

DISCUSSION PAPER

NEW FEMINIST ACTIVISM, WAVES AND GENERATIONS



No. 40, April 2021

MAXINE MOLYNEUX, ADRIJA DEY, MALU A.C. GATTO AND HOLLY ROWDEN
BACKGROUND PAPER PREPARED FOR THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR
ACTION, 64th SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFF	African Feminist Forum
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEDEP	Centre for the Development of People
CSO	Civil society organization
FBSP	Brazilian Forum of Public Security
ILO	International Labour Organization
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
MUCB	Mulheres Unidas Contra Bolsonaro (Women United against Bolsonaro)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), Brazil
PFA	Platform for Action
PT	Pinjra Tod, India
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
VAW	Violence against women
WVS	World Values Survey

SUMMARY

Over the last decade, young women have taken the lead in a new wave of feminist and democratic protests in a wide range of countries, North and South. These movements raise a range of political and analytic questions: To what extent is it useful to identify the recent wave of activism in terms of a new generation of activists? How different are these new feminist movements to earlier forms, and what differences and continuities divide and unite the generations? How useful is the idea of feminist 'waves' as a way of periodizing the history of feminism?

These questions are explored first through examining the characteristics common to past and contemporary feminisms and dissecting the issues associated with periodizing feminism in terms of 'waves'. In the second part of the paper, the focus is on understanding the most recent wave of feminist activism by considering its antecedents and main characteristics. Part three presents three case studies of movements in the Global South: The cases of Brazil, India and Malawi illustrate some of the ideas, campaigns and organizational forms of 'new feminists'. They

focus on three prominent themes in feminist activism: campaigns to defend democratic rights (Brazil), gender-based violence (India) and sexual and identity rights (Malawi).

The analysis of the emergent fourth wave illustrates the importance of history and context, politics, resources and opportunities. Four distinguishing features of the 'new feminism' stand out from our research: First, we find that today, more than ever, feminist activism is global and that the countries of the South contain some of the most dynamic movements; second, feminist activism is highly dependent on new communications technology, which accelerates the temporality of communication and allows for extensive organizational power and reach. Third, this wave of feminism is characterized by more defensive campaigns, as women's rights have come under increasing threat from conservative forces. Fourth, issues of intersectionality, i.e., a strong commitment to diversity, radical inclusion and anti-racism, are all more prominent in these recent movements than in previous times.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours de la dernière décennie, des jeunes femmes ont pris la tête d'une nouvelle vague de protestations féministes et démocratiques dans de nombreux pays, du Nord et du Sud. Ces mouvements soulèvent un éventail de questions politiques et analytiques : Dans quelle mesure est-il utile d'identifier la récente vague d'activisme en termes d'une nouvelle génération d'activistes ? De quelle manière ces nouveaux mouvements féministes se différencient-ils des formes antérieures, et quelles différences et continuités divisent et unissent les générations ? Quelle est l'utilité de l'idée de « vagues » féministes comme moyen de périodisation de l'histoire du féminisme ?

Ces questions sont tout d'abord étudiées en examinant les caractéristiques communes aux féminismes passés et contemporains et en analysant les enjeux associés à la périodisation du féminisme en termes de « vagues ». Dans la seconde partie du document, l'accent est mis sur la vague d'activisme féministe la plus récente en considérant ses antécédents et ses principales caractéristiques. La troisième partie présente trois études de cas de mouvements dans les pays du Sud : les cas du Brésil, de l'Inde et du Malawi illustrent certaines des idées, des campagnes et des formes organisationnelles des « nouveaux féministes ». Ils se concentrent sur trois thèmes principaux

de l'activisme féministe : les campagnes de défense des droits démocratiques (Brésil), la violence basée sur le genre (Inde) et les droits sexuels et identitaires (Malawi).

L'analyse de la quatrième vague émergente illustre l'importance de l'histoire et du contexte, des politiques, des ressources et des opportunités. Quatre traits distinctifs du « nouveau féminisme » se démarquent dans notre recherche : premièrement, nous constatons qu'aujourd'hui, plus que jamais, l'activisme féministe est mondial et que les pays du Sud comportent certains des mouvements les plus

dynamiques ; deuxièmement, l'activisme féministe dépend fortement des nouvelles technologies de communication, qui accélèrent la temporalité de la communication et permettent un pouvoir et une portée organisationnels étendus. Troisièmement, cette vague de féminisme se caractérise par des campagnes plus défensives, les droits des femmes étant de plus en plus menacés par les forces conservatrices. Quatrièmement, les problèmes d'intersectionnalité, notamment un engagement fort en faveur de la diversité, de l'inclusion radicale et de la lutte contre la diversité, sont tous plus importants dans ces mouvements récents qu'auparavant.

RESUMEN

Durante la última década, las jóvenes han llevado la iniciativa en una nueva ola de manifestaciones feministas y democráticas en una gran variedad de países del Norte y del Sur. Estos movimientos plantean diversas preguntas de carácter político y analítico: ¿Hasta qué punto resulta útil identificar la reciente ola de activismo en términos de una nueva generación de activistas? ¿En qué se diferencian estos nuevos movimientos feministas de sus formas anteriores, y qué diferencias y continuidades separan y unen a las generaciones? ¿Cuál es la utilidad de la noción de “olas” feministas como modo de periodizar la historia del feminismo?

Estos interrogantes se analizan en primer término mediante un examen de las características comunes entre los feminismos pasados y los contemporáneos y una disección de los asuntos asociados a la periodización del feminismo en términos de “olas”. En la segunda parte del trabajo, el foco se centra en comprender la ola más reciente de activismo feminista mediante un análisis de sus antecedentes y principales características. En la tercera parte se presentan tres estudios de casos sobre movimientos en el Sur Global: los casos del Brasil, la India y Malawi ilustran algunas de las ideas, campañas y formas de organización de los “nuevos feminismos”. Estos

movimientos se enfocan en tres temas sobresalientes del activismo feminista: campañas en defensa de los derechos democráticos (Brasil), violencia de género (India) y derechos sexuales y a la identidad (Malawi).

El análisis de esta cuarta ola emergente explica la importancia de la historia y el contexto, la política, los recursos y las oportunidades. En nuestra investigación sobresalen cuatro características distintivas del “nuevo feminismo”: En primer término, encontramos que hoy, más que nunca, el activismo feminista es global y que los países del Sur contienen algunos de los movimientos más dinámicos; en segundo lugar, el activismo feminista depende en gran medida de las nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación, las cuales aceleran la temporalidad de las comunicaciones y facilitan un amplio poder y alcance organizacional. En tercer término, esta ola del feminismo se caracteriza por campañas más defensivas, habida cuenta de la creciente amenaza que suponen las fuerzas conservadoras para los derechos de las mujeres. En cuarto lugar, destacan las cuestiones de la interseccionalidad; es decir, un férreo compromiso con la diversidad, la inclusión radical y el antirracismo, todo lo cual adquiere un carácter más prominente en estos nuevos movimientos que en los de antaño.

1.

INTRODUCTION

The second decade of the millennium has been marked by a startling upsurge of political activity by a new generation of activists. Protests against authoritarian governments and campaigns for democracy and rights have seen young people in key organizational roles and filling the ranks of demonstrators, with the short-lived Arab Spring one of the early precursors. In Turkey, young activists have taken to the streets to challenge Erdogan's erosion of their former rights; in Armenia, Algeria, China (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), Russian Federation, Sudan, Thailand and Ukraine as well as Bellarussia, protests have been led by young people demanding a change in government and an end to corruption. In the United States, they have been at the forefront of protests against migration policies and mass shootings, while the women-led Black Lives Matter campaign has focused on racist police outrages and in 2020 became a global movement. In Europe, 16-year old Greta Thunberg has inspired a host of environmental movements; and in Chile, school and university students have since 2006 been taking to the streets to protest against neoliberal educational reforms. What is striking is how young women have been key actors and leaders in many of these movements.

Young women have also brought a new dynamism to feminism and feminist activism¹ in both North and South. More than a decade ago, feminism was pronounced 'over', yet we have seen growing international support for movements such as Million Women Rise and the Me Too campaign, which have galvanized untold numbers of women across the world to denounce gender-based violence, misogyny and sexual harassment. The Women's Marches and insurgent campaigns around reproductive rights are other instances of these recent mobilizations. In Poland, thousands took part in the *Czarny* (Black) Protest to oppose attempts by the ruling Law and Justice (PIS)

Una Menos (Not One Less) campaign to protest the lack of government response to violence against women (VAW). In the post-Soviet world, there have been outbreaks of feminist protest of different kinds: In Russia, Pussy Riot, and in Ukraine, *Femen*, have staged dramatic episodes of protest at the treatment of women by deploying sexuality and the female body as weapons of revolt.

Across many regions, these protests suggest a new moment in politics, when patriarchal privilege is once again being called out, this time by a new, younger generation (see Annex I). Feminism seems to have

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