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Protests in Spain: A Gender Review[1]

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Starting on May 15th 2011, one week before regional and local elections took place in Spain, a large group composed mainly of young women and men went out into the streets to show their "indignation". They call themselves "Los indignados", the "indignants", after the French philosopher Stéphane Hessel's "Indignez-vous". The movement, which has shown an extraordinary ability to spread to almost all major cities in Spain, and also to other countries, is also called the "15M movement", in reference to the first day of demonstrations, 15th of May. The extensive use of social networks has been one of the success factors of the numerous calls for demonstrations and the coordination between the different cities. At first a spontaneous camp was set up in the popular "Puerta del Sol" in Madrid with the initial intention of staying for one week until the elections. This was then replicated in all capital cities and attracted the attention of mass media worldwide, thus obtaining support of around 80% of the Spanish population.

The 15M movement has also shown an extraordinary ability to organize well staged civic demonstrations and reflecting their demands in thousands of varied, sometimes contradictory, creative, even poetic slogans. It also organizes open public debates in the city squares on important issues affecting the people and society at large. The effects of the financial and economic crisis may be seen as the origin of the debates, but are not the only fiercely discussed topic. Politicians, corruption and an imperfect electoral law that "does not represent them" are also at the heart of the debate.

The "indignados"are young men and women demonstrating together, camping together debating together and trying to change the world together. The question whether they have successfully changed traditional social views and whether women's and men's needs are equally represented is the objective of this article.

The origin of the protests

Over the last four years, Spain has experienced significant economic, social and political changes. The results in terms of job losses and rise of unemployment have been devastating, particularly among young people, over 40% of them are now condemned to unemployment or precarious working conditions.

At the beginning of the crisis, the measures adopted were designed to counter the massive job destruction and focused mainly on the construction sector and to support the unemployed, mainly men, through demand policies. The public sector also pumped money into the financial establishments, mainly banks, also male driven, and into the economic system. Meanwhile, important structural reforms, such as the reform of the labour market, the collective bargaining system and the pension system were being discussed by the government and the unions and employers' associations.

Once again, women are not equally represented, especially in the decision bodies of both social partners and no changes are expected in the ongoing collective bargaining reform. In spite of a relative low sovereign debt (around 60% of GDP), the fiscal deficit and the pressures of the financial markets on the sovereign debt of the peripheral EU countries led to the unexpected adoption of a decree law in May 2010 which meant a radical change of the strategy for economic recovery. Under this decree law it became priority to reduce fiscal deficit and adopt structural reforms aimed at improving the credibility of the country on the financial markets. Later in October 2010, as trade unions and employers' associations could not agree on the terms of the labour market reform, it was passed by the government without their consensus. The cuts in social spending approved in May 2010 and the labour market reform were seen as a U-turn of the socialist government. Since then, politicians have dealt with the crisis with further social spending cuts, structural reforms and support to the financial sector, while blaming "the markets" for what happened. Needless to mention the more severe impact these measures had on women.

Nevertheless, society's response was almost inexistent. After several months, trade unions called for a general strike to protest against the labour market reform, with no great success. Moreover, some months later, in February 2011, the same trade unions agreed with the government on the main points of an unpopular pension reform. The unpopularity of this reform has but very little to do with its unfair differential effects on women's pensions.[2]

In any case, the adoption of the pension reform may have been the tipping point of the current protests. As a consequence of the described events, a general perception of injustice, inequality and illegitimacy has emerged in significant parts of the population, which are tired of a system that does not take into account the needs of the people but just of powerful entities, especially the big corporations and the financial sector. Few people discussed that the new criteria will affect negatively especially on women. Against this background, the regional and local elections of May the 22nd were an opportunity to make democratic changes to the political landscape. However, the prevalent electoral law, passed in the transition period following Dictator Franco's regime, was put into place to ensure stability, not to enable the emergence and empowerment of new or renewed political parties and ideas, such as feminism. The result was two dominant political parties, the governing social democrat party PSOE and the conservative opposition party PP. These hold very polarized opinions, leaving little room for other interests and positions. Both of them are also male-dominated.

This has proved to be unbearable for the 15M movement, who wants things to change. They claim that "politicians do not represent them", reflecting a general feeling that political parties are a problem in the Spanish society. Indeed, Spaniards rate politicians their 3rd-biggest concern, behind the economy and the unemployment. In addition to this perceived lack of legitimacy, corruption among politicians, though the exception, has often gone unpunished, thanks to a certain political tolerance and to a

progressive process by which the three state powers (justice, executive, legislative) are becoming less independent and more politically influenced.

The 15M movement: objectives, organisation and gender issues

While the 15M movement claims to be apolitical and not related to trade unions, to support direct democracy and to be peaceful, some think that they are a leftist movement, since the regional and local elections were mainly won by the conservative party (PP). In any case, many of their demands are quite neutral in this respect (change in the electoral law, punishment of corruption etc), although some concrete demands could be rather aligned with leftist ideas, such as the support given to the new law of abortion and the support of equality and diversity.

The "indignants" have two main objectives. First, they aim to bring the political debate to the streets and open it to more people, as an issue of general interest. Second, they want to come to consensus decisions on key issues in order to provide new ideas to change the current working of legislative, governmental and judiciary institutions, in their view unable to represent and defend all opinions.

The extremely peaceful and civilised way, with some exceptions,[3] of debating and managing the situation in the camps distributed all along the Spanish geography has been highlighted. Thousands of people have participated in assemblies, where specific issues have been discussed. Accordingly, specific commissions have been created to address various subjects, such as health, the economy, education and electoral law. A specific commission for feminisms ("Comisión de feminismos") has been created and plays an active role.

However, despite the fact that the objective was to bring more democracy to decision making, the 15M movement is no more, and no less, a social representation of a rather traditional society. The lack of gender equality has crept in and paradoxically a gender blind approach has been mainstreamed, despite the participation of women and the feminism commissions which have been actively working in several cities, such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Seville. The feminism commissions have even denounced the appearance of some "micro sexist acts",[4] such as the use of sexist language in some assemblies or less respect to women's turn to speak. At the beginning, the commission for feminisms denounced these behaviours but considered the situation as an opportunity for awareness rising. However, the emergence of sexual aggressions such as touching, abuse of power, sexual intimidations, paternalist behaviours and rude macho language, caused the members of the commission for feminisms to abandon the camp. Nonetheless, the commission for feminisms stated that they continued supporting the 15M movement.

Indeed, the organisation of assemblies and the goal of consensus, though democratic, egalitarian and fair it might seem, create an almost impossible decision making process.[5] Moreover, this assembly system does not fully respect the positions and aspirations of minorities. The deliberate lack of formal hierarchies and structures, with rotating spokespeople and chairmen/women in the assemblies does not guarantee the

presence of women and/or of minority groups. On the contrary, leadership roles are increasingly assumed by males.

The assemblies advance only in particular issues when there is a broad acceptance and consensus, which is not generally the case in regards to gender issues. If proposals are not accepted, these ideas may not even be discussed. Currently, gender equality continues to be a low priority topic, as gender mainstreaming is far away from being implemented, both in politics and society. Women have participated actively in the movement and have formed productive commissions which have pointed out the different realities for men and women in Spain. Disappointingly, this important work of analysis and communication has not been incorporated by the general movement. Despite the fact that the "Puerta del Sol" square has been full of messages about democracy, the slogan "there is no revolution without women" was retired on the grounds that it was a "political" message. Without doubt equality between women and men is not yet properly considered by many young people who want a more democratic system. Maybe, the most important achievement of the feminism commissions is to raise awareness about what feminism is and what it is not.

Despite the lack of gender equality seen in the squares, where men continue to speak more often and louder than women, where they play significant roles more often than women, where subjects affecting especially women do not enter in the general agenda, where sexist acts have been denounced and condemned, the 15M movement is still continuously known as fundamentally democratic and peaceful. It has even been referred to as a gender movement, because the female gender, different to the male one in a lot of the Spanish words and adjectives, has been incorporated to a reasonable degree in some speeches. However, the movement is summarized in one word: "indignados", a plural male adjective without space for the Spanish women's demands, thus disregarding the needs of half of the population.

In conclusion, even though the protests are encouraging social movement and are inspiring many people, they lack gender sensitivity where women and men are equally considered. Nonetheless, they are promoting a convergence between the feminist movements and general social movements, which is already a success. Some steps have been taken in the right direction, but much more needs to be done.

Notes

1 We thank Janina Hantke for proofreading (Redaktion Femina Politica).

2 Among other changes, the pension reform has extended the number of years to calculate the pension amount and thereby the entitlement for a contributory pension. This particular criterion affects more widely women than men because their contribution periods are shorter and more interrupted.

3 At the time of writing this article, August 2011, some conflicts in the streets between the police and members of the 15M movement are occurring.

4 The commissions for feminisms literally named them "micromachismos".

5 In fact, a lot of manifests, declarations and proposals circulate in the Internet, but very few definitive agreements have been reached.