



Mariana Abreu Olvera*

Women's Freedom: A Change to Come

Since the 1960s, the feminist movement has prompted a change of such grandeur that it has had and continues to have an impact on all aspects of human life. Luisa Muraro says it with great clarity:

Women began to exist as autonomous desiring and speaking subjects, and . . . that existence is destined by nature to speed ahead of the Feminine men fantasize about and that so many men put in the place of what flesh-and-bone women are: a more varied and rich existence than that Feminine that fewer and fewer women will be willing to fulfill. So, the world will never be the same.¹

It is a change that profoundly transforms existence itself. The way women and men, women and women, and—hopefully also—men and men relate to each other has

begun to change significantly. The social pact that considers that women define ourselves based on what others expect from us has been broken.

In recent years, this transformation has taken on new power. My own experience has made me see, experience, and feel how a new way of signifying ourselves, of relating, of living has been launched in the consciousness of many—very many—women and also many men. Today, there seems to be a new upsurge of what began in the middle of the last century. To talk about this new awakening, I base myself on my experience and my reading about what is happening in three spaces in particular: the university, social media, and the streets.

In Mexico, in the 1970s and 1980s, there were women's groups that fought to create spaces where women's presence would be significant. This was the case, for example, of the Autonomous University Women's Group (GAMU), the LAMBDA Gay Liberation Group, and the VenSeremos (ComeWe'llBe) Collective. These three joined together to create the Feminist Women's National Network.² They

* Master's student in the Graduate History Program in Humanities; mariana.abreu.olvera@gmail.com.

were important, particularly in university circles. However, a few decades later, the feminist movement in academia seemed to have faded away.

Despite the existence of these groups, the university continued to be a place where we women seemed like intruders.³ Violence experienced by women in this universe has taken different forms. Even today, most course subject matter has been designed by, for, and about men. This has excluded women as creators and as the subject of knowledge. In addition, emotions have been left out of academic studies to give priority to reason and objectivity, as though these were mutually exclusive spheres and as if incorporating the world of emotionality would subtract seriousness and validity from knowledge. Women's experience has not been considered a source of knowledge. And, in the most extreme cases, sexual violence exercised by male students and professors has forced many women to share spaces with their abusers or abandon the university. For many years, silence about these problems predominated in academia despite the depth to which they affected all university women.

On November 4, 2019, the group Organized Women of the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters forcefully made visible the problem of violence inside the university. They did so by taking over the school, a take-over that ended in April of this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has paralyzed the world. The current circumstances have made it impossible for the changes wrought by this movement's demands to be felt in person and in a generalized way. However, even in our virtual schoolrooms, some transformations have taken place. Women students have refused to share spaces with their abusers; they have denounced the misogyny of some professors; and, together with female teachers and administrative workers, they have worked to create subjects with feminist content to ensure the presence of trained specialists who can accompany women who have suffered sexual violence. This is unprecedented and is the reflection of a profound change in women's mentality. Where before there was silence, today there is unequivocal rejection that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

What is happening in the university is an expression of women's refusal to define themselves according to "the Feminine fantasized by men" that Luisa Muraro writes about. While male students can dedicate themselves almost exclusively to their studies, women students have

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said that we have to "fight for our lives as we try to get good grades or to have [our] ideas recognized."⁴ University women have autonomously expressed their desire to be free in a space in which they have been forced to survive male violence.

This so very public, generalized expression of women's wishes is a change that will necessarily affect university life and will be manifested in the way both male and female students relate to men and women professors, how women students relate to male students, and how women students relate to each other. What happens in the university will also have an impact in other spheres since academic training and the student experience play an important part in life itself and the future work and personal experience of all students.

What has happened in the university correlates fundamentally to the use of social media as a space for expression. Women students themselves recognize a precursor in the Me Too movement in which many Hollywood actresses began in 2017 to publicly denounce sexual harassment and abuse by their male colleagues. Something unprecedented happened with this movement, as Lia Cigarini points out: "Their [the accusers'] words were believed without having to go to trial or present proof. The individuals involved were powerful men who up until then had enjoyed impunity."⁵ This phenomenon was fundamental because, before, when a woman made an accusation, her own personal hell began. Female authority came into play, says Lia Cigarini, thanks to the women's movement's 50 years of struggle and political work. Women's authority became a symbolic force that confronted male power.

The Me Too movement has not been the only factor that has faced up to power. In general, this change visibly manifests itself on social media and has played a role in the symbolic sphere. In Mexico, for example, the 2017 femicide of Lesvy Osorio on the UNAM campus prompted the emergence of the #SiMeMatan (#IfTheyKillMe) hashtag. Many women used it to express their indignation about

the way in which the Mexico City District Attorney's Office tried to justify Lesvy's femicide using details of her personal life to portray her as a "bad victim," such as her experimenting with drugs and supposedly being a not very committed student.

What was novel here was not the use of these kinds of arguments, which are more or less frequent in government authorities' discourse, but the massive reaction of women who forcefully rejected them. The social media have become an unprecedented space for expression, becoming reference points for women's thinking, action, and critiques in all spheres. We can see here the rich, varied female existence that is becoming more and more visible and has allowed many women to recognize themselves in their sisters and signify themselves in new ways.

The streets have also become a space in which women have brought their authority into play. The green wave that emerged in Argentina and that has spread throughout Latin America and the world for the decriminalization of abortion, the April 24, 2016 Violet Spring, and the performance piece "A Rapist in Your Path," created by the Chilean Las Tesis collective and performed in different countries by groups of women, are just some of the actions that have taken place in the public space, previously dominated by men.

On March 8, women held demonstrations and work stoppages in different countries to commemorate International Women's Day. Three days later, the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus a pandemic. The lockdown caused by this crisis put mass mobilizations on pause and increased the number of cases of violence against women in Mexico. However, some collectives have continued to struggle. This is the case, for example, of the take-over of National Human Rights Commission facilities in different parts of the country, the take-over of the Sciences and Humanities High School east-side campus in Mexico City, and the women in Poland

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who have taken to the streets against a law that proposed eliminating the malformation of a fetus as grounds for obtaining a legal abortion. Women the world over are saying "No" to violence and the male power that attempts to impose itself on them.

What the three spaces I have referred to here have in common is the use women have made of them to make their words and voices heard to express their common experience of violence and a common desire for freedom. This is a central change that has taken place over a half century and that today is expressed with undeniable clarity. The feminists of the Women's Bookshop of Milan recognized the end of patriarchy in 1996: it would no longer order women's minds; it would no longer be the domain that provided identity.⁶ What we are seeing today is the expression of that ending. Women all over the world have begun to stop defining themselves in the terms established by the patriarchy and have broken their silence in the face of male violence. However, there is still a long way to go. We women must still find our freedom and ensure that our experiences are a source of signifying reality. Women have rejected violence and sense a different way forward from the one imposed upon them. It still remains to move forward on that path and for women to use their energies not to survive and struggle, but to live in freedom. ■■■

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- 1 L. Muraro, *La increíble suerte de nacer mujer* (Madrid: Narcea, 2013), p. 28.
- 2 "La Boletina es de Todas," *Archivos Históricos del Feminismo en México*, https://archivos-feministas.cieg.unam.mx/semblanzas/semblanzas_boletina.html, accessed November 9, 2020. This digitalized archive includes feminist publications like *Fem*, *La Revuelta*, *La Boletina*, *Cihuat*, and *La Correa Feminista*, fundamental texts for the reconstruction of a genealogy of feminist thinking in Mexico.
- 3 I use this expression, taken from the book by Ana Buquet Corleto, Araceli Mingo, Hortensia Moreno, and Jennifer Cooper, *Intrusas en la universidad* (Mexico City: UNAM, PUEG-IISUE, 2013).
- 4 El desenfado, "Entrevista FFyL: voces unidas contra la violencia de género," *Redymención*, February 12, 2020, <https://redymencion.com/2020/02/12/entrevista-sobre-paro-en-la-facultad-de-filosofia-y-letras-voces-contra-la-violencia-de-genero/>, accessed November 9, 2020.
- 5 Lia Cigarini, "La batalla por el relato," María-Milagros Rivera, trans., *Cambio de civilización. Puntos de vista y de referencia*, DUODA no. 56, 2019, p. 56.
- 6 Librería de Mujeres de Milán, "(Ha ocurrido y no por casualidad) El final del patriarcado," María-Milagros Rivera Garretas, trans., *El Viejo Topo* no. 916, May 1996.