

Feminisms and the 15M Movement in Spain: Between Frames of Recognition and Contexts of Action

María José Gámez Fuentes

Institute for Social Development and Peace, Universitat Jaume I of Castellón (Spain)

Corresponding address:

María José Gámez Fuentes

Dep de Ciencias de la Comunicación

Facultad de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Universitat Jaume I

Avda. Vicent Sos Baynat s/n

12071 Castellón (Spain)

E-mail address: gamezf@uji.es

Feminisms and the 15M Movement in Spain: Between Frames of Recognition and Contexts of Action¹

Abstract: The purpose of this profile is to address the Spanish 15M movement from a gender perspective, focusing, on the one hand, on the role played by feminist demands within it and, on the other, on how feminism may have contributed to the 15M, its internal debate and its further developments unfolding in the current Spanish political context. In order to do that, we will first explore how feminist demands were initially received in the camps and the reactions they raised among the media and citizenship. Secondly, we will tackle how this case of overlap between a larger group and feminist groups is different from previous collaborations and confrontations. Finally, we will focus on how the 15M movement has transformed (or not) as a result of feminism and the implications of this process towards rethinking the role of feminism within contemporary Spanish politics.

Key words: Feminism, 15M movement, democracy, Spain,

¹ This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness through its Research Secretary of State under grant CSO2012-34066 ‘Evaluación e indicadores de sensibilidad moral en la comunicación actual de los movimientos sociales’ [Assessment and indicators of moral sensitivity in social movements’ communication strategies]; and Universitat Jaume I-Bancaja Foundation under grant P1-1A2012-05 ‘De víctimas a indignados: visibilidad mediática, migración de imágenes, espectacularización de los conflictos y procesos de transformación social hacia una cultura de paz’ [From victim to indignant: media visibility, image migration, conflicts spectacularization and conflict transformation processes towards a peace culture].

I also wish to thank Alessandra Farné, Álex Arévalo, Sonia Nuñez and Eloísa Nos for their insightful comments and support in the rewriting of this paper.

Three years after the emergence of the 15M movement in Spain, specialized literature and the press have profusely tackled the characteristics of such movement in the particular historical context of Spanish democracy and in the international arena of the 2011 uprisings. However, little has been said of the intersections and challenges between the 15M and the feminist movement in Spain. The purpose of this profile is to analyse what the Spanish ‘indignados’ movement has meant for Spanish feminisms and what the latter may have signified both to the 15M debate and the further political protests stemming from it in contemporary Spain.. Our ultimate aim is to contribute to the debate on how studies on the 2011 uprisings, such as the 15M movement in Spain, can inform or be informed by feminist movement analysis.

New contexts, old frames

It is widely known that the 15M movement, as well as adopting a non-hierarchical organisational structure and rotating its spokespersons, also shunned any identification with political, trade union or even third sector organisational lines. The movement’s efforts were geared towards constructing a political agenda on the basis of advocating for fundamental human rights for every citizen. However, with regard to legitimising feminist demands, the 15M had a troublesome reaction. As different activists express in the multi-authored volume *R-evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15M* (VVAA, 2012), feminist proposals initially encountered rejection by the people gathering in the assemblies. The feminist committees and work groups in Madrid (Comisión Feminismos Sol, @feminismos_sol), Seville (Setas Feministas, <http://setasfeministas.wordpress.com/>), Barcelona (Feministes Indignades, <http://feministesindignades.blogspot.com.es/>), Galicia (Feminismos en #AcampadaObradoiro, @feminismogaliza) and Zaragoza (Feministas Bastardas, feministasbastardas@hotmail.com), among others, coincide in highlighting that during the 15M assemblies they encountered many difficulties to make themselves visible and heard. The different committees had to deal with manifestations of structural violence in the form of lack of representation in committees and assemblies, patronising behaviours (when exposing their arguments) and sexist stereotyping (mainly having to do with women’s demands being considered not universal or “personal caprices”) (Taibo, 2013). Also, they suffered some acts of violent sexism and undermining of women’s demands (VVAA, 2012: 49 & 61-62). For example, during the camp in May 2011 in the Plaza de Sol in Madrid, two events occurred that symptomatised the frictions between the

Feminist Committee and the rest of the movement. The first episode occurred on May 20, 2011, when, after hanging a banner with the slogan ‘The revolution will be feminist or no revolution at all’, a man tore it down before the effusive clapping of the rest of the people witnessing it. The second event was a reading by the Feminist Committee, in the General Assembly, of a statement announcing that the Committee would no longer spend the night in the camp after having suffered and been informed of ‘sexual, sexist and homophobic aggression’ (Madrid Sol Committee on Feminisms, 2011: 46)².

The conflictive relation of the feminist groups within their respective camps was enhanced in occasions by the mainstream media by framing women’s demands as a source of confrontation. Indeed, in the examples above the Spanish press reacted promptly focusing on the banner incident and the committee’s denounce of aggressions but never dedicating space to explaining women’s vindications in the camps. Regarding the banner, the press capitalised on the public’s reaction which was portrayed in terms of widespread rejection to the hanging³.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that, in the blogs of the different newspapers covering the accusations incident, some of the readers’ comments questioned the veracity of women’s accusations. Many of these comments coalesced a strong rejection, not just to the Feminist Committee (accused of seeking to portray the Sol Camp in a bad light), but to feminism in general, which was accused of pursuing a privilege status of women over men. Feminist activists were labelled through different readers’ posts with the derogatory term ‘feminazi’ and feminism with the term ‘hembrismo’ (‘hembra’ is the Spanish word for ‘female’, so ‘hembrismo’ would allegedly be the equal opposite of ‘machismo’). These impossible coinages were used to define a new feminism that would supposedly benefit from grants and subsidies, and that would only seek privileges over men⁴.

² The statement defined the Committee’s understanding of aggression as ‘sexual intimidation, touching, looks, gestures, disempowerment and abuse of power, insults and physical assault, non-consensual sexual or non-sexual contact, and paternalistic attitudes’ (Madrid Sol Committee on Feminisms, 2011: 46).

³ *La Vanguardia* newspaper, 20-05-2011, retrieved from: <http://www.lavanguardia.com/local/madrid/20110520/54157002986/15m-gritos-mayoritarios-de-fuera-fuera-en-sol-al-colocar-una-gran-pancarta>. Europa Press agency news, 20-05-2011, retrieved from: <http://www.europapress.es/madrid/noticia-15m-gritos-mayoritarios-fuera-fuera-sol-colocar-gran-pancarta-lema-revolucion-sera-feminista-20110520002919.html>.

⁴ See the different readers’ posts at *El Mundo* newspaper, 02-06-2011, retrieved from: <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/06/02/madrid/1307033272.html>.

Público newspaper, 03-06-2011, retrieved from:

Obviously this is not the first time in the history of social movements that feminist demands are either denied legitimate recognition or framed under the matrix of confrontation. From the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (civil rights, against Vietnam War, student mobilization...), feminist vindications have been met with reticence and sexist attitudes, in the best of the cases, or violence in the worst scenarios (Eschle, 2001). When women reacted, they were criticised for worrying about personal issues.

With regards to the history of Spanish social movements, the relation of feminism with other movements crystallised during the reconstruction of democracy (after the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco died in 1975) and, as usual, it has been fraught with complexities. The priority of reconstructing Spanish democracy marked the path to be followed: women had to fight, along with other fellow citizens, to recover fundamental rights suppressed during Francoism. This explains why Spanish feminist activism has been characterised by tensions stemming from double militancy. During the 1980s, despite legal achievements obtained thanks to feminists' joined efforts (Divorce Law, decriminalization of abortion, Conciliation Law...), the gap between radical feminists and feminists active in left wing political parties and mixed groups (Anti-Otan, conscientious objection, students...) was progressively widened due to the Spanish Socialist Party PSOE winning the general elections in 1982 and the subsequent creation of the National Women's Institute in 1983. Actually, by the end of the 1980s, the legal rights achievements facilitated by the Socialist government deactivated social movements and, hence, feminism (Marugán, Miranda y Mato, 2013: 21). In the 1990s, the institutionalisation of feminism produced gender mainstreamed policies and women's research institutes and gender consultancy organizations flourished (although they were held back by the Popular Party government from 1996 to 2004). On the other hand, from 2000 we witnessed a revitalization of feminism activism influenced by the alterglobalization movement and the questioning of the political subject brought about by queer studies that will have important echoes in the 15M-feminist relation, as we shall see later.

<http://www.publico.es/espana/379934/la-comision-de-feminismo-de-acampados-en-sol-denuncia-agresiones-sexuales>.

Europa Press agency news, 02-06-2011, retrieved from: <http://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-comision-feminismo-acampados-sol-denuncia-agresiones-sexuales-20110602235541.html>.

As for institutional feminism, the return to power of the Socialist Party in 2004 constituted a turning point in the consolidation of gender policies with the passing of The Law against Gender Violence (2004) and the Equality Law (2007). Their approval and posterior developments were accompanied by intensive public opinion debates and media coverage, which did not always contribute to cast a positive light on women's deserved and long fought rights (Gámez Fuentes, 2012).

This explains that in the social climate of 15M, feminist demands and argumentations in the camps were initially framed within a supposedly privileged feminism that allegedly would undermine men.

However, the manifestations linking feminism with public subsidies and/or privileges are symptomatic of a debate that occurs even in the very heart of the feminist movement in Spain and that is related to the gains of Spanish institutional feminism. The feminist struggle in Spain, through citizen activism, academic work and political representation, has undoubtedly made huge advances in the field of rights (in serious jeopardy under the present right wing government of Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party). However, a debate about celebrating uncritically gender mainstreaming in plans and programmes has been rising progressively. The fear lays in the fact that institutionalization may have brought immobilization to the feminist movement as a political subject.

However, from the 15M uprisings in Spain, feminist groups in the public protests and on the web have emerged as discordant voices activating the Spanish feminist movement as a political subject and contributing to repositioning the very knowledge on social justice defended by the 15M, as we shall see below.

Spanish feminism and 15M: synergies and challenges

Despite the initial problems, feminist activists coincide in pointing out that the 15M supposed an opportunity for the reactivation of the feminist struggle and for getting rid of the stigma that still plagues Spanish feminism (VVAA, 2012: 15). In the squares, radical feminists, socialist feminists, LGTBI activists, union feminists, immigrant women, sex workers, religious women, atheist women, Muslim women, etc., gathered to make visible that feminism was diverse and alliances were needed for this struggle. The physical space of the squares and assemblies encouraging horizontal participation invited also women, despite difficulties, to occupy public spaces and assume leadership positions within different groups and committees (VVAA, 2012: 49).

Undoubtedly, the work of the feminist groups in the 15M was nourished by the activist legacy of the Spanish feminist movement during the first years of democracy, but also by an infrastructure that came into being in Spain in the nineties: cyberfeminism.

Beyond the mere presence of specialised portals, web 2.0 has provided opportune spaces for relations that favour online feminist praxis, especially through social network sites (Fernández, Corredor y Santín, 2011: 68). The creation of feminist portals and websites has given Spanish feminism practical and theoretical tools through which women located in different contexts can recognize their respective differences and work across ethnic, national and gender limits (Núñez Puente y García Jiménez, 2011: 41). In a neoliberal scenario concerned with making opaque any legacy of resistance stemming from anti-dictatorial protests, the 15M has made possible to recognize the similarities between the struggle of veteran feminists and postmodern ones.

Moreover, thanks to the 15M, the opportunity to create alliances against structural violence has expanded the traditional subject of feminism. The initial tensions with other members of the camps made women realise that they had to give priority to make their vindications understood within the context of the current neoliberal crisis.

Therefore they focused on the links between capitalism and patriarchy. In the face of quotidian precariousness, the materiality of the feminist “the personal is political” was clearer than ever. Oppressions had to be fought not gathering under a gender identity but through the assumption of interlocking oppressions (based on race, class, sexuality, etc.). As activists observe, physically occupying the squares along with citizens from diverse origins and social movements (ecologists, neighbourhood-based, anti-eviction...) and creating new relations through everyday protest experiences no doubt has facilitated mutual knowledge and the realisation of the interlocking character of oppressions (Marugán, Miranda y Mato, 2013: 24-25).

The question was not, however, one of adding in homosexual politics, politics of gender, anti-racist politics and so forth, but of building together relational policies and strategies of political intersectionality that would challenge the spaces where oppressions coincided. This, in turn, contributed to relax possible tensions inherited from the previous debate within Spanish feminism regarding women’s double militancy (VVAA, 2012: 19 & 73).

The “personal is political” is precisely the matrix that articulates the main contribution of Spanish feminism to the 15M movement. It extends not only to emphasising the links between patriarchy and neoliberal policies but also to the everyday work in the camps.

Indeed, women have transformed the 15M spaces by connecting the political struggle to the materiality of their bodies and to the everyday strategies of care they have deployed. Thus, they have denounced that through their unpaid everyday work they hold back capitalism chops in health, education and social services. But they have also provided, along with other fellow campers, care to support families in precarious situations such as before eviction actions.

Therefore, Spanish feminism has transformed the 15M movement by exposing another form of politics where the political subject cannot be understood without recurring to the sharing of vulnerabilities, collective empowerment and care. Collective empowerment is no longer constructed only on a shared identity but by common and concerted action against the violence coming not only from the state or the markets but also inscribed in quotidian social relations.

In sum, through the streets, the squares and the web, the different feminisms reactivated since the 2011 uprisings in Spain have been constituted, through their actions and demands, as ethical and uncomfortable witnesses (Oliver, 2004) whose struggle contribute to reposition the universal social justice claims of the 15M movement and revise the advances on issues of equality made by gender mainstreaming in Spain.

Advancing through tides

As a result of the assumption for the need of alliances and intersectional approaches, we have been witnessing since 2011 in Spain the emergence of various ‘mareas’ (literally meaning ‘tides’) where multitudes of people, with the 15M spirit at the core of their initiatives (as demonstrators’ banners show), demonstrate against the right wing Popular Party measures based on austerity and cuts. The different tides are: the green tide defending public education, the white tide for the health service, and the feminist purple tide against the backlash in gender policies. Specifically, the feminist purple tide (born in December, 2011 in Malaga in the wake of the cuts to equality-related budgets) had as its first initiative to organise a demonstration and disseminate a manifesto which was signed by state and local women’s associations, trade unions and various equality secretaries from IU (the united left party) and the PSOE (socialist party), the Sol Committee on Feminisms and Feminist 15M committees from other cities, as well as various feminist portals.

This time, the press could no longer reproduce a frame of confrontation: on February 6, 2012 the newspaper *Público* published an article on the manifesto and this new

women's network. Under the headline 'Marea Violeta contra los ultraconservadores' (Purple tide against ultra-conservatives), it described the birth of the purple tide as a visible network of feminist women's organisations that was supported by non-feminist organisations (Carballar, 2012). On February 10, 2012 *Público* also published a story with the headline '15M protests against labour reform and equality cuts' in which the purple tide demonstration was combined with that of the 15M, such that feminist demands appeared alongside those of the 15M (Muriel and Giménez, 2012).

The last example of this alliance before the interlocking of oppressions can be found in the demonstration named 'El tren de la libertad' (The Liberty Train) that took place on February 1, 2014 in Madrid where women from all parts of Spain marched along the white tide, trade unions and left wing parties in a 30.000 people march in order to protest against the recently approved Law for the Rights of the Conceived and Women (euphemism used to name the new law that goes against the sexual rights of women before abortion).

Conclusions

Throughout this profile we have addressed the 15M movement from the position of the feminist demands made within it, to offer a nuanced reading of the synergies and challenges that their coming together has brought about in the face of the 2011 protests, the Spanish feminist movement and contemporary politics.

Spanish feminists through the squares and the web have become ethical and, fortunately, uncomfortable witnesses embarked upon the task of focusing on the interlocking of oppressions and bringing to the public space the oppressions suffered in the private sphere. The crisis of patriarchal capitalism, with all the inequalities that it embodies, has provided feminism with the empirical basis to legitimate its fundamental contribution in the face of the quotidian materiality of shared precariousness. Indeed, assuming the collective character of the subject's vulnerability before gender, race, class or any other orientated exclusion, has changed the focus of the struggle, amplified the concept of power and re-signified the political subject. Undoubtedly, the Spanish 2011 uprisings have made possible for feminists to bring at the forefront of the struggle the intersectionality of oppressions. The 15M has, in turn, galvanised feminists' demands beyond past tensions derived from double militancy, has reactivated the feminist struggle and has facilitated the creation of alliances within feminist groups and between those and women of diverse origins.

In sum, feminist groups, through their actions in the squares and on the web, have followed the line Butler defends, to transform frameworks of intelligibility through social practices, thereby pressurising the symbolic from the social because:

No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only ‘between’ bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another’s. In this way, my body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the ‘between’ (Butler, 2011).

This being ‘between’ is at the base of an interstitial Spanish feminist project that, favoured by 15-M, seeks to convey, through alliances, a rhizomatic project with differential but intermingling tides, assuming, nonetheless, that the position of the subject in relation to the discourse (whether political or protest) is always in a state of flight.

REFERENCES

- Butler, J. (2011). Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street. Lecture delivered in Venice (Italy), under the series The State of Things, organized by the Norwegian Office for Contemporary Art. Retrieved from <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.
- Carballar, O. (2012, February 6). Marea Violeta contra los Ultraconservadores. *Público*. Retrieved from <http://www.publico.es/espana/420519/marea-violeta-contra-los-ultraconservadores>.
- Eschle, C. (2001). *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Fernández, D., Corredor, P. & Santín, M. (2011). Nuevos espacios de comunicación, relación y activismo en la era digital: la Red como oportunidad para el feminismo. *Asparkía. Investigació Feminista*, 22, 61-72.
- Gámez Fuentes, M. J. (2012). Sobre los modos de visibilización mediático-política de la violencia de género en España: consideraciones críticas para su reformulación. *OBETS. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 7 (2), 185-213..
- Madrid Sol Committee on Feminisms (2011). Dossier [original in Spanish]. Retrieved from <https://n-1.cc/file/download/540220>.
- Marugán, B., Miranda, M. J. & Mato, M (2013). El poder de los géneros y los géneros del poder. *Encrucijadas. Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales*, 5, 12-29.

Muriel, E. & Giménez, L. (2012, February 10). El 15-M Protesta contra la Reforma Laboral y los Recortes en Igualdad. *Público*. Retrieved from <http://www.publico.es/espana/421422/el-15-m-protesta-contra-la-reforma-laboral-y-los-recortes-en-igualdad>.

Núñez Puente, S. & García Jiménez, A. (2011). Inhabiting or occupying the web?: virtual communities and feminist cyberactivism in online Spanish feminist theory and praxis. *Feminist review*, 99, 39-54.

Oliver, K. (2004). Witnessing and Testimony. *Parallax*, 10(1), 79-88.

Taibo, C. (2013). The Spanish Indignados: a Movement with Two Souls. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 20(1), 155-158.

VV.AA. (2012). *R-evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M*. Barcelona: Icaria