

Young Migrants and the Construction of Desire in Popular Feminism

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The women's rights movement installed abortion as violence against women and sex education as a historical social and political demand in Argentina. Recently, thousands among the younger generations have engaged in activism, starting in what the media has called "the revolution of the daughters" (Peker 2018). To understand how the diversity of young women inhabit the roles assigned to them, it is necessary to unravel adult-centric or mainstream representations present even within the feminist movement (Elizalde and Valdés 2021).

The pandemic hindered the participation of women and young people in activism, especially affecting those from the working classes. In 2020, the 35th "Plurinational Meeting of Women and LGBTQ" could not be organized, which every year gathers thousands of people for three days in one city. Instead, a monthly local and virtual event called "Transfeminist October" was held that year. Through public dialogues that were broadcasted on Instagram and by holding private workshops in Zoom sessions, participants discussed their issues as women and queers in the city of San Martín.

One of the workshops, entitled "Youth and Enjoyment," questioned taboos about sexual pleasure, bringing together natives and migrants from local youth organizations. Through comments made spontaneously, the same horizontal dialogue was promoted as in face-to-face events. In contrast, in events organized over Zoom, those who spoke the most were white female university students in their 30s, as well as members of the LGBTIQ community, all of them from Argentina. Members among these two groups spoke of enjoyment as erotic pleasure experienced in lesbian or non-binary relationships, polyamory, or bondage practices.

A small group of young migrants, between seventeen and twenty years old, listened attentively, but did not speak, until an eighteen-year-old Paraguayan girl broke the silence and confessed with embarrassment: "When we think about how pleasure and desire crosses us young people from popular neighborhoods, we realize that the issues we raise are all negative". In fact, for another nineteen-year-old Paraguayan, sexuality was experienced negatively because "Being a woman, mother and migrant, it is much more difficult for me to think about enjoyment from a cool place because we were denied the freedom of sexuality." This refers to the situation in her home country, where women and children are forced to become mothers because their abortion law is very restrictive and sex education is forbidden in schools.

The workshop was one of the instances of a two-year collaborative ethnography that I developed before and during the pandemic with rural youth, women, and men from Paraguay, and residents of poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. They are members of a long-standing diaspora affected by xenophobia and racism, given the history of neo-colonial relations in South-South migration

flows. As a queer and feminist student from Argentina conducting anthropological research in my own society, I applied Participatory Action Research methods and considered feminist theories that seek to change or eliminate social oppression (Fals Borda 2012; Olivera and Nucamendi 2014; Rappaport 2008).

An intersectional perspective allows us to see gender in a relational way, taking into account the map of hierarchies on which inequalities are built in each context (Crenshaw 1991; Viveros Vigoya 2016). In my case, a key finding was that all the participants of the aforementioned event stated that they had attended it as a reaction to the patriarchal violence inflicted on them on a daily basis. However, other issues also emerged, such as class and national inequalities that intersect with gender inequalities, shaping different experiences for young migrants in their relationship to enjoyment and sexuality.

Therefore, analyzing female genealogies is suggestive to understand the role of these young migrants in the feminist movement, considering the lineage in which their practices are inscribed, what they separate themselves from and what they reinvent (Elizalde 2021). In turn, focusing on negotiation spaces implies understanding that when the young are called to participate as “young,” they can speak from the voice of age but also other voices such as those of the poor, women, or migrants, making explicit different dimensions according to the specific context (Gaitán, Medan, and Llobet 2015).

In this sense, the young women create their own groups where they “build a popular feminism from the experiences of the territory,” as one of them once told me in a meeting. Thus, they learn about sexuality from pleasure, which they tend to see more as a privilege than as a right. They create a feminism that differentiates them from the young people of “unpopular” neighborhoods and from the “academic” feminisms rooted in the middle and upper classes, in which the time of youth and the ways of using it for enjoyment are different.

Thus, the exploration of sexuality and the idea of enjoyment are disruptive in a context marked by migration, poverty, and early motherhood. That said, from their subordinate position, the young women speak through silences in some spaces or by expressing themselves in others. These are issues that need to be addressed in order to decolonize Western feminism, as several postcolonial authors from the Global South have noted (Lugones 2008; Mohanty 1984). The critical contributions of Ochy Curiel (2019) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) have been especially influential in rethinking indigenous and peasant feminism from a decolonial perspective.

In conclusion, an important research finding is that the participation of young migrant women in feminist spaces is crucial to access some of the rights they lack in their home country. At the same time, through their activism in “popular feminism,” they not only fight against inequalities that afflict them in the destination country but also introduce new demands and meanings to question mainstream feminisms. In summary, it is necessary to approach the experiences of young migrants from an intersectional perspective in order to understand their constructions of demands within feminism.

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