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, Castellón, Spain

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 first explore how feminist demands were initially received in the camps and the reactions they raised among the media and citizenship. Second, we tackle how this case of overlap between a larger group and feminist groups is different from previous collaborations and confrontations. Finally, we 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, gender

Three years after the emergence of the 15M movement in Spain, both the specialised literature and the mainstream press have extensively tackled the characteristics of the 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 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, all highlight that during the 15M assemblies they encountered numerous difficulties in making 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 behaviour (when setting out 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 acts of violent sexism, and the undermining of women’s demands (VVAA, 2012, pp. 49, 61–62). For example, during the camp in May 2011 in the Plaza de Sol in Madrid, two events occurred that were symptomatic of the frictions between the Feminist Committee and the rest of the movement. The first episode occurred on 20 May 2011, when a banner bearing the slogan ‘The revolution will be feminist or no revolution at all’ was torn down by a man in front of the enthusiastic 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, p. 46). 1

The conflictual relationships experienced by feminist groups within their respective camps was enhanced on occasion by the mainstream media, who framed 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 denunciation of aggressions, but never dedicating space to explaining women’s vindications in the camps. Thus, the press capitalised on the banner incident, portrayed in terms of the widespread public rejection of the banner. 2

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 the privileged 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, supposedly benefiting from grants and subsidies, and which would only seek privileges over men. 3

Obviously, this is not the first time in the history of social movements that feminist demands have either been 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 mobilisation, etc.), feminist claims and analyses have been met at
best with reticence and sexism, at worst with violence (Eschle, 2001). When women reacted, they were criticised for worrying about personal issues.

With regard to the history of Spanish social movements, the relationships between feminism and 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’ joint efforts (Divorce Law, decriminalisation of abortion, Conciliation Law, etc.), the gap between radical feminists and feminists active in left wing political parties and mixed groups (Anti-NATO, conscientious objection, students, etc.) progressively widened following the victory of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in the 1982 general election, and the subsequent creation of the National Women’s Institute in 1983. In fact, by the end of the 1980s, the legal rights achievements facilitated by the Socialist government produced a demobilisation of social movements and, hence, feminism (Marugán, Miranda, & Mato, 2013, p. 21). In the 1990s, the institutionalisation of feminism produced gender mainstreamed policies, and women’s research institutes and gender consultancy organisations flourished (although they were held back by the Popular Party government from 1996 to 2004). However, since 2000 we have witnessed a revitalisation of feminism activism in Spain, influenced by the alterglobalisation movement and the questioning of the political subject brought about by queer studies that will have important echoes in the 15M–feminist relationship, as we shall see later.

As for institutional feminism, the return to power of the PSOE 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). The passing of these laws and subsequent developments were accompanied by intensive public debates and media coverage, which did not always serve to cast a positive light on women’s deserved and long fought-for rights (GÁMEZ FUENTES, 2012).

This context explains why, in the social climate of 15M, feminist demands and analyses in the camps were initially framed within a supposedly privileged feminism that allegedly would undermine men. However, the arguments 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 (now in serious jeopardy under the right wing government of Mariano Rajoy’s Popular Party). However, a debate about celebrating uncritically gender mainstreaming in plans and programmes has been steadily rising. The fear lies in the fact that institutionalisation may have brought immobilisation to the feminist movement as a political subject.

Yet, in the wake of the 15M uprisings, feminist groups in the public protests and on the web have emerged as discordant voices, re-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 later.
Spanish Feminism and 15M: Synergies and Challenges

Despite these initial problems, feminist activists point to the 15M movement as an opportunity for the reactivation of feminist struggle, and for getting rid of the stigma still plaguing Spanish feminism (VVAA, 2012, p. 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 both the diversity of feminism and the need for alliances visible. The physical space of the squares and assemblies which encouraged horizontal participation also invited women, despite difficulties, to occupy public spaces and assume leadership positions within different groups and committees (VVAA, 2012, p. 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 1990s: 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, & Santín, 2011, p. 68). The creation of feminist portals and websites has given Spanish feminism practical and theoretical tools through which women located in different contexts can recognise their respective differences and work across ethnic, national and gender divides (Nuñez Puente & García Jiménez, 2011, p. 41). In a neoliberal scenario concerned with making opaque any legacy of resistance stemming from anti-dictatorial protests, the 15M has made possible the recognition of the similarities between the struggle of veteran feminists and postmodern feminists.

Moreover, thanks to 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 by mobilising under a gender identity but through the assumption of interlocking oppressions (based on race, class, sexuality, etc.). As activists have observed, physically occupying the squares along with citizens from diverse origins and social movements (ecologists, neighbourhood-based, anti-eviction, etc.) and creating new relations through everyday protest experiences has no doubt facilitated mutual knowledge sharing and consciousness of the interlocking character of oppressions (Marugán et al., 2013, pp. 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 relaxing possible tensions inherited form the previous debate within Spanish feminism regarding women’s double militancy (VVAA, 2012, pp. 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 argue that through their unpaid everyday work they counter the effects of capitalist cuts in health, education and social services. But they have also provided, along with other fellow camp activists, care and support to families in precarious situations, such as prior to evictions.

Spanish feminism has thus transformed the 15M movement by establishing another form of politics where the political subject cannot be understood outside a frame of reference constructed around the sharing of vulnerabilities, collective empowerment and care. Collective empowerment is no longer constructed uniquely through shared identity, but through common and concerted action against the violence whose source lies not only in the state or the markets, but which is 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). This feminist mobilisation participates in the repositioning of the universal social justice claims of the 15M movement, and interrogates the advances on issues of equality made by gender mainstreaming in Spain.

**Advancing Through Tides**

As a result of this understanding of the need for alliances and intersectional approaches, since 2011 we have been witnessing in Spain the emergence of various ‘mareas’ (literally, ‘tides’) where multitudes of people, with the 15M spirit at the core of their initiatives (as demonstrators’ banners show), demonstrate against the governing Popular Party’s measures of austerity and cuts. Different ‘tides’ represent different movements: a ‘green tide’ defending public education, a ‘white tide’ defending the health service and a ‘purple tide’ mobilising against the backlash over gender policies. Specifically, the first initiative of this feminist ‘purple tide’ (which was born in December 2011 in Malaga in the wake of the cuts to equality-related budgets) was the organisation of a demonstration and the dissemination of a manifesto signed by state and local women’s associations, trade unions and various equality secretariats 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 mainstream press was unable to maintain its dominant, confrontation-based framing: on 6 February 2012, 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 supported by non-feminists organisations (Carballar, 2012). Four days later, Público published a further story, under 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 & Giménez, 2012).

More recently, the Madrid ‘Liberty train’ demonstration (‘El tren de la libertad’) of 1 February 2014 brought together women from all parts of Spain alongside trade unions and left wing parties, as part of a 30,000-strong ‘white tide’ protest against the recently approved Law for the Rights of the Conceived and Women (a euphemism for the restriction of women’s right to abortion).
Conclusions

Throughout this profile, we have addressed the 15M movement from the position of the feminist demands made within it, offering a nuanced reading of the synergies and challenges brought about by the interactions between the 2011 protests, the Spanish feminist movement and contemporary Spanish politics.

In the public squares and online, Spanish feminists have become ethical and, fortunately, uncomfortable witnesses, focusing on the interlocking of social claims and rendering visible within 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 it possible for feminists to bring the intersectionality of oppressions to the forefront of the struggle. 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 them 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, transforming 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 different but intermingling ‘tides’ – assuming, nonetheless, that the position of the subject in relation to discourse (whether political or protest) is always fluid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness through its Research Secretary of State under grant [grant number 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 [grant number 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.
Notes

1. 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, p. 46).

2. La Vanguardia Newspaper, 20 May 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 May 2011. Retrieved from http://www.europapress.es/madrid/noticia-15m-gritos-mayoritarios-fuera-fuera-sol-colocar-pancarta-lema-revolucion-sera-feminista-20110520002919.html

3. See the different readers’ posts at El Mundo, 2 June 2011. Retrieved from http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/06/02/madrid/1307033272.html; Público, 3 June 2011. Retrieved from http://www.publico.es/espana/379934/la-comision-de-feminismo-de-acampados-en-sol-denuncia-agresiones-sexuales; Europa Press Agency News, 2 June 2011. Retrieved from http://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-comision-feminismo-acampados-sol-denuncia-agresiones-sexuales-20110602235541.html.

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 [Purple tide against the ultraconservatives]. Público. Retrieved from http://www.publico.es/espana/420519/marea-violeta-contra-los-ultraconservadores

Eschle, C. (2001). Global democracy, social movements, and feminism. Boulder, CO: 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 [New spaces for communication, relation and activism in the digital era: The Internet, an opportunity for feminism]. Asparkia. 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 [Regarding how gender violence has been made visible in media-political terms in Spain: a critique towards its reconceptualization]. OBETS. Revista de Ciencias Sociales, 7, 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 generos del poder [The power of gender and the gender of power]. 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 [The 15M protests against labour reform and cutbacks in equality policies]. 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, 79–88.

Taibo, C. (2013). The Spanish Indignados: A movement with two souls. European Urban and Regional Studies, 20, 155–158.

VVAA. (2012). R-evolucionando. Feminismos en el 15-M [R-evolutionizing. Feminisms and the 15M]. Barcelona: Icaria.

María José Gámez Fuentes is a tenured assistant professor on Gender and Cultural Studies in the Department of Communication Sciences at Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain), Vice Head of the Research Institute for Social Development and Peace and member of the Institute for Feminist Research of the same university. Her work focuses on the politics of representing cultural violence from a feminist perspective and how to transform it.