



Neoliberalism and Gender Equality
in Latin America: a feminist perspective

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Abstract

This project explores the history and implications of Neoliberalism in Latin America and discusses its cost and benefits on gender equality. The Literature Review starts by defining Neoliberalism before linking it with the Latin American context. Thereafter, the paper dives more in-depth into the relationship between Neoliberalism and Gender Equality, specifically on the following dimensions: Violence against women, Labor Inequality, and the Development sector. The case study of Chile is used to illustrate the findings. After examining the literature, it is found that Neoliberalism has had some positive implications for Latin American society however, the economic system inherited by its policies poses a serious burden on women and has not fulfilled the promise of ensuring gender equality in the last decades.

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Introduction

With the “Ni Una Menos” and “Me too” movements, the current protests happening in Iran, the political battles taking place in the United States and Poland around abortion rights, and so on, bringing to light and discussing feminists' challenges and defending women's rights is more than ever an important topic for my generation. The important and “herstorical” events taking place in every corner of the world highlight a deeper problem in our current global(ized) world: women's rights and freedom are far from being reached and secured. Feminist movements (among others) are still fighting so women (and other minorities such as LGBTQ+, indigenous communities, etc.) can have access to basic needs in areas such as education, health, wages and political participation.

The gender inequality or gender gap occurring globally can be explained as the result of many historical and sociological factors such as religion, culture, traditions, colonialism, economic crisis etc. However, there have been in the last 30 years some scholars who have criticized the global economic system inherited by the Washington Consensus and its influence on the way societies have evolved to become. Some scholars have argued that Neoliberalism has not worked efficiently to better women's situation in the Global South, while others could argue on the contrary, that Neoliberalism has been a catalyser for gender equality and women's rights. This paper will focus on Latin American countries (excluding the Caribbeans) or LA because there have been in the past few years, more and more voices criticising the current patriarchal system undermining women's rights in the region, but also the legacy of colonialism and the current economic system. These critics include notably post-colonial thinkers, post-development theorists, and also critical feminist writers. In this paper, the focus will be on presenting the current state of Neoliberalism in the region and discussing its cost and benefits on gender equality. The following questions will be driving the project: **How has Neoliberalism influenced gender equality in Latin America, since the end of the 1990s?**

As my internship is taking place in Oxfam IBIS, I have been working closely with the education and gender team, who focus on promoting gender rights and feminist principles¹ in

¹ Oxfam IBIS. (2020). *Feminist Principles*.
<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/feminist-principles-621064/>

their projects. A few of my colleagues focus on LA and as I am myself half-Peruvian and Spanish speaker, I felt very interested to write this project on this particular region. Moreover, I am combining both International Development and Global Studies (my two subjects) with this research question as I use “Neoliberalism” to focus on the economic and political dimensions of these countries, a macro perspective approach, while also focusing on gender equality and women’s right, central to NGOs and the development sector. I used my acquired knowledge of LA countries and how development projects work to construct this internship project and reflect on the multiple dimensions surrounding the topic. This reflection made me choose to focus on three dimensions of gender equality: violence targeted to women, workload and the development paradigm.

Going back to the region, Latin America is situated south of the United States and Canada and includes Argentina, Bolivia, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela. All of these countries have as their national language a European tongue, most of them being Spanish or Portuguese. These countries were also ex-colonies of European states in the past and their population is constituted of mainly European-descendant people, followed by African descendants and Indigenous people. This has created an interesting mixture of people, with different origins and histories, nowadays trying to live together despite the brutal colonial past. Moreover, those governments are all (technically) democracies, even if cases of corruption are relatively common (Global Corruption Barometer, 2017). The main religion in the region is Christianity, with LA holding 40% of the world’s total catholic population (Wormald, 2014). As for the economy, countries opened their market after the 1980s, integrating into the “world economy”, which will be developed further on (Bértola & Ocampo, 2012, p.198).

This project will use available data and peer-review articles, which are often focused on one or more countries for their analysis. Thereafter, my conclusions and reflections cannot be generalized, but I hope can offer an interesting reflection on the role of Neoliberalism and its influence on gender rights in Latin America.

The first part of this paper will present the Literature Review found on this topic, starting with defining Neoliberalism as understood by authors such as Duménil and Lévy (2004), Harvey (2005) and Cupples Julie et al. (2018) followed by linking Latin America with Neoliberalism, before diving more specifically on the relationship between Neoliberalism and

Gender Equality. This will lead to the Methodology section, which will present the Theoretical Framework, the Data Collection and Extraction and finally, the Case Study. Furthermore, there will be a Discussion section where findings will be presented, leading to the strengths and limitations of the paper, ending with the Conclusion.

Literature Review

a. Neoliberalism: Definition

After the end of the Second World War, economists in the West decided on a form of economical system that would, according to them, be the best suited for the global world. This world configuration is often called the “Keynesian Compromise”, characterized by large growth rates, sustained technological change, an increasing purchasing power and the development of the “Welfare State” in countries such as the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan (Dunénil and Lévy, 2004, p.10). Simply said, the State regulated the economy with fixed exchange rates and market regulation, while also prioritizing its welfare role by promoting low unemployment, and strong labor organizations. However, the situation became harder in the 1970s as the world entered a “structural crisis” with diminishing growth rates, a wave of unemployment, and cumulative inflation (Duménil and Lévy, 2004, p.10). Thereafter, a competition started between territories for who had the best model for economic development, while “neoliberalization” was pushed forward by “successful states or regions” (Harvey, 2005, p. 87), such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This situation led up to the “Washington Consensus” in the mid-1900s, where Neoliberalism became the answer to all the world’s problems, an idea enforced and imposed by the US (Harvey, 2005, p.93). The idea was to have growing foreign exchange transactions, international mobility of capital, and expansion of transnational corporations, all of this with the help of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (now World Trade Organization or WTO). Moreover, Neoliberalism had new rules for capitalism such as:

“...a new discipline of labour and management to the benefit of lenders and shareholders; the diminished intervention of the state concerning development and welfare; the dramatic growth of financial institutions; the implementation of new relationships between the financial and non-financial sectors, to the benefit of the former; a new legal stand in favour of mergers and acquisitions; the strengthening of central banks and the targeting of their activity

toward price stability, and the new determination to drain the resources of the periphery toward the centre.” (Duménil and Lévy, 2004, p.10)

For the Global South (or said Third World back then), consequences were also felt because of this new form of global economic system imposed upon them (Cupples Julie et al., 2018, p.111; Harvey, 2005, p.92). According to Duménil and Lévy: “The further a country was from the center, the more damaging was its transition toward neoliberalism.” (2004, p.17). Indeed, more powerful and richer countries started exploiting natural resources at low prices, using the cheap labor force and draining flows of interest resulting from cumulative debt of other poorer and less powerful countries, while national elites exploited lower-class people, reducing safety nets for the poorest (Duménil and Lévy, 2004, p. 18; Cupples Julie et al., 2018, p.111).

For the Global South/Third World, these new sets of neoliberal policies meant that the development nexus was also changing. Thereupon, capitalism was the main paradigm for the global economy, with the accumulation of wealth believed to be the main driver for a better society and the only way to develop and modernise countries (Schild, 2019, p.31). Arturo Escobar denounces how development has been imposed on the “Third World” by the West, with the complicity of their elites (Chowdhury, 2016, p.119). For Latin America, this has meant that they had to follow structural adjustment policy prescribed by the IMF and the World Bank, which for example, have according to Neumann (2013) “produced specific disadvantages for women at the household level” in Ecuador (p.801). Moreover, Schild (2019) writes about how these neoliberal changes have lead ultimately to the overexploitation of natural resources for export, the displacement of communities, and the precariousness of work (Schild, 2019, p.31).

b. Latin America and Neoliberalism

From the end of the Korean War to the collapse of the Bretton Wood system, there was a period of prosperity for the region, with steady and high rates of growth (Vernengo, 2019, p.179). Unfortunately, significant growth was linked to an accumulation of foreign debt that led to a debt crisis in 1982, associated with the oil shocks and Volckner’s interest rate shock (Vernengo, 2019, p. 180). As a consequence of these crises, LA countries needed to switch directions with their economic strategy in order to recover (Rodríguez, 2021, p3). Many governments at that time decided to switch to neoliberal economic policies bolstered by the

World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1990s (Neumann, 2013, p.801). These institutions were the products of Europe and the US, in their plan to promote their idea of “development” which according to Rodriguez (2021), is “...strongly conditioned by its [LA countries’] colonial past and its relationship of dependence and subordination with the core economies, as well as the structures of power resulting from these asymmetries.” (p.3). According to Rodriguez LA countries were also hit harder than European states by the transition to neoliberal reforms, the reason being that the context of this transition was a time of social, political and economic instability in the region (Rodriguez, 2021, p.4-5). The Washington Consensus was developed with the idea of controlling the damages of the debt crisis and reorienting the economy with a set of pro-market measures believed to be the only way to achieve economic development (Rodriguez, 2021, p.6). The measures included “...fiscal discipline to avoid fiscal and budget deficit, the reduction of public expenditure, the liberalization of interest and exchange rates, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and deregulation, among others” (Williamson, 1990 in Rodriguez, 2021, p.6). For some authors, these measures had a positive impact on the region with economic growth, inflation control and more foreign investment (Rodriguez, 2021, p.6). On the other side, the social benefices of these reforms were less than expected since the system favored the business sector, and according to Rodriguez (2021), “...citizenship rights in Latin America have developed not so much because of the political system opening up to the majority of the population, but rather, as a reaction and protest impulse from civil society...” (p.7). In other words, these reforms were focused on improving the economy of the countries, even if that meant cutting back on social welfare, which meant that civil society had to actively push back the authorities to ask for more social reforms. At the end of the 20th century, LA was considered the most income-unequal region in the world, with increased violence and a strong anti-neoliberal sentiment growing demanding political change (Cupples Julie et al., 2018, p.113; Schild, 2019, p.36).

However, in the 1990s - early 2000s, a new wave of left and centre-left governments were elected in several LA states (Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Chile) sparking a new movement also called the “Pink Tide”. Some experts have described this trend as “post-neoliberalism”, which Rodriguez (2021) describes as: “...the ideological and political movement aimed at counteracting to varying degrees the effects of neoliberal reforms at the levels of electoral politics and mass mobilization during this period” (p.8). People in LA were tired of some of the neoliberal policies and they were protesting by

electing different governments, supposedly more focused on “progressive alternatives”, such as “ alternatives to structural adjustment, and social wellbeing became a political priority, with governments implementing policies geared toward income redistribution and increased social spending to alleviate extreme poverty and reduce income inequality (Cameron and Hershberg, 2010)” (Macdonald & Ruckert, 2009 in Rodriguez, 2021, p.8; Cupples Julie et al., 2018, p.116). In the end, various authors underline the little change that these leftist governments have done (except for Venezuela) in their countries in order to change the market-oriented system they were embedded in (Artaraz et al., 2021; Grugel & Riggiozzi, 2018; Rodriguez, 2021). On a more positive note, Grugel and Riggiozzi (2018) argue that these Left governments have “... offered an alternative to the dominant global development agenda by focusing discussion on inequalities of income, class, place, ethnicity and (dis)ability rather than simply poverty.” (p.561). Moreover, in some governments like Bolivia and Ecuador, a new concept of “*Buen Vivir*”² promoted by indigenous communities, is at the centre of their development plans focusing on “...delivery of welfare, the pursuit of alternative models of development, and the introduction of citizenship rights.”, sparking much interest for whom is searching alternative ways of doing development (Artaraz et al., 2021, p.5).

Notwithstanding, LA countries are still mostly dependent on neoliberal policies prioritizing economic growth over social expenditure (Grugel & Riggiozzi, 2018, p.536), pushing civil society to hold important protests to ask for more social rights and protection, such as seen with the Zapatistas in Mexico, the 2019 student movement in Chile, “Ni una Menos” in Argentina, etc. Another way for citizens to protest is to vote once more for a leftist government as seen in 2021 with Pedro Castillo in Peru or with the more recent reelection of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brasil. On the other side, there are some alternative ways of leading a society that is pushed forward such as the “*Buen Vivir*” plan in Ecuador and Bolivia, which shows the will of governments to listen to the voice of marginalized groups.

c. Gender equality and Neoliberalism:

Some experts point out how the 1990s and the turn to a liberal democracy saw the surge of “women empowerment” in NGOs as a strategy to better women’s conditions, which in some

² “The mainstream characterization of *buen vivir* is built on the idea of harmony with nature (with a nod to the idea of sustainability) and with those around us—in an argument reminiscent of the equality-driven pursuit of distributive justice.” (Artaraz et al., 2021, p.6)

cases improved their rights and political and civil citizenship (Neumann, 2013 p.801-802; Vargas, 2015, p.540). Among these advances, Vargas (2015) cites "... new state institutions that are committed to gender equality; new legislation against domestic, physical, and sexual violence; and policies of positive action such as quotas of representation." and generally a strong network of women and feminist organizations (Vargas, 2015, p.540). Moreover, the leftist turn in the 2000s, has bolstered "social policies based on human rights, especially socio-economic and identity rights, that challenge neoliberal world visions." (Grugel & Ruggirozzi, 2018, p.528). In their paper, Carrigan and Dawson (2020) underline that in the last 40 years, there has been great progress in " law reform, recognizing VAW and femicide/feminicide more specifically." (Carrigan & Dawson, 2020, p.13). This is a noticeable advance for women, who are considered to be equal to men, with the same rights and protection.

i. Violence and women

Violence against women is an endemic and systemic world problem. The epitome of this violence is what has been commonly described as "femicide" or "woman-killing rooted in gendered power structures and produced by patriarchal and social organizations of gender" (Carrigan & Dawson, 2020, p.2). In LA, this problem has been particularly challenging as the region holds the highest rates in the world, (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2019 in Carrigan & Dawson, 2020, p.3). A recent study made by the UN has classified LA as the "world's most violent region for women" and other marginalized groups, a situation exacerbated by the COVID 19 crisis (de Souza & Rodrigues Selis, 2022, p. 5-6). Yet, legislation to protect women exists in most of these countries but is rarely enforced (Vargas, 2015, p.540-541; Carrigan & Dawson, 2020, p.2). The main problem is that States are mostly ineffective in reinforcing the law, creating a climate of impunity for the perpetrators (Carrigan & Dawson, 2020, p.2). This violence targeted at women is an important factor to measure gender equality in the region.

ii. Labor market

Some authors have also pointed out how in Latin America women's labor participation in the market has increased more than in any part of the world (Bando, 2019, p. 2). However, increased labor participation does not necessarily mean better living conditions for women. Workload has been mentioned by many authors as an important factor slowing gender

equality in Latin American countries (but this is also true in the rest of the world) (Bando, 2019; Neumann, 2013; Quiñonez & Maldonado-Erazo, 2021; Vargas, 2015). Inequality related to workload can be seen in many different aspects of women's life. For example in Mexico, "... married women's earnings reduce within-household inequality because they share their income with other household members" (CamposVázquez et al. 2012 in Bando, 2019, p.2), this being because they tend to "invest more than men in human capital for future generations" (Bando, 2019, p.2). In other words, women tend to spend more on others than on them, widening the inequality with men.

Many authors speak about how women need to work for money outside of their homes, and then work at home, doing the chores, taking care of the children, etc. Neumann writes about the "triple role" of women by "... working in the precarious lower rungs of the paid labor market, maintaining the primary caregiving role and taking on new, unremunerated community management responsibilities" (Moser in Neumann, 2013, p.801). Vargas also mentions a similar process, or the "double burden" of women, as they have to work outside of their homes, while also having to take care of domestic duties, without the support of men or the government to alleviate this burden (Vargas, 2015, p.542). In one paper, it is stated that the average woman in LAC (Latin America and the Carribeans) works 25 more hours per month than the average man, and half of them work for no pay or profit at all (UN, 2015; World Bank, 2016 in Bando, 2019). Neumann describes this as being a way of introducing "... new burdens into women's daily lives by extending entrenched gender roles and responsibilities from the domestic into the public sphere." (Neumann, 2013, p.814). Women are also more prone to work in the informal sector, which means more hours, lower wages, substandard working conditions, and a lack of social protection (Schild, 2019, p.36). Another way of presenting the gender gap is the lack of equal pay between women and men. In Latin America (and the Caribbean) in 2013, women earned 87 cents for every dollar a man made (Bando, 2019, p.5).

iii. Development paradigm

In the development world, there was and still is a belief in the capacity of experts to be the best suited to find solutions to "underdevelopment" in the South (Chowdhury, 2016, p. 120). Often, the development sector is criticised for patronizing local people they are trying to help by controlling the "development language" and applying "rational solutions" developed in the West (See Arturo Escobar's work). This can become a problem when development is

made by men in the West (Tinker, 2015, p.139). Sure enough, there has been plenty of projects aimed at women with the surge of “women empowerment” in the field which often translates into economic solutions such as training, skill development, or small loans (Neumann, 2013, p.801). These methods have been criticized for not promoting “women’s individual capacity to survive on their own”, or by becoming a mechanism for debt accumulation (Jenkins, 2011 in Neumann, 2013, p.801; Schild, 2019, p.37). Other development projects have also been criticised for failing to understand women’s realities, as they did not take into consideration all the activities they done in a day that experts did not account as being “work” (such as harvesting and cooking the food, searching for water and fuelwood and taking care of their family) (Tinker, 2015, p. 139). In other words, women are holding responsibilities both at home, at work and in the community. The latter means that development processes linked to state initiatives have enforced gender roles and have expected women to take the role of proving welfare to the community when the State can not or does not want to deliver it. Neumann (2013) writes that governments are failing to recognise the value of women’s work, and merely treat them as tools to help the development of the country’s economy, while making gendered assumptions about women’s roles in their families and communities” (Neumann, 2013, p.801, 814). . An idea also supported by Vargas (2015) which states that “Such a lack of gender awareness in public policy leads to a weakening of women’s collective consciousness as subjects worthy of rights and to an undermining of the value of their role in care work” (p.542). In other words, women are expected to help their communities, even if it is at their disadvantage because many fail to realise they are already working a double amount between their regular job and their “house” job. Because, of the reduction of state-provided services linked to the Neoliberal switch, local organizations and international NGOs stepped in to fill the gaps (Neumann, 2013, p.803; Murdock, 2003, p.135).

Methodology

As mentioned previously, gender equality and women’s rights are topics more and more discussed in academic circles, but also in mainstream media. This debate is exposing a hard truth: even after decades of struggle, we have not yet achieved gender equality in any region of the world.

This paper is focusing on Latin America (minus the Caribbeans) or LA because of the interesting story and situation of the region. Many movements led by women have been at the

forefronts of fighting against dictators, for democracy and civil rights (Bastian Duarte, 2012; Neumann, 2013; Schild, 2019; Vargas, 2015), and it is important to underline this contribution. Nowadays, social movements continue to fight for these same issues, many of them still led by women and other minorities groups (from abortion rights to the protection of the environment). As presented in the literature review, even though women have been fighting for social causes for many decades, especially since the end of colonialism, their rights and freedom are still not guaranteed in most LA, and there is still important gender inequality in economic, political and social areas.

This paper will have as a theoretical framework, a *feminist perspective* which allows a more critical and women/minority oriented point-of-view on the question. Fortunately, a significant amount of literature is available on the subject, with many different examples taken from different LA countries. The goal of this paper is to analyse the situation in LA and analyze the role of Neoliberalism in helping or not, reducing gender inequality. Moreover, to illustrate the analysis, the paper will use the case study of Chile, a country with an interesting story regarding Neoliberalism and women's rights.

a. Data Extraction and Collection

For this study, a systematic computer search through the electronic database of different digital libraries such as: JSTOR, Taylor and Francis, Research Gate, SAGE journals, Silverchair and Academia was conducted. Moreover, the library system of the Royal Danish Library containing physical and electronic resources from the National Library, Aarhus University, Copenhagen University, the IT University, Roskilde University and Danish School of Media and Journalism was used. The aim was to identify the most relevant papers on the topic of gender equality, feminism, feminist movements, neoliberalism and development, all in LA. The goal was to present an overview of what neoliberalism is, what is had evolved to become and how it has impacted the gender equality in this region. Because it was the first country in the world to introduce Neoliberalism and because of the abundance of research on Chile, it was decided that this country in particular will be used for a more in-depth case study.

b. Theoretical Framework

To analyse gender equality and feminist movements in LA, this paper focuses on a critical feminist perspective of Neoliberalism.

Moreover, when gender is mentioned throughout this paper we will use the World Health Organization (WHO)'s definition. as found in Bando (2019) text: "Gender denotes a group of behaviors that society considers appropriate for men and women (WHO 2015)." (p.2). This definition is giving us two important aspects of gender : it is a category socially constructed, which sets norms for each of the two sex. In this paper, the term "gender inequality" will be used (and not sex inequality), as we are referring to inequality produced and enforced by the overall system (society, culture and economic norms), and not biological differences.

i. Feminist perspective

According to Bastian Duarte (2012), Feminism in LA began in the 1970s, in the context of military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. Women were gathering to protest against these forms of governance and in the words of Vargas (2015) "Feminism made a major contribution to the general demands for democratic rights" (p.537). Obviously, feminist movements have emerged and grown in various ways throughout the countries: more linked to revolutionary organizations and working clandestinely in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Chile, and more linked to middle-class and academic circles in Mexico and Argentina (Bastian Duarte p.156, 2012). In the 1980s, there was a rise in women's organizations, as women were politicising the private sphere (Vargas, 2015, p. 537)³.

"These women came out of their private confinement, bringing their anguish and pain to the streets, presenting their symbolic opposition to the authoritarian and patriarchal regimes with their non-negotiable demand 'alive they took them, alive we want them' "(Maier 2006, 37 in Vargas, 2015, p.537)

These movements were important for Feminism in LA, and even in the world, as they were "...generating new categories of analysis, new visibilities, and even new languages to name what until then had remained nameless: domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape in marriage, and the feminization of poverty." (Vargas, 2015, p.537). Documentation was flourishing and the theoretical body of LA Feminism was taking shape, pushing the women

³Vargas (2015) gives as an example the movements: "Madre de la Plaza" (Argentina), "Comadres" (El Salvador) and "Comité Eureka" (Mexico) (p.537)

to become more outspoken and bold in their words and actions (Vargas, 2015, p.538). To illustrate this, take the “Latin America and Caribbean Feminist Encounters” started in 1981, planned every three years, and which became an opportunity for feminists to discuss and exchange on various topics that are important to them (Vargas, 2015, p.538). This movement became even bigger with the organization of global conferences on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993; Cairo, 1994, Beijing, 1995; etc.), where women were invited to speak and debate their most urgent issues (Vargas, 2015, p.538). It was a time when women’s rights were pushed forward in the government’s agenda and “experts” or “counsellors” were hired by governments (Bastian Duarte, p.157, 2012).

In the West, the 1990s saw an emergence of what is nowadays called “third-wave feminism”, which was more critical of mainstream feminism for not taking into consideration many other forms of feminism such as indigenous and black feminism (Genz & Brabon, 2022; Serrano-Amaya & Vidal-Ortiz, 2015). This is the beginning of the institutionalisation and depoliticization of feminism in the region (Bastian Duarte p.157, 2012; Vargas, 2015, p.539). This third-wave feminism is characterised by its “... understanding of gender equality and women’s rights often making a “business case” argument that gender equality is good for economic growth...” (Serrano-Amaya & Vidal-Ortiz, 2015). At that time, NGOs were more or less following the UN agenda set by donors, forgetting that not every region has the same needs and means of helping women’s rights (Bastian Duarte p.157, 2012). According to Bastian Duarte (2012), there was a lack of criticism of the new economic and political reforms happening in the countries among feminists (p.157). At the same time, feminism in LA saw a strengthening of indigenous movements in the 1990s, leading to new movements of contestation to demand better rights and recognition, also regarding gender rights for indigenous women (Bastian Duarte, 2012, p.159). In countries such as Ecuador, Mexico and Guatemala, they had an important role in shaping national politics (Bastian Duarte, p.160, 2012). Feminist movements were particularly outspoken in challenging the dominant view in development, of women being “domestic subjects”, associated too often with home and motherhood (Murdock, 2003, p.138). These feminist movements have challenged mainstream feminism with a unilateral point-of-view which is more white, upper-class and academic.

Years later, women in LA are still very much unsatisfied with their situation, regardless of the progress made in the last decades (Schild, 2019, p. 23). Recent examples include the 2015 movement that started in Argentina and quickly spread to other countries united under a

slogan “Ni Menos”, a movement gathering women from every social class and ethnicity (Schild, 2019, p.23). These women were asking for more sexual and reproductive rights, safety from violence and sexism, better help with employment, and even generally for better access to food and water (Schild, 2019, p.24). According to Schild, what makes these movements so particular is their “anti-capitalist struggles” as their problems such as invasion of territories, destruction and displacement of communities, and sexual violence are been tolerated in the name of “development” (Schild, 2019, p.24). Furthermore, feminist critic the contradiction between “the government's increasing reliance on feminist development expertise, [while] social attitudes toward feminism and feminists remain basically negative.” (Murdock, 2003, p.143).

b. Case Study: Chile

In the 1960s, Chile was under the development policy of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (sponsored by the United States), which was in theory to promote extensive state intervention, with high industrial activity and social development (Calderón, 2020, p.100). However, this resulted in inflation and discontent among Chileans (Calderón, 2020, p.100). In 1973, the country suffered a coup followed by the dictatorship of General Pinochet, and henceforth neoliberal policies were implemented for the first time in the country serving more or less as a testing ground for the West (Calderón, 2020 p.101). The idea was at the time to leave the “latifundio” estate system⁴, promote productive employment, reduce poverty and increase consumption (Calderón, 2020, p.101). What happened in practice was the integration of the country into the global economy by exploitation of raw materials using its cheap labor force, but also more foreign investment into primary industries such as mining and agriculture, and intense privatization of public companies and social providers (Calderón, 2020, p.103). Chile became a symbol of neoliberalism’s success, an ally to the United States and experienced important economic growth from the 1980s to the 2000s (Calderón, 2020, p.103). Important to underline is that under the 1980s constitution, the state cannot provide social services (Calderón, 2020, p.103). Neoliberalism was then ruling every aspect of Chilean’s life from their work to their education (primary to higher education is not free) to their health (people rely heavily on medication instead of medical advice), to their retirement (no pension system), to their dependence on the financial market (Calderón, 2020,

⁴ “latifundia were owned by members of the aristocracy, conferring upon them considerable social and political power and providing them with the income needed to support a lavish lifestyle.”(*Latifundia* | *Encyclopedia.Com*, retrieved 18.12.2022)

p.104-105). Unfortunately, the neoliberal transformation of the country has resulted in increased inequality with a powerful but small elite controlling many sectors of the economy, thus creating more and more frustration among the rest of the population (Calderón, 2020, p.104). Nowadays, Chileans have started to voice more and more their discontent, leading to the 2019 mass protests, sparked by the rising transportation fares but (as with many movements) evolved to become general protests against neoliberal policies (Calderón, 2020, p.100)

Focusing more on gender equality, Chile has had a fragmented feminist movement until the early 2000s (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.201). After the mid-2000s, student protests spurred the resurgence of critical feminist movements, leading to the 2006 and 2011 important student manifestations demanding structural reforms in the education system (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.201). These manifestations have been a fertile ground for feminist ideas and discussions to expand, on topics from gender, and class to race (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.201). From 2013, feminist protests gradually expanded and in 2015, women took the streets after some femicide or femicide attempts choked the public (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.202). Later on, even bigger protests took place in 2016 and 2017, under the slogan “Ni una Menos” against gender violence, again sparked by a femicide attempt in Chile (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.207). On the other side, Chile is also a progressive state and even had a women president (Michelle Bachelet) elected two times (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), with a record number of women in the 2018 Congress (Palacios-Valladares, 2022, p.196). Bachelet is responsible for some positive advances for women’s rights such as abolishing the absolute ban on abortion in 2017, though the “life of the unborn” is still protected under the 1980s constitution (Martinez Mateo, 2020, p.597). One factor to also take into account -even though this paper does not dive into the subject- is that the Catholic Church (and even more the Opus Dei), had an important impact on mentalities during the dictatorship, but also today (Blofield, 2006 in Martinez Mateo, 2020, p.598). Moreover, if we take OECD’s 2021 publication on “Gender Equality in Chile”, there are positive advances in terms of education:

“today ...young women out-perform young men in terms of educational outcomes. The share of tertiary graduates is higher among young women than among young men, with slightly higher returns to education for women” (OECD, 2021, p.8)

Notwithstanding, the same publication stress that social and economic gaps persist, especially in the workload, the gender stereotypes, the wages, etc, especially comparing to other OECD countries.

Regarding the three dimensions discussed earlier, the general trend witnessed in LA is also seen in Chile regarding violence against women. Violence is still high in Chile and somehow tolerated even from women as considered “not serious enough” to be reported in many cases (OECD, 2021, p.30). Sexual harassment and even assaults are also more often than not kept silenced and not reported to the authorities (OECD, 2021, p.30). Regarding the work dimension: women are more likely to work part time or in informal sector after their first pregnancy, they earn significantly less than men, they are less likely to be promoted and more likely to do “unpaid work” (OECD, 2021, p.21, 23, 24). On the other side, in the public sector women hold 48 per cent of the companies’ board of directors, a quarter of the political positions, and even one-third to half of the positions in the judicial system thanks to quotas on gender representation (OECD, 2021, p.23). Nonetheless, there is still much progress to be made, as seen for example in the Chilean Congress where not even one-quarter of the people holding a seat are women (OECD, 2021, p.23).

OECD publication gives some possible explanations to this situation: patriarchal culture, gender stereotypes, the role of laws and institutions (especially for married women who often chose a restrictive agreement) and weak infrastructures to help with the care work (OECD, 2021, p.8, 29). These explanations can most probably be applied to the rest of LA.

Discussion

What this project has been discussing and analysing is the development, evolution and impact of Neoliberalism on gender equality in Latin American countries. The results presented above show how important the influence of the West/Global North has been on economic policies implemented in LA at the end of the 20th century, thereafter on how development projects have been conceived (Harvey, 2005; Cupples Julie et al., 2018; Schild, 2019; Rodriguez, 2021). Moreover, gender equality has been on the agenda of many countries, but the results are deceiving for women. Numbers show low levels of equality, safety and freedom for Latin American women (Neumann, 2013; de Souza & Rodrigues Selis, 2022). Neoliberalism has brought social costs for the Latin American population, pushing many to hold protests and demonstrations to contest economic and political decisions, undermining the lives of

minorities and marginalized groups (Rodriguez, 2021, Cupples Julie et al, 2018; Schild, 2019). On a higher level, some changes have been observed such as the “Pink Tide” leading to the election of leftist governments in countries such as Venezuela, Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador which have brought some positive changes such as alternatives to structural adjustment with policies focusing on income redistribution and increased social spending (Artaraz et al., 2021; Cupples Julie et al. 2018, Grugel & Riggiozzi, 2018; Rodriguez, 2021). However, many point out that these governments have done little to deviate from capitalistic motivations prioritizing growth and capital accumulation (Artaraz et al., 2021; Grugel & Riggiozzi, 2018; Rodriguez, 2021).

Relating to gender equality, the end of the 20th century saw a surge in vocabulary mentioning “women empowerment” with a rise in international conferences, NGOs, legislations and social policies targeting women, with the help of some leftist elected government under the “Pink Tide” (Carrigan & Dawson, 2020; Grugel & Riggiozzi, 2018; Neuman, 2013; Vargas, 2015). However, systemic problems such as violence targeting women, heavy workload, unequal pay, precarious work, reliance on women for house and community care work, etc. underline how far LA is from reaching gender equality (Carrigan & Dawson, 2020; Neumann, 2013; Quiñonez & Maldonado-Erazo, 2021; Schild, 2019; de Souza & Rodrigues Selis, 2022; Vargas, 2015). Using a critical feminist perspective, this paper has shown how the feminist movement has been important since the 1970s in the fight for social justice, and for denouncing and pushing back the negative consequences of neoliberal policies, questioning mainstream and institutionalized feminist thinking, criticizing the development sector for relying on western expertise and enforcing gender stereotypes, and leading big civil movements mentioned previously (Bastian Duarte, 2012; Chowdhury, 2016; Murdock, 2003; Schild, 2019; Vargas, 2015) This perspective has underlined links between neoliberalism, capitalism and gender inequality in LA, with the governments focusing on productivity and wealth accumulation, leaving behind social welfare (Neumann, 2013; Rodriguez, 2021; Tinker, 2015) However, this perspective needs to be challenged as neoliberalism has also brought positive changes such as investment opportunities, powerful allies (USA and UK), more incorporation of women’s rights in legislation and development programmes, increase in life expectancy, lowering of the fertility rate and higher education of the population, especially with female participation, and finally higher rates of women incorporation in the labor sector (Bando, 2019; Muñoz, 2017; Rodriguez, 2021; Vernengo, 2019).

To quote Martinez Mateo (2020): “... it is worth thinking about neoliberalism as it reveals itself in Chile, because this helps to see the shape it may adopt.” (p.610). Chile’s case study has been interesting in analysing, as it shows many of the flaws mentioned above. The country was the first in the world to adopt a neoliberal regime and in consequence, has enjoyed 20 years of growth bolstered by Western investment (Calderón, 2020). On the other hand, the withdrawal from the State from taking any responsibility for social services and protection has prompted rising inequality rates, leading to important discontent among its citizens (Calderón, 2020). Women and the feminist movement have been at the forefront of the fight for better rights and social solidarity, and a recognition of the violence targeting them, as well as the unfairness of their working conditions (Palacios-Valladares, 2022). Though, it should be noted that throughout the years some advances have been made on reproductive rights, education and political representation (Martinez Mateo, 2020; Palacios-Valladares, 2022; OECD, 2021). However, Chile as well as the rest of LA is far from having reached gender equality, but also security and freedom for women (OECD, 2021; Palacios-Valladares, 2022; Schild 2019).

a. Strength and Limitations

This project has dived deep into the history of Latin America, looking into its history/herstory with Neoliberalism, the West, Feminism, social movements and gender (ine)quality. It offers a macroperspective on gender equality, linking it with broader economic, political and sociological factors brought by Neoliberalism policies. Moreover, the Feminist perspective brings an interesting point of view on the topic, giving voice to women and other marginalised groups that feel that neoliberalism and its capitalistic system, has left them behind. Also, the quantity of peer-reviewed papers on the subject gave this project a solid ground to build its analysis. Undoubtedly, gender inequality in Latin America can be explained by multiple variables such as culture and religion, colonialism, etc and these dimensions could be developed further in other research. Moreover, this paper could have used more quantitative data to support its claims using databases from international organizations such as the UN, UNICEF, World Bank, World Economic Forum, etc.

Conclusion

In the end, Neoliberalism is complicated to summarise in a few sentences and its significance can be multiple and diverse as seen in Latin America. Neoliberalism has more or less taken over the world with its promising and appealing capitalistic economic system and its lavishing promises of wealth and prosperity. For women, this has not always meant better conditions, even though advances in terms of education, employment, and political representation in LA should be applauded. There is still much to do, and reflecting on the causes of systemic and persistent gender inequality has to be further explored in order to find solutions to this world problem. As seen in Chile, the withdrawal of the State from social services has dramatic consequences for women, increasing their workload and responsibilities, while reinforcing gender stereotypes. To conclude, I will use Bando (2019) words: “Overcoming gender gaps can be difficult, and perpetuating gender gaps is likely to deter some paths to economic growth. (p.3). Let’s hope governments and institutions around the world can hear this.

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