

# “THE HOMOGENEITY IN FEMINISM BORES US; UNUSUAL ALLIANCES NEED TO BE FORMED”

• Interview with Maria Galindo •

By Alana Moraes, Mariana Patrício and Tatiana Roque (Revista DR)\*

*María Galindo is a Bolivian anarcho-feminist activist, a psychologist, a radio presenter and a former TV host. She founded the Mujeres Creando (Women Creating) feminist movement in Bolivia, which unites women of different sexual identities, classes and conditions in the fight against machismo and homophobia. Her performance actions have landed her in prison several times. She is the author of: *Feminismo urgente: A Despatriacar! (Urgent Feminism: Dismantle patriarchy!)* 2014; *No se puede Descolonizar sin Despatriarcalizar (Decolonisation is impossible without dismantling patriarchy)*, 2013 and (with Sonia Sánchez) *Ninguna mujer nace para puta (No woman is born to be a prostitute)*, illustrated edition by Lavaca Editora, 2007.*

*For Galindo, it is through the rigorous questioning of individualism, the collective work carried out daily and “very demanding forms of solidarity and connection” that a social fabric, which allows women to act politically and with depth, can be built. In this interview, María Galindo talks about the Mujeres Creando’s “concrete politics”, such as the collective management of a savings fund by women in the cooperatives that are part of the movement, heterogeneous feminism (built on “unusual alliances”) and the street. She also criticises queer theory (“a theory for the elite, by the elite”) and the use of the gender category (which she sees as part of the neoliberal agenda) to frame women’s struggles. She is hopeful about the emergence of new feminist movements, despite their fragmentation.*

**Revista DR** • Can you tell us a little about the *Mujeres Creando* movement, its political actions and how it began?

**Maria Galindo** • *Mujeres Creando* is a feminist women's movement. We have an anarchist view of power and we are independent from political parties, churches, NGOs and all governments – from the left or the right. We have been fighting for years using different tools and in different ways, but basically, we defend the need to build a heterogeneous feminist movement. This homogeneity in Latin American feminism in general – of young, white, professional, middle class women – is one that bores us, bothers us and that we're not interested in. Thus, we are building a movement that fosters unusual alliances – that is, political alliances with women with whom it is forbidden to form alliances. We use a very interesting metaphor: we are native women, prostitutes and lesbians, united, rebellious and "*hermanadas*" (joined in sisterhood). And this is not just a metaphor: it's real: the youngest people in the movement must be around 18 or 19 years of age, and the oldest, around 70. We have lesbian and non-lesbian comrades and comrades who come from different social worlds: there are women intellectuals, professionals, as well as unemployed, self-taught women.

We argue that the most important political arena for feminism is the street and we work from the street. We made the street our main political forum and that is why we are having such strong repercussions in Bolivia. Ours is not a borrowed voice. It's not a borrowed space. It is not through the parliament or through the laws or through the media [that we speak]. No, it is through the street.

An interesting concept we created is that of "concrete politics". Several of us came from the left and we strongly questioned the fact that the different movements - ecologist, feminist, other left-wing movements - are very focused on discourse. Few have been able to turn discourse into a form of concrete action. We work with the concept of "concrete politics": we offer services to women without depoliticising these services. We offer services based on a feminist vision, but without becoming institutionalised: that is what concrete politics is.

**Revista DR** • For example?

**M.G.** • For example, we fight against bank usury. In Bolivia, women are massively affected by unemployment. Therefore, instead of looking for work, which they will never find, many unemployed women take out loans. And when they cannot pay back the loan, they get another loan to pay off the first one. This leads to a terrifying process of over-indebtedness, a very severe form of bank usury, because the banking institutions know what the situation of these women is and put a lot of pressure on them. So, we have generated other ways of negotiating with banks, in which we side with these women. This is a concrete example of concrete anti-neoliberal politics.

**Revista DR** • Is this how you manage to break the barriers between different types of women from different social classes? Because these barriers are real...How do you break them?

**M.G.** • They are real! We break the barriers through our struggles, through concrete struggle. For example, we are totally anti-institutional, but we have built a very large association of women sex workers who are setting up brothels as cooperatives. In these cases, the owner of the brothel is no longer the pimp, but rather the women themselves. Together, these women – sometimes three or four – set up small brothels. We then created an association of brothels and, since they wanted to remain clandestine, we lent them our legal name. These are some of the concrete things we do. There is also the issue of feminicide, which is very serious in Bolivia, and we build alliances through these struggles.

**Revista DR** • In Brazil, there are institutions that defend women's rights, but the feminist struggle itself and feminist groups have grown recently...

**M.G.** • I think that all over Latin America, feminism went through a strong process of “NGO-isation” in the 1980s or 1990s. NGOs replaced the movement and ended up strangling and making the feminist movement disappear. These NGOs became institutions that offered services, but via clientelist and vertical hierarchical relations, which were at the service of an international political agenda that was entirely neoliberal. Thus, feminists stopped being feminists and became employees of institutions, with an eight-hour workday and an office: you are on that side and I am on this side. That is when the feminist political agenda disappeared and a neoliberal gender agenda appeared in its place. This happened throughout Latin America.

Since the beginning, *Mujeres Creando* has been very clear on questioning all of this. We question how, based on the gender category, women's potential and needs have been used to save – or better said – to generate a social cushion for neoliberalism. Because obviously, as a result of neoliberalism, unemployment reaches very high levels, as that is where structural adjustment takes place. So, a human group was needed that was capable of sacrificing itself more than all of the workers combined in order to cushion the crisis, and this group was us women! We questioned all of this.

I am currently working on a new theory: the theory of “dispatriarchisation”, which I present in my book *Feminismo Urgente: A Despatriarcar!* (Urgent Feminism: Dismantle patriarchy!). Based on a highly critical perspective, this theory argues that the agenda on inclusion must not be allowed to rob the feminist discourse of its subversive content or rob our struggle of its horizon for the future. If it does so, why would we bother organising? To become clients of the state? One law here, another law there, public servants... In Latin America, we even had three women presidents, right? Cristina Kirchner, Dilma Rousseff and Michelle Bachelet. And a large mass of women followed them into the state administration and were swallowed up by the patriarchal nature of the state.

**Revista DR** • But this criticism could apply to all struggles of the so-called “minorities”...Could we not say the same for the black movement? In fact, this

is one of the criticisms often made of the quota system – that it only serves to incorporate people into the neoliberal system.

**M.G.** • I would say you can't. I am not entirely certain because, first of all, we women are not a minority. Even if we are categorised as a minority, we make up half of the human population. We are another version of human beings, aren't we? So, we are not a minority and quotas reduce us to our biological nature because they do not allow for a political imaginary that is different from the one that already exists. Instead, we belong to the one that exists due to the fact that biologically, we are female. This negates the political subject – women as political subjects – which I think is very serious. I would not say that there is a specific criticism for indigenous people, for black people, for gays; there is one common element, which is inclusion. You can be part of the system and the system wants you to be part of it, because when you are part of the system - if you are gay, if you are black or if you are a woman – you strengthen the system. You do not weaken it, as you are part of it, and will have a certain way of thinking. This is the criticism, the common denominator of all of this. I think, however, that important differences exist in the case of women. First, there is a quantitative difference: we are half of humanity; we are not a minority. Secondly, I believe in feminism as a political theory. In the plurality of feminisms, a very important political theory was generated, which other political subjects have not necessarily developed – a political theory with great potential, which was very useful for neutralising, annihilating, minimising and making the theory that identifies women merely based on their biological nature disappear. Why? Because feminism is a political imaginary that includes not only the public, but also the private. Neither black or indigenous people nor the gay world raised the issues of daily life as being political, the private sphere as being political. This is feminism's most subversive and most important potential. This has always been left out of the patriarchal imaginary. Therefore, neutralising feminism was an important weapon for neutralising all other discourses - of the black, indigenous, environmental movement...

**Revista DR** • Here in Brazil, in the most recently formed feminist movements, there is a major dispute among the different groups. We see little of NGO-feminism. Now, there are many feminist groups fighting over discourse. They also do a lot on the street, but in the form of political acts, and not continuous action. There is considerable fragmentation among the groups that adhere to radical feminism, queer theories, which are very strong here... From our point of view, this weakens the struggle because it creates a lot of division.

**M.G.** • What you are saying is interesting. It is true that the wave of NGOs took place during the 1980s and 1990s and it is now very weak. However, the neoliberal agenda on gender equality continues on in full force. As such, I think it is highly necessary to remember where all of these policies that force women into debt, on political quotas for women and women's "empowerment" come from. They are all neoliberal policies

because neoliberalism in Latin America is not in crisis. Neoliberalism is in full force. Therefore, I think that it is extremely necessary to continue talking about this, as we women act as the human buffer for neoliberalism in our societies through precarious work, through ways to guarantee subsistence, etc. etc. etc.

**Revista DR** • And reproductive and care work...

**M.G.** • And through migration, which is economic exile. Migration is an eviction. I always talk about women exiled by neoliberalism. Brazil takes in a lot of Bolivian exiles to do precarious work in textile workshops. This economic exile of women is also part of this cushion for neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can always reduce costs by lowering labour costs. This reduction of costs is achieved through the economic exile of women, who are willing to do it because they are the ones who have the least opportunities for work in their societies of origin. There is also the issue of care work that you mentioned. Precarious conditions in care work, which relies on women exiled by neoliberalism, is what allows white, middle class women professionals to believe they are emancipated because they leave part of the care work in the hands of cheap and overexploited labour – that is, a woman who belongs to another society: a Bolivian woman, an Ecuadorian woman, a Paraguayan woman... All of this is very important because it comes from international organisations' gender equality agenda, which has been taken on by NGOs.

Now, with regards to the queer movement, I personally respect many intellectuals such as Beatriz Preciado or Judith Butler. I respect them a lot as intellectuals. They make interesting contributions. But we are often baptised as queer and we are not queer; we are feminists with our own way of thinking. A lot of the queer wave arriving in Latin America is completely distorted. Why? First, it is an extremely complex political theory, which can only be translated, interpreted or absorbed by the academic world. The academic environments that translate or interpret this theory are spaces for the middle and upper middle classes. They are not spaces based on the street, on prostitution in the streets, or from the travestitism of the streets of prostitution. They are spaces for the elite. It is an extremely complex political theory, right from the way it deals with categories. I believe that in Latin America, the queer theory in general is a theory for the elite, based on the elite, which ends up losing its subversive content and, as a result, is linked to a series of practices that I do not find interesting. The transgender movement in Latin America, based on this movement that we can call "proletariat", is not a movement that starts with the notion of queer. It is a movement based on the discussion on sex work and on the body, which is something different.

As for the fragmentation and the fragility of small groups – I don't know – I have a lot of hope. When a small group of women organises themselves and do something concrete, it seems to me to be an interesting phenomena because it is a kind of second, third, fourth, tenth, etc. wave. It is the rebirth of young women who want to do

something on their own, who do not want to be leaders, do not want to bear the burden of becoming bourgeois like many feminisms that are now very heavy, very immobile, and who want to go out to do something, without a lot of baggage. This is a fabulous, positive principle. Now, if [the movement] is becoming fragmented, there is also the risk that it may be weakened and be reduced to a sort of enthusiasm that dies off quickly. But, in principle, I see this as being very positive.

**Revista DR** • How can we move between the possibility of a more critical feminism engaging in direct action outside of institutions and the state, and a feminism rooted more in daily life, daily relations, daily power relations? How can we combine very radical practices with more every day, low intensity practices based on the underground? This concept of underground you mention. Can we not think of doing something from within, through institutional gaps?

**M.G.** • In general, I don't like to pretend that we have a recipe, but that is exactly what we do. I personally believe that we need to build social fabric. What do I mean by social fabric? Often, when we say "movement", what are we talking about? We are talking about the sum of women – many or few – who meet up during their free time. It is very hard to find free time. While women who belong to the highest classes of society have some free time, the ones from the more popular classes have much less free time. So, how do you build a movement? I think it is necessary to build social fabric more than movements. What does that mean? Generate spaces to collectively construct daily life.

In principle, we create our daily life. Feminism is not for the weekend. It's not for every two weeks. It's not for March 8<sup>th</sup>, September 25<sup>th</sup>. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, we normally drink and dance and we don't do anything else. But we manage a popular cafeteria, we manage a radio, we manage some cooperatives, we manage our daily lives. If you are my comrade and you are sick, I will know about it. We manage a collective savings fund, which is a savings fund where we can lend ourselves money for health or for anything. Therefore, we are managing even what is within us and producing social fabric. But this is very hard work and it takes a long time. It's not easy or simple. It requires very demanding forms of solidarity and connection. And it entails questioning, for example, the individualism of each one of us. We are completely convinced that the discourse that says "I am going to resolve my housing, my health, my education, my work problems on my own" is a false discourse that neoliberalism drilled into our heads. "If you are good, if you are intelligent, if you are pretty, you will resolve [your problem] and if you don't resolve it, it's because you are ugly, dumb and incapable." In other words, we also have to fight against this notion that has been instilled in women because everything took a lot of work. It took a lot of effort to finish school. It took a lot of work to get a job. So, once you accomplish something, you defend it with all your might.

We are building a movement that builds social fabric, a movement that says, "you will not resolve anything alone. You won't resolve housing, work, education, health,

freedom, dignity, happiness.” We cannot resolve them alone. We either seek to deal with these issues collectively or we will not do anything in any depth.

**Revista DR** • But how do you manage to create the conditions necessary to have some availability? Because it is, in fact, very demanding and neoliberalism makes us have less and less time and availability for things that do not generate a “return”. Only for work!

**M.G.** • Well, we did things little by little, over many years, while we searched for leftovers. For example, I remember that when we began, I had come back from exile with the money I had earned and so, I managed to buy a house in the outskirts, which became the movement’s house. Over time, we built small cooperatives. We do everything in cooperatives. Everything we do is through cooperatives, from the film to the books, etc. Three comrades joined to form a cooperative and contributed something to the common savings fund. We try to make things less bureaucratic. We institutionalise nothing and each cooperative buys the things it needs little by little. For example, we have a cooperative that offers very good food, which would buy kitchen by kitchen. Now, we have one big kitchen, but we began from scratch, with one small oven used to make food for the markets and we gradually added more things.

**Revista DR** • And what about women who have children?

**M.G.** • There are a lot of women who have children! We question maternity as an obligation, but we totally respect the lives of each one. There are a lot of women who have children and there are also many women who work outside the home – journalists or lawyers, etc. In their free time, they join the movement, but the core of women in the movement are the women in the cooperatives. We always engage in political debate, constant political debate. You cannot belong to a movement if you do not take part in political debate! This is the mechanism for membership: participate in concrete political discussions. We have 25 years of work.

**Revista DR** • We don’t have money, so at times, we face the problem of not having money to do something... What is the issue of funding like for you?

**M.G.** • In some cases, we accept funding. In the areas that are not self-managed, such as our violence protection services (one in La Paz and another in Santa Cruz), our comrades receive a salary because they work long hours. What is more, it always has to be the same comrades who do the work to ensure proper follow-up. For this kind of work, we opt for using funds. What is important is that we have our own work methods.

**Revista DR** • Can you talk a bit more about the current political situation in Bolivia? You said there is a lot of mystification of the Evo Morales government. Are there conflicts between you and the government?

**M.G.** • The Bolivian government claims or uses a discourse claiming that it generated a social model that is not neoliberal. But that is simply a joke, a lie, because in Bolivia,

neoliberalism is still present and very strong – especially in relation to work, but to many other things as well. Education is a commodity; health is a commodity. The whole discourse on rights is completely neoliberal. The forms of representation have not changed at all. What there is in Bolivia is a hypocritical liberal democracy – hypocritical because the government says it is a participatory, plurinational democracy, but it’s not. It is the liberal democracy that we have always known. Then, there is the issue of women. The situation is very complicated because we have before us a government that exerts a lot of control over society. It’s a government that comes from the left, from social movements and knows that social movements and the social fabric are very important and very powerful forces. Therefore, one of its main objectives was to control, monitor, divide, weaken and be present in social movements, and to co-opt all social movements by using clientelist policies. The situation is not easy for us feminists. The government’s discourse is extremely sexist, patriarchal. One very big social movement is on their side: the peasant women’s movement. But this movement, which is called Bartolina Sisa, is also involved in very clientelist relationships. So, these comrades are like a kind of circle around the caudillo president’s altar, but they are women. So, they represent the support of indigenous peasant women, support for Evo Morales. This has all been very difficult for us because we also had important alliances with Bartolina women, but these alliances were lost. Many of them abandoned their own movement and were strongly harassed. It is very difficult to find space for autonomous feminist discourse in Bolivia.

Now, we have a lot of power. Three weeks ago, I was summoned to court and I was almost sent to jail. I was accused of destroying national wealth because of the graffiti I did. It was very amusing because I was willing to go to prison, but they did not dare send me there because it would have given us even more power. So, we are resisting. We have a radio that gives us a lot of power; it is licensed and broadcasts not only online, but also nationally. We need to sell publicity to pay for the radio and no state enterprise hires us to do its publicity. We have a very efficient cafeteria and we have to use the cafeteria to sustain the house and the radio.

The idea is to stifle dissent. “If you are not with me, you are from the right”. But this polarisation is totally wrong! We question the neoliberal bases of the Evo Morales government’s programme. There is a lot of manipulation of the press to discredit [the opposition].

**Revista DR** • Yes, the same thing happens here. We are interested in your discourse on work and your argument that there are certain specificities of women’s work in modern society that are of interest to neoliberalism. This is a vision that is difficult for the left to understand, isn’t it? What is your dialogue with the more traditional left-wing movements like? In our experience, at least, these movements do not understand these issues as having to do with another way of thinking about labour. For them, labour is industrial, proletariat, wage labour. They don’t understand these other categories.

**M.G.** • No, they don't understand them. But listen, I'm going to be very sincere: I am 52 years old and I think that people from my generation do not waste time dialoguing with this left because it is pointless (laughter)! They do not understand why they do not tolerate their privileges as men being brought into question. In Bolivia, paternal irresponsibility and not doing domestic work are sacred male institutions. For us, it is very tiring, but we dialogue with society through graffiti, through the radio, through street actions.

On the radio, for example, we present a list of irresponsible fathers. We read their first name, last name, the place where they work, one by one. It is a free list; women come and write a name on it. There are two lists: one is a list of violent men and the other is the list of irresponsible fathers. It is a lot of fun because the list appears five times a day on the programme schedule and we say, "Attention! Here comes the list of irresponsible fathers!" Then, [they] say: "And now, who do we have here?" It is very efficient. There are men, especially from the upper middle class, bankers, who say, "Please, I am paying [what I owe] and I don't want to be on this list anymore." If a woman says, "Delete, take him off the list", we take his name off the next day. We update the list once a month and do the "escrache". It makes people laugh and, at the same time, is efficient.

**Revista DR** • Male politicians don't want their names on the list, right? There must even be a few from the left...

**M.G.** • So, our relationship with the left... Look, there are dialogues that kill you; there are dialogues that mean nothing to you, that you waste a lot of time on. There are dialogues that tire you out. There are even dialogues that set you back some. Some argue that "No, dialogue is important, and so on," but we women can't keep on saying the same thing over and over for a hundred years... If we are going to repeat the same thing all the time, we'll go crazy. We will lose the desire to think of new things, new language, new sentences and this seems very despairing to me. Therefore, there are certain dialogues that demand that we women always repeat the same thing and these dialogues aren't worth it. These dialogues are not fruitful; they are a waste of energy and time.

**Revista DR** • Where does the strength to do all of this come from? To contest institutions, forms of subjectivity, individualism, ideals of success... This deconstruction is very thorough, isn't it? I was reading an article on your website that said that it is necessary to transform the pain of feminicide into a revolutionary force... And where does the joy to do this come from? Because it is hard to deal with violence against women, loneliness, the lack of work, money...

**M.G.** • Transform the pain of feminicide into a struggle for justice. The hardest thing of all is feminicide, because it involves death. Last year, they killed the daughter of one of our comrades and it was terrible. Nothing was as painful as that was. I want to respond very clearly to what you said. We are not exceptional. The strength comes from the fact that it is the only possibility we have in order to think, enjoy, create and

build something. I mean, we women do not realise that on our own, individually, we have absolutely no possibility – we only have the possibility of surviving. But if we join together, it changes everything. We can go beyond surviving and really enjoy life, do interesting things, think – but only if we build social fabric. So, it’s not an act of renunciation. It is not an act of Christian, messianic, missionary renunciation: “I give up my life for you.” No, it is not an act of redemption for anyone. It is the only option we have in a Latin American neoliberal society. It is likely that the conditions are just as harsh in Europe or somewhere else, but I am not interested in getting into this. In Latin America, our only option is to take radical decisions while we pool our strength, our intelligence, our energy, unite our history and our spaces. You have a kitchen, a refrigerator and a space, so we already have something to start with. You can go try to [make it] on your own and you will have to insert yourself into sexist, classist and racist structures. Even if you are not black, do you want to be part of a racist structure and play the role of a white person in it? No! If you do not want this, you can’t allow yourself to be part of this structure. I believe that we can build different micro-spaces. They are micro-spaces, but they are very important because they create possibilities.

**Revista DR** • Do you believe that we should move the debate on feminism to the centre of the discussion on power? How can we foster a debate on power from a feminist perspective – but no longer as an isolated, separate issue described using international organisations’ language on gender – and put it in the centre of politics?

**M.G.** • I’d say that we should abandon the gender category. The gender category is no longer useful to us because there is a lot of ideological confusion around it. This confusion is not by chance; it’s deliberate. So, first, we must completely abandon the gender category in the social debate. We must participate in the social debate as political subjects: women as political subjects.

Currently, women are at the centre of the debate because, as a political subject, you discuss work; as a political subject, you discuss the relationship and the separation between the public and private spheres. This debate has been going on for many years. There is a long tradition of this in feminism and it’s still very useful and fertile, because the patriarchal dichotomy, the schizophrenia between the public and the private continue to be one of the key elements of patriarchal power and capitalism itself. Capitalism is so strong because it has been inserted into our private lives, our subjectivity, our desires. That is why capitalism is so strong and, obviously, patriarchy too, as patriarchy and capitalism are practically one. So, it seems to me that this continues to be a key debate: everyday life, the relationship between public and private spheres, the management of pleasure, the management of time, the management of space, the management of desires. This has nothing to do with gender. We can say that we have been emancipated from gender for a long time now (laughter).

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*\* This interview was conducted in São Paulo by Alana Moraes, Mariana Patrício and Tatiana Roque from Revista DR (<http://revistadr.com.br/>), on 28 January 2016, with the support of PACA (Programa de Ações Culturais Autônomas, or Programme for Autonomous Cultural Action), which organised María Galindo's visit to São Paulo. This article is an edited version of the interview. The full interview can be found at: <http://revistadr.com.br/posts/maria-galindo>.*



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