Introduction

Feminism is a vigorous movement spreading worldwide. In Latin America, achievements made by a progressive feminist movement include the extension of political rights for women, the enactment of laws against gender-based violence, and the design of reproductive health programs. The extensive protests held in recent years against sexual harassment and femicide, and in favor of abortion rights attest to the movement’s renewed vitality on the streets and digital media platforms. These moments, however, are simultaneously threatened by new autocratic tendencies led by religious and nonreligious conservative counter-movements. This Element explores how feminists, taking advantage of their plurality, are able to counter these conservative attacks.

The Element has two goals. First, it analyzes the features of current feminist movements in the region, particularly in Mexico and Brazil. Second, it examines how the dynamics of different movements have responded to conservative threats. To address this second goal, we focus on the pro-choice feminist movement in relation to conservative antiabortion reactions in Mexico and Brazil from 2000 to 2018 (and include highlights from after this period). Specifically, we ask: what does the landscape of feminism in the region look like? What are the current central conflicts and points of convergence in Mexico and Brazil? What dynamics enable this movement to best respond to attacks from conservatives in these countries? We provide a conceptual and analytical answer based on the idea of nested feminist networks.

We argue that in Mexico, a more elite and fragmented network, well nested within the three government branches (executive, legislative, and judiciary) and connected to a multi-party nondoctrinal political coalition, enabled a progressive pro-abortion law in the capital city (in 2007), but faced crucial obstacles when dealing with the antiabortion backlash from conservatives at the subnational level in the ensuing eleven years. Within the context of a transformed party system, top-level embeddedness in the judiciary, and a new generation of leadership in both classic and new organizations, this network has only recently achieved more pro-choice results. In comparison, a more cohesive and pluralistic network in Brazil, focused on the executive and left-wing parties, and coordinated across the country, was unable to pass a pro-abortion law but was skilled at blocking conservative attacks. In sum, an elite, fragmented, pro-choice network achieved enabling progress, but was not able to block the backlash at subnational level until 2018, while a more horizontal, pluralistic network experienced major enabling defeats but was successful in blocking attacks.
The first part of this Element (Sections 1 and 2) provides an analytical description of the heterogeneity of feminism – or rather feminism(s) – in Latin America, more specifically in Mexico and Brazil. We critically assess the commonly held idea that feminism has occurred in four waves, with respective periods, agendas, repertoires, and actors. It is commonly assumed that the greatest pluralization of the feminist movement is found in the fourth and most recent, wave, with the inclusion of renewed expressions of feminism and repertoires of action (Varela, 2019). These new expressions have been seen in campaigns such as #Ni una menos (Not One Less), Marea Verde (Green Tide), and different regional derivations of the #MeToo movement. This latest feminist wave is highly critical of the previous generation (usually called hegemonic feminism), specifically of its supposed preference for acting within the state, and inclusion of mainly white, middle-class, educated women, NGO members, and femocrats (Gargallo, 2006; Hooks, 2017). This predominant expression of feminism may have ignored intersectional, transversal, and multidisciplinary boundaries between gender, race, and class; the voices of Indigenous and Afro-Latin American women were especially disregarded (Crenshaw, 1989; Hernández Castillo and Suárez Navaz, 2008). Simultaneously, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender+ (LGBT+) movements have pushed for the transformation of the sex-binary paradigm, denouncing the nonrecognition of fluid sexualities (Careaga and Cruz, 2004).

From our point of view, this perspective of feminism as occurring through historical waves allows us to identify important shifts within the feminist movement over time; but it also hides crucial nuances and offers a simplistic image of a movement that is actually more complex and vibrant (Paradis and Matos, 2013). First, such a characterization of the movement conceals the recurring conflicts across generations. For example, conflicts between pro-institutional and anarchist feminism have existed from the beginning of the movement until the present day. Disagreements over the degree of autonomy the movement should have with respect to governments, expressed in terms of “betrayals versus loyalties” or “true versus false” feminism, have been present in every generation of feminists, as is the case with other social movements. Second, in their lifetime, an individual activist may well experience being both inside and outside institutional or movement spaces (Banaszak, 2010). Third, history does not advance in a straight line. There is no reason to assume that one generation of social movement activists will be completely replaced by another. A whole generation should not be defined – nor distinguished from others – by whether it is perceived as more or less institutionally driven, binary, or intersectional (Sorj, 2016).

We agree with historical descriptions that, unlike the wave approach, depict the feminist movement as intrinsically heterogeneous and “mestizo” since its
beginnings (Barrancos, 2020), or even that it may be understood as an ensemble (Alvarez, 2014). Although the concept of ensemble (assemblage) makes visible the heterogeneity of feminism, it may work better to explain the ephemeral moments of unity of multiple feminisms (Alvarez, 2019).

As we are less concerned with moments of power emergence and unity and more interested in the heterogeneous and multi-situated continuity of contemporary movements over time, we rely on the concept of networks. Some scholars warn that even when not assembled, movements can be part of networks that share collective identities, have a common adversary or confictive issue, and collaborate through formal and informal interactions (Diani, 1992; Diani and Bison, 2004; Saunders, 2007). The conceptualization of social movements as networks, however, continues the idea of a shared common identity, which fails to account for the different links established between activists and the feminist movement. At the same time, the alternative notion of coalition – presented by Diani and Bison (2004) for those cases where a strong identity is not present – restricts the analysis to instrumental and short-lived forms of collective action.

To provide a more nuanced and analytical description of the feminist movement in the region, we bring together social movements literature, feminist governance theory, and network theory. We offer the concept of nested networks – defined as a space of social relationships that alternates dynamically between separation and incorporation of distinct actors into a common set of repertoires. This relationship between actors is nested within the network and is constantly reshaped, like fluid parentheses that fit inside one another. The parentheses are fluid because they can be alternately inserted or disengaged as required. Actors can thus concurrently have their own entity (as a parenthesis) and be within the network. They can be in conflct and in cooperation simultaneously. In other words, we argue that feminism is a f exible umbrella that provides a space for various feminisms (i.e., radical feminism, autonomous feminism, Indigenous or Afro-feminism, etc.), with distinct levels of engagement. In short, our purpose is to offer a concept that captures the movement’s multiple inner conflicts and points of convergence, as well as its openness across different governance arrangements (Woodward, 2004; Holli, 2008) and group expressions, such as social movements, NGOs, civil society organizations, informal groups known as colectivas (in Spanish), academics, political actors, governments, and international agencies (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

1 According to network analysis terminology, networks are spaces of social relationship that constitute a graph. Graphs can include several subgraphs or disconnected components; however, they are still part of the same space of social relationship (Harary, 1969).

2 Young feminist activists in Latin-America refer to their organizations as colectivas, a plural feminine of the noun colectivo that refers to a collective or cooperative organization.
In this Element, drawing on Alvarez’s (2014) explanation of the difference between mainstreaming (vertical fluxes between the movement and the state) and sidestreaming (horizontal fluxes within the movement), we argue that analysts should pay attention to three nested network dimensions – horizontal, vertical, and intermediary – that range on a continuum from fragmentation to coordination. We deepen this classification with the analytical framework set out in Table 1.

The horizontal dimension refers to the dynamics within society – the socio-cultural space occupied by actors, organizations, and social movements – and comprises two subdimensions. The intersectionality subdimension refers to disputes arising from different conceptions of inequality – seen either as an issue exclusively related to the contrast between universal women and men or as a broad question following situated variables referring to ethnicity, race, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). In this Element, we investigate the extent to which classical pro-gender organizations are present in the network in contrast to those advocating for black and Indigenous women’s interests in Mexico and Brazil. The sexual identity subdimension includes conflicts emerging from the clash between a binary gendered identity and the more fluid performed sexualities, and related to deep theoretical and pragmatic political discussions of biology and culture, which include distinctions between gender and sexuality, bodies and discourses, and material structures and identities (see Section 1). Here, we compare the structural position of LGBT+ organizations – when present – with that of traditional binary organizations.

Table 1 Nested network analytical framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Subdimension</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Horizontal</td>
<td>• Intersectionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexual identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediary</td>
<td>• Political parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participatory institutions (councils, conferences)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertical</td>
<td>• Branches of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Territory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Population</td>
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Note: The table considers the role of intermediaries played by organizations such as political parties and participatory spaces; however, actors located within governmental institutions such as secretariats and ministries may also act as intermediaries between the movement and the state apparatus and its resources in some cases (Abers and Tatagiba, 2015; Zaremberg and Guzmán Lucero, 2019).
Following the literature on state feminism (see Section 1), the vertical dimension analyzes the relationship between feminist networks and the state. We identify three key subdimensions to address the complexity of the state. First, the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. This separation of powers is typical of any state under a democratic regime. Most national states in Latin America, and specifically in Mexico and Brazil during the period of our analysis (2000–18), follow the classical division of powers in branches, under presidential systems of government. Second, the subdimension of territory. The notion of domination implies that the state is guaranteed control over a circumscribed territory in order to consolidate sovereignty. It assumes that specific governance mechanisms operate at the national and subnational levels. Both Mexico and Brazil are federal states. As we will show, the pro-choice networks’ capacity to expand their reach in relation to antiabortion networks across the territory differs markedly in each case. Third, the subdimension of population: in addition to controlling territory, domination entails control over people, the physical bodies living within certain borders, with the state regulating life and death usinggendered codes (Segato, 2014). We question the feminists’ connection with governmental areas working with marginalized populations (particularly Indigenous, afro, migrant groups) in relation to dominant (white, urban, wealthy) groups.

Rather than operating independently, some of these subdimensions – both vertical and horizontal – interact within a nested network. For example, the feminist movement is more likely to incorporate different types of groups if it is more widely dispersed over the territory – the subdimension of intersectionality (feminists’ links with black or Indigenous women) and the subdimension of territory (the presence of feminist networks connected at the subnational level) are thus clearly and deeply interrelated. We consider this interaction in the analysis of our cases. We demonstrate that, on the one hand, when acting in favor of pro-choice issues, the vertical integration of the Mexican feminist network in the three branches of the federal state offers the movement the possibility of better coordinated action than that of the Brazilian network, which is coordinated mostly with the executive. On the other hand, the Brazilian pro-choice network manages to reach intersectional and LGBT+ groups across the territory while its Mexican counterpart was less present at the subnational level and among marginalized groups until 2018.

With the use of network analysis, we examine the structural network characteristics that impact fragmentation versus coordination. More specifically, we observe many subcomponents within the network and identify those that fulfill such a strategic role that without their presence the network would lose...
We also highlight the crucial role played by what we call connecting organizations, which act as a “network of networks” (national fronts with local filiations, state organizations, and issue networks) (Gurza Lavalle and von Bülow, 2015). Overall, we show that the feminist network in Mexico is less horizontally connected than the network in Brazil.

Finally, we address the intermediary dimension. The horizontal and vertical dimensions are connected not spontaneously but rather through the intermediation of political parties and participatory institutions such as policy conferences, which draw together issues supported by feminists from across the Brazilian territory (Matos and Alvarez, 2018). Whether the horizontal and vertical dimensions are more or less connected is influenced by the historical relationship established during democratic transition processes between feminist’s movements, political actors, parties, and state institutions.

Feminism and Conservatism: The Cases of Mexico and Brazil

The conservative backlash against feminists has spread in Latin America and elsewhere, associating the feminist field to a threat embodied by so-called “gender ideology” – a threat that endangers what is conceived as the bedrock of society: the “traditional family” (Wilkinson, 2021). In fact, conservatives paradoxically reduce the complexity of feminism to a supposedly “simple” conspiracy theory, according to which feminism seeks to impose a leftist authoritarian revolution disguised by the gender perspective. This conspiracy reveals a perceived threat to an order based on heteronormative assumptions of sexuality and family, which conservatives seek not only to protect but also to promote (Biroli, Machado, and Vaggione, 2020).

The second part of this Element (Sections 3, 4, and 5) focuses on the tension between feminism and the state, analyzing how the different, specific configurations of feminist networks in Mexico and Brazil respond to conservative attacks. The reader may question and object to our insistence on studying the disappointing relationship between feminists and the state instead of the new lively feminist protests against the status quo and the conservative backlash. Indeed, feminists today are at the forefront of social, political, and economic contentious action that is on the rise in Latin America and elsewhere (Alvarez, 2019). However, we argue that there is still a dynamic interplay between the increasing mobilization on the streets and interactions with the state. We take street protests and other forms of mobilization into account, but will do so while

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3 To better understand connectivity measures, see Wasserman and Faust (1994).
4 For different feminist perspectives on the state, see Kantola, 2006.
considering the movement’s efforts to gain access to political institutions. The era of institutional activism (see Abers, 2020; Abers and Keck, 2013) is not over, and hence the relationship with the state is still relevant. Indeed, although less auspicious and innovative, this form of activism is still crucial to opposing conservative actors in Latin America.

To analyze the conflicts between the movements and conservative actors, we resort to the literature on contentious interactions between movements and countermovements – a key element to understanding the conservative backlash phenomenon (see Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Szwako, 2014). We acknowledge that the definition of countermovement is much disputed in the literature (Piscopo and Walsh, 2020), especially concerning its identification with an ideological conservative and reactionary position (Silva and Pereira, 2020). However, we adopt a chronological and relational criterion to define conservatives as an organized countermovement in opposition to feminist movements: conservatives are actors currently reacting to the past actions of feminists. In this sense, feminist mobilizations, especially those in favor of sexual diversity and reproductive rights, have triggered a conservative opposition. In earlier periods, feminists can be seen as the countermovement to conservatives, by politicizing and denaturalizing the Christian perspective on abortion, and bringing different perspectives on motherhood and reproductive rights into the public debate.

We thus propose addressing institutional feminist activism as a tripartite relationship (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020). In other words, when engaging with the state, feminist movements are not acting alone; they are, at the same time, disputing governmental institutions with their opponents. Interacting with the state involves both advancing a feminist agenda and preventing adversaries from taking advantage of the same institutional spaces. It is important to clarify that a specific examination of conservative actors, their agendas, and actions is beyond the scope of this Element, though we do analyze their relationship with the feminist movement and the state. Although we do not offer readers an in-depth analysis of conservative networks, some observations on the main reactions by conservatives and their attacks against feminism and the state are provided.

One of our arguments is that, as feminists dispute the state with conservative groups, they nest around networks “oriented toward blocking or enabling particular policy outcomes” (Hochstetler, 2011: 350). Thereby, to assure a proper consideration of the full spectrum of the movement’s potential effects, we recognize that feminists act not only to promote change and create policies at the state level, but also to block countermovement actions and reactions (Hochstetler and Keck, 2007).
Case Study Selection

We have selected two “diverse cases” (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) – Brazil and Mexico – to investigate how feminist networks resisted conservative attacks over a fifteen to eighteen-year period (Brazil from 2003 to 2018, and Mexico from 2000 to 2018). In some parts of the analysis, we add some explorations until 2021. Mexico and Brazil are diverse cases concerning particularly the variable of religiosity during the analyzed period (see Section 2). Diverse cases offer an excellent opportunity to address complex causal relations and generate innovative hypotheses. However, this methodological choice also makes it more difficult to achieve parsimony, and it requires that the hypothesis be tested to avoid selection and confirmation biases (Nahmias-Wolinsky, 2004). To overcome these issues, we developed three strategies. First, to achieve parsimony, we focus on the question of how feminist networks responded to conservative threats concerning one particular doctrinal issue: abortion (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Abortion is a well-studied issue in the literature, with a constant presence in the history of feminism, responsible for generating vigorous reactions from conservative groups. Second, we keep the network analysis simple. We know that for many readers, network analysis terminology can be demanding. With that in mind, after several analytical procedures, we have strategically chosen a small number of measurements that we believe to be instrumental in highlighting our arguments. Third, with respect to hypothesis testing, we accept that our study is more of a hypothesis-generating than a theory-confirming/disconfirming case study. However, we sought to explore whether our new hypotheses can be replicated by other case studies; that is, if they have heuristic value. To do so, we explore recent literature in search of cases to contrast our analytical model with (in Section 5).

Finally, it is important to highlight that Mexico and Brazil both experienced democratic transitions thirty years ago, an historical background that affects social movements’ capacity to coordinate with each other and engage with political actors, parties, and state institutions. As a result, in order to capture specific nested network features, historical processes must be considered. Based on our analysis of the Brazilian and Mexican cases, we argue that interactions with the state are beneficial for the movement depending on the historical access to the state the movement has enjoyed, and the type of nested network built during this interactive process. Nested networks create particular trade-offs between enabling and blocking results, allowing the movement to face conservative reactions differently and obtain distinct results.
Organization of the Element

This Element is organized into five sections. Section 1 outlines the current features of the feminist movement in Latin America, identifying the main conflicts and points of convergence around the subdimensions of intersectionality and sexual identity (horizontal dimension) and examining the movement’s interactions with the state (vertical dimension), political parties, and participative institutions (the intermediaries). Section 2 applies network analysis tools to describe these features in the Mexican and Brazilian cases. Section 3 focuses on the vertical dimension of the Mexican feminist movement, offering a processual-based argument of how the Mexican nested pro-choice network was relatively successful in the centralized capital city, but struggled to block conservative reactions at the subnational level until 2018. Section 4 addresses the vertical dimension of the Brazilian movement, presenting a nested network that, although unable to advance its agenda, proved strong enough to block conservatives during the studied period. The strategic role assumed by political parties in intermediating between the horizontal and the vertical network dimensions is also stressed in Sections 3 and 4. Finally, Section 5 explores the heuristic possibilities of our analytical framework, and summarizes the main conclusions, highlighting new hypotheses for future research.

1 Feminism in Latin America

Feminism is characterized by sharp disagreements over how to define its nature. While some scholars may describe feminism as profoundly heterogeneous, others suggest the opposite, that it lacks plurality. Accounting for such complexity requires exploring its main features, including its contradictions and points of convergence. As stated in the Introduction, our approach considers feminism as a nested network. This demands simultaneously analyzing moments of coordination as well as the different conflicts that may lead to fragmentation.

1.1 Feminism and Its Adjectives: A State of the Art

Feminism is not the only existing heterogeneous and emancipatory political movement. Good examples of the plurality of movements are found in the internal differences within labor movements regarding tactics, practices, and overall worldview, as well as the environmentalist movement’s various identities, adversaries, and goals (Fantasia and Stepan-Norris, 2004; Castells, 2010). Although this heterogeneity is not exclusive to feminism, it is particularly pronounced within this movement, with its several currents, political projects, and perspectives.
The great number of feminisms – including Latin American feminism – is accompanied by a boom in innovative theoretical perspectives. An endless list of adjectives is used before the word “feminism” to mark divisions within the movement. Indeed, feminism seems to have followed a similar path to what Collier and Levitsky (1997) describe as “democracy with adjectives.”

Liberal, capitalist, institutional, hegemonic, academic, popular, peripheral, pragmatic, postmodern, reformist, pop, digital, social, economic, political, cultural, cis, lesbo, trans, queer, homo, hetero-normed, heterosexual, separatist, radical, anarchist, Marxist, socialist, autonomous, anti-capitalistic, decolonial, global, South–South, Eurocentric, Anglo-centered, eco, vegan, afro, Indigenous, whitened, blackened, Africana womanism, intersectional, real, true, false, and even patriarchal are some of the adjectives that were used by our interviewees.

Some Latin American and Iberian scholars are critically opposed to conceiving feminism as a multiple phenomenon. They argue that the notion of “performing gender” acts as a Trojan horse within the movement as it introduces a radical relativism that dissolves its main political subject (women). Thereby, “feminism is not plural but in a debate” (Valcárcel, 2019: 218). From this perspective, queer theory – prominently associated with the Butlerian deconstructive feminism (Butler, 2004) – blurs the definition of women as political agents and replaces it with a subject that is sexually fluid and cannot lead the feminist fight. Moreover, these scholars repel the definition of feminism as identity theory and maintain that it is only understandable from a political theory point of view (Miyares, 2017). This discussion also includes elaborate works from lesbofeminist perspectives (Jeffreys, 2003). Due to the scope of this Element, we will not analyze this debate in all its complexity, although we will point out there is not a hegemonic position around it in Latin America, where contrasting theoretical approaches and practices around fluid sexuality paradigms exist (Dehesa, 2010; Correa and Parker, 2019).

Other Latin American scholars address the heterogeneity of feminism from a different point of view, particularly through intersectional and decolonial perspectives (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, 1991; Lugones, 2011; Mendoza, 2014). These perspectives have provided significant contributions to the field, criticizing the hegemonic narrative of the Global North and its attempt to fit all women into the reality of being a white woman, without considering Latin American women’s views on domination and oppression based on territory, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation (Espinosa, 2010). They propose to

5 To capture diverse forms of democracy, these authors highlight that scholars have increased analytic differentiation, adding adjectives to democracy that may lead to conceptual stretching.