

FEMINISMS: WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Potentials, challenges and tensions in Catalan feminisms today

From silent revolution to systemic alternative

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The feminist strikes in the last two years and protests against unjust sentences in sexual aggression trials clearly show that this is a historic moment for the feminist movement in both Catalonia and Spain. This period of effervescence, maturity and the spread of feminisms (in plural, in recognition of the diversities and inequalities that cut through the movement) is not a flash in the pan; it is the result of sustained, tenacious, capillary action by thousands, millions of women, lesbians and trans women who in recent decades (and centuries) have managed to imbue society in general with feminist knowledge and practices, explicit or otherwise.

It has been said that the feminist revolution is a silent one, subtle rather than strident, associated more closely with essential nodes and rearguards than enlightened vanguards; concerned more with shared, alternating leadership than sacred cows, more with sustaining survival than great, grandiloquent speeches. This constant, stubborn interlinked groundwork explains how the feminist movement has managed to build and sustain a general social, consumer and care strike through decentralised, assembly-based structures and avoiding leadership or control from major political parties and trade unions.

The work of building relations and supportive, sisterly networking among activists in the streets, organisations and institutions has turned the feminist movement into a front-line social actor, organised horizontally, coordinated with and distributed among other social and political organisations and movements. As well as working in its traditional areas (such as rights over one's own body, life free of violence, equal and just rights and valuing and recognising all forms of work), today the feminist movement is present in transformational and emancipatory movements, as its cross-cutting nature means it can transcend social, economic and political frontiers and divisions where other social actors cannot.

Hence, it has the programme, agenda and alliances to provide a comprehensive proposal for overcoming the crises in economics, finance, production and the sustainability of work, care and the environment, and thus become and construct an international systemic alternative.

A cycle of mobilisation and construction, sustained and distributed through feminisms

At the start of the lost decade following the bursting of the financial bubble and imposition of government by the Troika, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the eurozone and in our lives through structural adjustments, reforms and spending cuts, the feminist movement consisted of several emerging feminisms that had multiplied throughout the 1990s (migrant, racialised, anti-racist feminists in situations of labour precarity, transfeminists, lesbian and queer feminists, pro-sex feminists, domestic workers, organised sex workers / prostitutes, non-standard / functionally diverse feminists, ecofeminists). They had made their presence felt in discourses and proposals presented at forums such as the 2006 Catalan feminist conference in Catalonia and the 2009 Spanish conference in Granada, demonstrating the diversity, wealth of debate and proposals, and generational succession in the movement.

Catalan feminist spaces, organisations, collectives and networks have been present in the streets, squares, occupations, organisations and institutions through various waves of protest in this period: from the eruption of the *indignados* on 15 May in squares throughout Spain in 2011, to the boost given to the Catalan independence process; from the protests in 2010 throughout Catalonia to the 1 October referendum; not to mention the constant upheavals in the municipal, Catalan and state electoral cycles.

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Over the past eight years, the feminist movement has maintained continual, networked

mobilisation and coordination in defence of a wide range of rights. These include, in the field of social rights, participation in marches and platforms against cuts in public health and education (the so-called *marees blanca i groga* [white and yellow tides]), in assistance for families and dependent persons, in budgets and organisations tackling gender-based violence and promoting gender equality and justice. The movement positioned the feminist agenda and new forms of strike action in the general strike against reforms to the pension system in 2010 and the two strikes against the labour reforms in 2012, highlighting the specific effects of austerity on gender inequalities and the growing feminisation of poverty and social exclusion.

In recent years, Catalan feminisms have maintained their autonomy and independence from other political groupings and parties while building a common agenda, through initiatives such as *Feminismes i Radicalitats Democràtiques* (Democratic Feminisms and Radicalities), which launched #Alertafeminista in 2015 to position feminist proposals, practices and perspectives and demand gender parity and the participation of women, lesbian and trans feminists in municipal, Catalan and state government agencies.

Through plural, grassroots spaces, they have been active and present in the Catalan sovereignty process and independence movement, in defending national rights and self-determination, providing a feminist perspective to guarantee a fair, non-discriminatory constituent process as included, for instance, in the document *Independents del Patriarcat*. They have also participated in initiatives and spaces defending civil rights and the freedoms of expression, protest and organisation, and attacking the repression and criminalisation of political dissidence, through spaces for observing and reporting police violence, such as #SomDefensores during the 1 October referendum and the trial of representatives of civil pro-independence organisations and politicians in the Supreme Court.

At a time when links and bridges between social and political organisations have been burned due to the independence process, referendum, intervention in Catalan self-government and the application of clause 155 of the Spanish Constitution, the feminist movement has been one of the few spaces capable of generating forums for internal dialogue and critical debate and coordinating responses of feminist solidarity throughout Spain in defending rights and freedoms against political criminalisation, judicialisation, repression, imprisonment and exile.

Feminisms everywhere, explicit or otherwise: generous, conscious alliances to build social change

The feminist movement has always been capable of networking, nourishing and feeding off other struggles and spaces for social transformation. Feminists have not only supported struggles such as the right to housing and the city, in movements such as the *Plataforma d'Afectats per la Hipoteca* (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) and tenant's and neighbourhood unions, which already have notable female leadership, but have also built alliances and synergies that help these areas construct their own feminist discourse.

But it has also become a space for constructing economic alternatives, such as cooperativism and the social and solidarity economy, where feminist activists have managed to position feminist economic perspectives and practices in the mainstream of cooperatives, associations, areas of coordination and actions of municipal governments and throughout the country, as can be seen in the Catalan network of cooperative Atheneums.

Such synergies between movements have also occurred in the struggle against racism and immigration law, and in favour of citizenship for migrants, refugees and racialised persons. The feminist movement has protested against the Spanish apartheid health decree that cut free medical care for migrants, in favour of the closure of foreigner internment centres, and against the persecution of migrants who live from street selling and selective raids against migrants. At the same time, migrant and racialised women's feminist organisations provided the backbone for the sit-ins in 2016 at the University of Barcelona and in 2018 at the Escola Massana, where for three months they organised an anti-racist feminist meeting place.

My body, my rights, a historic feminist milestone threatened by the anti-choice offensive

Over the last decade, the movement has continued to defend sexual and reproductive rights from the state offensive by ultra-Catholic and anti-choice groups. This began in 2007 with the criminalisation of abortion clinics and became more sinister with the attempt to revoke the 2012 Spanish law on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health, which had been passed with the precise intention of protecting women against constant attack. Catalan and Spanish feminisms challenged the so-called abortion counter-reform with two years of uninterrupted mobilisation coordinated by the *Campanya pel Dret a l'Avortament Lliure i Gratuït* (Campaign for the Right to Free Abortion), culminating in the withdrawal of the white paper and resignation of Gallardon, the minister behind the initiative.

The government limited minors' right of decision over their own body through a partial reform of the 2010 law, particularly harms the rights of girls living in situations of intrafamily or gender-based violence

Nevertheless, Rajoy's government limited minors' right of decision over their own body through a partial reform of the 2010 law requiring girls to tell their parents of their decision to have an abortion. This particularly harms the rights of girls living in situations of intrafamily or gender-based violence, in response to which the movement has promoted and practised active disobedience. Furthermore, feminist and sexual and reproductive rights organisations have continued to facilitate abortion for women with advanced pregnancies who discover their foetus has problems of malformation, as such infants would

be unable to survive. Yet the law continues to offer women no legal protection and requires them to break the law or have an abortion abroad.

This permanent mobilisation has seen a dozen feminist activists in Spain charged with hate crimes, a worldwide strategy by anti-choice groups to criminalise the movement. One of the best-known cases is that of the defendants in Palma, sentenced to a year in prison for the crime of insulting religious feelings after a symbolic protest at the Church of St. Michael in Palma, during the #Febrerfeminista protests on 14 February 2014. The Supreme Court ratified the sentence, thus setting a worrying precedent by criminalising the freedom of expression and protest.

With regard to the right to a freely chosen sexual orientation and gender identity, the movement promoted and supported the 2014 law against lesbophobia, homophobia and transphobia, the healthcare protocol for trans people that depathologises their accompaniment, and the 2015 law on assisted reproduction for single and lesbian mothers.

For a life free from gender-based violence, building feminist justice and dismantling rape culture

In a context of cuts to resources and budgets for tackling gender-based violence, the escalation in femicide, rise in sexual violence, judicial re-victimisation of women and children and media sensationalism regarding such violence, the feminist movement has redoubled its efforts in accompanying women who have suffered attacks and in its social condemnation and political impact in the light of institutional inaction.

In 2015, feminist spaces and platforms came together in the Novembre Feminista network to denounce and demand urgent action against the refusal to issue restraining orders for women in situations of high risk and demand clarification from the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding risk assessment protocols. Protests throughout Spain demanded a law combating all forms of gender-based violence, against women and children and not limited to relations between heterosexual couples, as established by the Istanbul Convention. The protests spread to denouncing the re-victimisation of women during lawsuits for gender-based violence or sexual aggression, such as the cases of the sexual predators at the San Fermin festival and, more recently, those who raped a girl in Manresa.

As recently stated by Marisa Fernández of Dones Juristes (Women Jurists), the Supreme Court's verdict recognising multiple sexual aggressions at the San Fermin festival was in fact rape is evidence that the feminist movement has positioned the issue of sexual consent in the public debate and built a social consensus on the issue beyond the courts.

An international grassroots labour, student, consumer and care strike

The rejection of all forms of violence against women was also behind the international call for a strike by the feminist movement #Niunamenos in 2016, with the rise in femicides in Latin America, under the title “Si nuestras vidas no valen nada, produzcan sin nosotras” (if our lives are worth nothing, then produce without us).

In Catalonia the Vaga de Totes (Strike by Us All) had already called for a feminist strike in the autumn of 2015. The proposal for a world strike on 8 March, International Women’s Day, arose in the 1970s with the international campaign for a salary for unpaid work, demanding visibility and recognition for all domestic and care work that was not considered a job. In Catalonia, the Les Dones Compten (Women Count) network started spreading the idea in the early 2000s, when it promoted accounting of unpaid domestic, reproductive and care work, gaining the support of the Parliament of Catalonia, and when the CGT trade union called for partial strikes in 2001.

The manifesto for the 2019 feminist strike called for everything to be brought to a halt in rejection of “the patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, racism, heterocentrism and ableism”

It has taken 18 years for this call to mobilise Catalan and Spanish trade unions, students and associations with a proposal that is both comprehensive and ambitious: a workers’ and students’ strike, a care strike by paid and unpaid workers and a resource and energy consumption strike. The manifesto for the 2019 feminist strike called for everything to be brought to a halt in rejection of “the patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, racism, heterocentrism and ableism”, a reboot of the system as a whole, with a broad and comprehensive programme of measures to achieve it.

In 2017, movements in 30 countries joined the call for a strike, and in Catalonia the CGT called for half-hour strikes. In 2018, 170 countries joined the strike and the feminist movement, coordinated through neighbourhood, town and city, and state assemblies, persuaded the CGT and CNT trade unions to call a state-wide 24-hour strike, while the larger unions organised 2-hour strikes. In 2018 and 2019, six million people went on strike in Spain and in 2019 the education sectors of the CCOO and UGT unions called for a 24-hour strike. The strike was a success in the universities, with 72.44% participation, and, although the Government of Catalonia calculated general participation at 7%, in areas such as the Barcelona metro around 19% of workers went on strike. In Catalonia, thousands of journalists and media professionals joined the state-wide initiative Las periodistas paramos (Women Journalists are Striking) with their own manifesto, Les periodistes parem, and strike organisers set up the Agència 8M news agency, where feminist photographers, journalists, camera operators, communicators and activists provided minute-by-minute

coverage of the strike, under the slogan “Nosaltres parem, nosaltres t’ho expliquem” (We strike, we explain).

At least 10 feminist activists have suffered reprisals in Catalonia for actions during the two feminist strikes, a number rising to 20 in the Catalan-speaking countries and 30 overall in Spain. The seven strikers who blocked the Government of Catalonia train lines at Sant Cugat for several hours on 8 May 2018 face trial and fines of up to €26,000 and have responded with the #8milmotius campaign. In Barcelona, the Catalan Ministry of Home Affairs used the new public safety act, the so-called Ley Mordaza, or ‘gag law’, to fine three activists from Sants and Poble Sec for blocking traffic, and the Espai Feminista de Sants launched the campaign #Jotambétallo, which even received support from the president of the Catalan Women’s Institute. However, the Ministry of Home Affairs refused to drop the fines and, during the 2019 strike, the Catalan Mossos d’Esquadra police force identified hundreds of feminists on the Barcelona picket lines, hindered reporting by Agència 8M and charged into hundreds of people celebrating the end of the day’s strike in Manresa.

The great challenge, affirming diversity, dismantling inequalities, privileges and power relations

The 2018 and 2019 feminist strikes marked a turning point in how feminism is viewed, suddenly bringing it into the mainstream. Managing this moment of broad social support and resisting its co-optation, absorption and instrumentalisation by a variety social and political organisations is essential, as is continuing to work on its horizontal approach, diversity and networking, preparing for future moments of counter-flow and confronting the violence besieging feminist activists and all women, lesbian, trans women and non-hegemonic gender identities and masculinities in these times of neoliberalism and rising neo-fascism.

The feminist movement has grown quantitatively and qualitatively when it has shown it can coordinate among and with those people and groups whose rights are most under threat, working to amplify their denunciations, demands and proposals for improving their living conditions. The common feminist route map must focus on eradicating not just inequalities of gender, but also those of class, ethnicity and origin, the negation of citizens’ rights and north-south inequalities.

Migrant women as well as native, racialised women (Romani and Afro-descendant women), who are living through a moment of collective empowerment and the construction of their own discourse and action, have for decades been calling on the movement to confront internal privileges and inequalities and transcend the white, European, western, heterosexual and urban perspective. In 2018 they criticised the muted feminist response to the rape of seasonal strawberry pickers in Huelva, compared to the case of the San Fermin festival, and added issues such as rejecting the immigration law and greater exposure of migrant, refugee and racialised women to gender-based violence to the manifesto of the 2019 feminist strike.

Domestic workers have been waiting eight years for their labour rights to be made fully equal to all other workers, as stipulated in the 2011 International Labour Organization Convention 189. A large majority of such workers are migrants and for decades their demands have been sidelined by the agenda of certain hegemonic feminisms. With an ageing society and a growing crisis in the sustainability of care work, providing decent working conditions for these women and focussing public debate on the importance of and urgency in making these tasks sustainable in all areas of life (work, social and community care) is a central challenge for the transformational feminist agenda.

In Catalonia, prostitutes organised almost 20 years ago to fight police and government persecution and demand labour and social rights. Some created union sex worker sections and others set up the OTRAS union in 2018. Two feminist organisations took them to court and succeeded in getting the Audiencia Nacional court to revoke their statutes and nullify their acceptance by the Ministry of Labour.

Differences over how prostitution is considered within the feminist movement must be managed through dialogue and constructive debate. Some feminist sectors encourage open confrontation, littered with insults and condemnation of feminists and organisations who for decades have been providing support to prostitutes against the multiple forms of violence that besiege them. Prohibitionist measures that criminalise and persecute women working as prostitutes are justified in the name of defending their rights; and the fight against sexual prostitution and people trafficking is used to justify measures that fail to tackle the underlying issues, such as immigration law, and that favour the proliferation of organised crime in people smuggling and trafficking and the privileges of the owners of macro-brothels, where organised crime exploiting women proliferates. We need to listen to the voices of victims and organisations specialising in the issue of people trafficking when they claim that criminalising prostitution only helps organised crime.

It is important to work on co-education, sexual and affective education under equal conditions and the awareness of professional educators and communicators

Other sectors, with the excuse of debating the central subject of feminism, reject the presence of transgender women and men in the movement, in a discourse that is dangerously similar to anti-choice and ultra-Catholic groups who claim that biological characteristics immovably determine gender. A transformational feminist movement must bar the way to the exclusion and stigmatisation of trans people.

Halting the rise in gender-based violence and the criminalisation of feminisms; keep on coordinating

Another key priority is to halt the escalation in social and institutional gender-biased violence. This can be seen both in a section of the judiciary, which protects the impunity of gender-based violence, and at the institutional level, with the rise of far-right parties who describe feminist thought as gender ideology and criminalise feminist activism, aware that it is one of the strongest firewalls against the rise of fascism: let us not forget that the feminist movement mobilised 50 cities in protest at the far-right party Vox joining the Andalusian government last January.

We need to demolish the social discourse that talks about false accusations while femicides continue and women, reporting violence as the only source of protection for themselves and their children, face a judiciary that doubts them, accuses them of alienating their children and punishes them for protecting their children from violence, as in the case of Juana Rivas and dozens of mothers who have disobeyed the courts to distance themselves from abusive fathers.

We need to build support networks for women and children while continuing to position the practice of feminist justice in community, social and organisational spaces. As feminist jurists state, the feminist notion of justice does not focus on harsher sentencing and punishing aggressors. It only uses the penal system as a means of protecting women and children who suffer gender-based and even sexual violence, because society does not permit repetition, and to end the impunity of aggressors, social inaction and complicity and the stigmatisation of those suffering aggression.

The feminist movement starts from the premise that gender-based violence can only be eradicated through a profound transformation of the collective patriarchal mentality and dismantling the violent component in hegemonic masculinity. Thus, we need to continue working towards co-education, sexual and affective education under equal conditions and in raising awareness among teachers and the media, who are both key agents in preventing gender-based violence.

We urgently need to generate resources for reporting, protecting and ensuring self-care for feminist activists who are harassed and attacked on the social media and in the street, and to put an end to criminalisation and judicial proceedings against feminist activists, 50 of whom have been charged in Spain, as reported by the campaign *Defender a Quien Defiende* (Defend Those Who Defend), and stop social and institutional actors from persecuting them.

We need to improve coordination in Catalonia, Spain and internationally to maintain our capacity for mobilisation and creative, transformational construction, as well as for looking after one of the movement's main strengths: generating and sustaining constructive debate and building consensus despite dissent, achieving common goals through diverse strategies. We have seen it in the streets: this is not the moment to build vertical

structures, but to achieve shared goals through decentralised, networked action, where each node is essential and none at the centre, to construct a global shake-up to bring about the social, economic and political transformation we need as a society, as a country and as a species on a planet on the verge of collapse.



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