsibility thanks to the sexual division of labour and the contempt in which this unpaid work is held, imposing on women a double working day in and out of the home, with severe consequences to health and well-being (less time for leisure, self-care or developing life projects), especially when women lack the financial means to hire care on the market. In the case of migrant women, there is the additional inability to access public care services due to their irregular administrative situation and lack of community and family networks to organise care. The sexual division of labour is the basis for discriminations suffered by women at work and a leading contribution to the feminisation of poverty, lower employment rates than among men, higher rates of unemployment and part-time or temporary work, and the pay gap.

Understanding the economy from a feminist perspective means avoiding approaches aimed at maximising individual profit and accumulation that fail to consider people and nature. By contrast, the economy of the feminist republic we imagine seeks to guarantee decent living conditions for all, to ensure ‘good living’ (an expression originating with the indigenous Andean communities). Social reproduction that incorporates decent living conditions leads to the broader concept of sustainability of life. The collective debate on the implications of this concept involves a number of key concepts.

Care work, as an essential economic and social contribution, must be properly valued and organised as a social and not individual responsibility. Recognition and redistribution of this work as a front-line political issue requires the state to assume greater responsibility for care. For instance, access to public nursery schools must be universal and free and public health and related programmes must be given sufficient funding to ensure care responsibility is not transferred to the home and that the work of domestic and family care workers is not precarious.

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With regard to labour policies, as well as taking firm action against all forms of discrimination, whether in access, promotion, professional development or salary, occupational segregation must be eliminated, at the same time fostering greater participation by women in masculinised sectors, such as technology, and greater participation by men in feminised sectors, such as health and education. The increasing precarity of more feminised sectors, such as hotel housekeepers and paid domestic workers must be combated. In this context, the feminist republic would have to ratify the International Labour Organization's Convention 189, incorporate domestic workers into the general social security system, including the right to unemployment benefit, introduce greater flexibility in the requirements and procedures for obtaining and renewing residence and work permits and establish measures for reporting and punishing gender-based violence in domestic work. Co-responsibility must also be fostered, ensuring effective work-life balance by extending maternity and paternity leave, implementing time-use policies and penalising companies that impede such balance.

Finally, at the macro level, a paradigm shift placing life at its centre means denouncing international economic policies that attack life, such as trade and investment agreements and austerity policies aimed at repaying the external debt acquired by bailing out banks, all of which have worsened the population's living conditions and placed a heavy burden on domestic care. By contrast, support must be given to social and solidarity initiatives and a progressive fiscal policy must be adopted to give the public sector sufficient resources to guarantee the sustainability of life. Thus, both macroeconomic policy and public budgets must be drawn up with a sensitivity to gender, establishing the necessary corrective mechanisms to combat inequalities.

## Feminist health policy

Some decades ago the World Health Organization established that "health is not just absence of disease", thus rejecting an idea of health based exclusively on biological factors. At the same time, international and national organisations in this field have for some time being highlighting the need to view health as a right, establishing numerous recommendations indicating, firstly, that health systems must be robust and sustainable and, secondly, the need to combat social and health inequalities that impoverish people and communities.

Nevertheless, limitations to this paradigm have been exposed by feminist approaches to health from a gender perspective and, therefore, in terms of rights. No real changes in the construction of scientific knowledge can be seen; most interventions continue to be palliative (focussing on symptoms and disease) and insufficient resources are given to

implementing public health policies, to the extent that a number of services are on the point of collapse. Furthermore, multinational pharmaceutical companies increasingly commodify our bodies and lives and often have a decisive impact on strategic government lines through their influence on medical science and research.

Health is a universal asset and not just part of the health system, thus there needs to be a radical change in the prevailing logic. Any (re)consideration of what a country with feminist-based health policies would be like inevitably means asking questions outside habitual parameters, with the primary goal of replacing the foundations of the gender regime on which society is built. The heteropatriarchy does not just control how we organise our lives, based on the individual, but also organises everything that is held in ‘common’, including institutions. One of the most powerful institutions in this regime, which notably influences health policies, is bioscientific and overly technical medical androcentrism, which even goes so far as to define what is understood by ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, pushing life and people to the margin through selective homogenisation.

Feminist-based health policy provides elements to overcome this pairing and the insurmountable dichotomies it generates and helps advance beyond the classic organisation of the health system, breaking with pathologising segmentation that envisages the human body as a set of unconnected organs. In short, the simplification of health in national plans, which in practice resemble catalogues of services and facilities, must give way to transformational public policies that end health inequalities and provide resources that are high-quality spaces for managing health in terms of empowerment and autonomy.

If postcodes (as a variable related to social class), the sex/gender system and other systems of oppression determine the quantity and the quality of our life (and life in good health), then the best public health policies are ones that create mechanisms to destructure all these systems and facilitate a sustainable economy and life. This would include providing decent housing, universal access to all health resources without residence-based exclusion, creating social and health services that are based on a comprehensive idea of care for people directly affected by health problems and for the family environment as a whole.

This change of paradigm also means overcoming a predatory economic system such as the current one. By way of example, reducing the prevalence and impact of breast cancer requires early diagnosis, with a greater frequency than is currently the case and good palliative technology. But drawing up strong public policies to combat pollution and food mass production systems is equally or more important. Health interventions would thus become an eco-transformational policy, impacting on the inter-relation of life-

sustaining systems.

Feminist health policies necessarily require a health system centred on public facilities and services, where community general practice is properly guaranteed, including a strong portfolio of mental health services. Health policy in the feminist republic we imagine would also place major emphasis on guaranteeing sexual and reproductive rights. Finally, but no less importantly, feminist health policies would convert health professionals into agents for change, who are well paid, recognised, cared for and respected.

## Feminist education policies

Education is a very powerful tool for social transformation because it transmits values and attitudes. In patriarchal societies, default education transmits the values and attitudes of the dominant groups, in both the formal and informal curriculum. Androcentrism, ethnocentrism, normative heterosexuality and ableism actively contribute to reproducing inequalities. This is why all international treaties, conventions and action platforms consider education a priority field for action in achieving equality between men and women and recognition of diversity: from the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 2011 Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women.

It is also included in state and Catalan education laws, laws on the effective equality of women and men and laws combating gender-based violence. However, in practice we are a long way from implementing principles and measures that combat stereotypes, prejudice and social roles assigned according to gender, guarantee the right of women to live free of violence and respect sexual and affective diversity. Sluggishness in education reforms is accompanied by a lack of teacher training in these issues and public resources for introducing the changes required to progress toward an education policy that undermines the foundations of the patriarchy.

Thus, in the feminist republic we imagine, education must be public, high quality, secular, in Catalan and, above all else, co-educational. Co-education does not mean educating boys and girls together. It is an educational action with the following objectives: dismantling androcentrism, giving greater visibility to the contributions of women in all their diversity, in all areas of knowledge and socially and historically to the development of humanity; promoting respect for equality and diversity, delegitimising the culture of violence and

replacing it with a culture of peace; and training girls and boys in co-responsibility placing life and caring for it at the centre.

Such co-educational action needs to begin with the 0-3-year-old age group, where stereotypes and social roles are constructed and absorbed. In primary and secondary education and in-service training, it is essential to foster critical, constructive and co-responsible reflection among students, so they are able to identify gender stereotypes, inequalities and discrimination against women and girls and daily events that sustain gender-based violence and LGBTI-phobia, employing active and participatory methodologies. It is also essential for schools to be able to recognise implicit or explicit sexism in teaching practices, in the configuration of spaces and in the planning of curricular and extracurricular activities, while mechanisms must be put in place to effectively prevent and tackle violence.

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None of the transformations can be successfully carried out if teachers are not trained with a critical spirit to problematise the dominant patterns of socialisation, such as androcentrism and lack of diversity in canonical knowledge, or fail to learn how to avoid gender blindness. These competencies must also be acquired by university teachers, so that the gender perspective impregnates how subjects are taught, including results of learning, the content, examples and language used, selection of bibliographical sources, assessment methods and management of the learning environments. It is materially impossible for public policy to effectively incorporate the gender perspective, bearing in mind the realities, expectations and needs of the population as a whole, if gaining qualifications means acquiring gender-blind competencies and knowledge.

Thus, the feminist republic we imagine cannot skimp on public investment in education. First of all, as mentioned above, there must be greater investment in teacher training, so teachers can implement co-education and the gender perspective, and efforts must be made to ensure that the needs of educational staff at all levels of education, including universities, are adequately covered and labour precarity is avoided. Secondly, public

education must provide full coverage for the ages 0 to 3, with the aim of reducing the burden imposed by the current socioeconomic model on women, both mothers and increasingly grandmothers, in caring for children. Finally, university fees must gradually be eliminated and the grant budget increased, in order to ensure that access to higher education does not depend on social class.

## Culture as a common asset

Gender cuts across cultural creation. It does so, firstly, by obscuring women's contributions and reproducing gender power relations through the construction of images, symbols and discourses that perpetuate certain models of femininity and masculinity. Secondly, the sexual division of labour and the feminisation of poverty impede women's access to enjoyment of culture. Furthermore, neoliberal productive conditions make cultural work intermittent and precarious, which is further exacerbated by economic crises. In this context, the contracting system that outsources services offered by public cultural facilities contributes to labour precarity in a highly feminised sector. At the same time, public policy tends to foster large culture industries and corporate use of culture, turning it into a highly economic resource, as illustrated by macro cultural events aimed at enhancing the international image of 'city-brands'. This impedes the growth of culture throughout the country, an issue further exacerbated by the change in management model in local public facilities. Civic centres, which were a focus for cultural and community life in the first years of Spanish democracy, are now managed by government subcontracted service companies.

From a feminist perspective, culture is conceived as a common asset, as also defended by the grassroots 15M (or indignados) movements. This conception means overturning public cultural policy to facilitate other forms of cooperation between institutions and self-organised citizens, offering support to the collective (self)representative experiences of social movements. As proposed by intersectional feminism, culture is the ideal terrain for recognising and confronting differences, multiple discriminations and struggles associated with oppressed subjects and dignifies collective imaginaries and knowledge arising from the margins of hegemonic hierarchical structures.

> Rejecting market criteria and favouring an ecosystem of cultural creation, which dignifies cultural work and ensures a decent and sustainable life for people who work in it, require a collective framework agreement in the culture sector to regulate salaries and

> defend labour rights

The feminist republic we imagine must emphasise conservation and strengthening of cultural policy associated with values of the common weal. Based largely on the cultural manifesto produced during the occupation of the squares by the Barcelona 15M movement, we highlight here a number of key aspects: protecting the plurality of social uses of culture throughout the country; prioritising community management of cultural facilities, reinforcing the confluence of culture and education; fostering an economy that favours a benefit to society and dignity for cultural work; and promoting gender equality in cultural production and in recognition of its value.

Instead of the regulatory model used too often by governments, local public facilities and infrastructures must acquire quality in services and common assets. Public-community management partnerships would help broaden access to culture and its plurality of social uses throughout the country, placing the needs of the public at their centre. In this cooperative model of co-responsibility between institutions and communities, services would be required to guarantee the public value of culture and benefits to citizens. Prioritising the social return on culture requires a feminist, social and supportive economy that seeks to transform the organisational model and work practices of government itself. Rejecting market criteria and favouring an ecosystem of cultural creation, which dignifies cultural work and ensures a decent and sustainable life for people who work in it, require a collective framework agreement in the culture sector to regulate salaries and defend labour rights.

Finally, public policies should be designed to provide a broad, overall framework for the relationship between culture and education, replacing the neoliberal and androcentric educational programmes that establish cultural narratives and canons that segregate, forget and exclude women. Despite numerous experiences of integrating training and cultural action in non-formal education, a strict alliance needs to be established between culture and formal and informal education, local facilities, cultural institutions, self-managing bodies and associations and the diversity of cultural and educational agents working throughout the country. Public policies are also needed to promote gender equality in cultural production and provide visibility and recognition to women’s contributions in different cultural expressions. By seeking a model capable of building alternatives to the dominant economic and social model, the values of feminist culture can contribute to restoring public action.

## Transforming social and political participation

The masculinisation of politics is not just a question of over-representation of men (generally white, middle-aged, heterosexual and without functional diversity), but also the persistence of an ‘ideal’ model of leader or activist who is expected to be available at all times, thereby artificially separating public life from private life. At the same time, in both online and physical spaces for debate and participation, sexist aggressions are frequent and often combined with racism and LGBTI-phobia, a veritable exercise of power aimed at generating unease and insecurity and, in the end, silencing women. Furthermore, women are rarely active protagonists in news stories, or experts or commentators in the media, which continues to broadcast sexist, stereotypical images and comments on female politicians. There is also a lack of participation by women’s rights organisations in the different phases of public policy-making and tens of thousands of migrants are excluded from defining the common life and deprived of the right to vote, thereby undermining democracy. In the feminist republic we imagine the eradication of these discriminations must go hand in hand with a new conception of participation.

First of all, measures must include introducing the zipper system in all electoral processes, applied both vertically and horizontally, earmarking part of free electoral advertising to gender equality policies, covering candidates’ childcare expenses with electoral subsidies, and preventing candidates found guilty of gender-based violence, racism or LGBTI-phobia from standing. Furthermore, effective parity, at around 50%, must be guaranteed in all the collegiate bodies of government agencies, establishing penalties for lack of compliance (such as legally nullifying decisions made in non-gender-equal bodies). In both cases, cultural origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, age and functional diversity must be promoted. At the same time, legislation on the prevention, prosecution and reparation of violence against social activists and women in politics must be passed.

Secondly, including the gender perspective in the operation of social and political organisations requires mandatory equality plans and protocols to combat sexist and LGBTI-phobic violence, fostering co-leadership, adopting positive action measures for the representation of the full range of diversity inherent in women, and earmarking public funds for training activists in feminist values and strengthening the area of women, equality and feminisms in organisations.

Thirdly, penalties should be imposed for lack of parity in debates and opinion spaces in the media and effective mechanisms introduced to ensure media representation of women and girls in programmes and advertising is free of sexism and stereotypes, especially with regard young girls, Romani women, migrant or racialised women and women with

functional diversity.

Fourthly, sources of public grants for feminist and women's organisations at different government levels must be given greater funding and guaranteed sustainability, while moving away from an aid-based subsidy policy. Furthermore, participation by women's rights associations in drafting and assessing public policy must be guaranteed and participatory councils must be converted into true decision-making bodies to which public institutions are accountable for their actions and whose decisions are binding. Effectively incorporating the gender perspective in municipal and supramunicipal citizen participation processes means placing special emphasis on counting attendances, absences and interventions, overseeing participation times, offering childcare, choosing spaces free of architectural barriers, providing sign-language interpretation and facilitating geographical mobility. It should also take into account initiatives and forms of organisation among migrant or racialised women, as leaders and agents for social change, in drafting diversity-sensitive public policies.

Finally, in the feminist republic we imagine, the right to active and passive suffrage must be inalienable to all and associated with residence, not nationality, and no law of public safety may limit the exercise of civil rights and freedoms.

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## Conclusions

As illustrated in this article, there are no gender-neutral public policies. If we envisage the feminist republic as a space for constructing sovereignties, then we must ensure that all state tools and structures are conceived under the maxim of 'the personal is political' and that their end goal is to guarantee the sustainability of life. Hence this involves reassessing and providing adequate resources for public action, which can no longer be subordinate to market interests or delegate social reproduction to women. Bringing about this paradigm shift means 'what' must be inseparable from 'how'. Removing the patriarchy from policy inevitably means removing the patriarchy from politics.

If face-to-face or online sector and territorial debates on the country we want are gender blind (as well as blind to the intersection of sexism with class discrimination, racism, ableism and homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia) they will only reflect the hopes and aspirations of privileged groups. Consequently, all debates must include feminist contributions and all discourses must integrate the gender perspective to denature, problematise and increase visibility of inequalities and injustices, which would otherwise remain hidden and forgotten. Furthermore, the format and mechanisms of participation must be monitored to ensure equality and guarantee recognition of women's voices in all their diversity. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, there is no revolution without women.



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