



Gaceta UNAM

Graciela Martínez-Zalce\*

## Minimal History of Gender Studies in Mexico

This article is based on interviews with Marisa Belausteguigoitia, Laura Cázares, Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco, and Gloria Prado<sup>1</sup>

**A**t this point in the twenty-first century, I think no doubt remains that feminist movements and gender studies have changed both society and academia. We have become aware that both sexual and gender differences have an impact on our lives and on social, political, economic, and cultural relations and processes and that, in general, women have had to fight to gain their freedoms and that the LGBTTI “minorities” have had to fight to make their situation visible and win space and rights.

Also at this point in the twenty-first century, however, so far, neither the gains nor the changes in thinking have gone far enough. How, then, can we advance even more? In this article, protagonists of these changes speak

about their experiences from the standpoint of academia in this transformation.

Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco states that feminism has a very exciting —though late-starting— history in Mexico, beginning after the United States, particularly in academia —because the movements were more or less simultaneous. In Mexico, research began in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a reflection of the 1968 movement, when clearly women participated in society, but were not recognized for it —this despite the fact that Santa Martha Acatitla Prison held women prisoners. There was no record of their history —much less archives— about their condition as a unified collective, due to the kind of oppression they experienced regardless of social class. The important thing was to recognize and prove that we women were subjected.

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It was at the end of the 1970s when projects that would lead both to the creation of research centers and graduate programs began to be cemented.

At the UNAM, for example, the School of Psychology saw the emergence of the Autonomous Group of University Women (GAMU), made up of both academics and students, who analyzed the situation of women and wanted to create a space specifically for that at the university. Their objective was to raise the feminist consciousness of both men and women in the university community; to do this, they held different academic events at high schools and college-level campuses. In 1984, the Center for Women's Studies was created at the School of Psychology, which set up an information and documentation center dedicated to collecting and organizing information about women nationwide. The 1990 University Congress accepted the proposal to create a women's and gender studies program. As a result, the University Gender Studies Program (PUEG) was created in 1992 under the aegis of the Humanities Coordination Office and headed by Graciela Hierro until her death, as a mechanism to link up projects and groups inside and outside the UNAM. The PUEG also aimed to spearhead research, develop teaching and extension activities, and offer a specialized library and publishing program that would fulfill its expectations of in-depth, continuous education.

Meanwhile, at the Colegio de México (Colmex), Elena Urrutia, together with a group of researchers, concretized this movement, oriented toward studying women's condition institutionally. The precedent for this was the publication of the magazine *Fem*, edited by Alaide Foppa, in which Elena, Marta Lamas, and many other colleagues participated intensely, translating articles published in the United States. These were the first steps toward the creation of study centers that emerged from the need to study women's condition academically. The Ford Foundation offered Colmex funding, contingent on regular reporting. This was decisive for Elena Urrutia and other researchers in different Colmex centers (sociology, history, literature) to collaborate without leaving our positions. That is how the Interdisciplinary Women's Studies Program (PIEM) began in 1983. At that time, Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco explains, people referred to the topic as "women's issues." The concept of gender had not yet entered into intellectual discussion; we had not yet reached a critical-theoretical mass in our experience in Mexico, but, rather, we had

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very important studies about general social conditions from which some analyses about women's conditions could be extrapolated. Workshops were founded to reflect on different issues, above all in the fields of history and sociology. In 1984, we created the literary theory and criticism workshop, which continues to exist and has pioneered the study of Mexican women writers from the nineteenth century on. After an open invitation was launched, women professors from different universities and other interested persons came to this workshop, and it took many years to establish the theoretical bases for this field.

At the Iztapalapa campus of the Autonomous Metropolitan and Ibero-American Universities, it was individual efforts by professors who participated in these workshops that fostered both feminist and gender studies. Laura Cázares mentions that it was a great discovery to begin to read the large number of women writers who had been completely erased, because, when we reviewed texts about literature, at the end, in a short paragraph, authors would include a list of writers, but seldom included women authors. This incredible erasure sadly continues because many people are against giving women writers their place, thinking that, when they are included, it is because they're women and not because of the quality of their work.

At the Ibero, the experience with the male and female students was easy, although some of the women students were very frightened and were questioned because they had a conservative, religious educational background. They were very frightened of feminism. The willingness of Gloria Prado to disseminate women's literature and feminist theory was so they would venture in, so they would read, so they would become aware, because she thinks we all have to be very open and accept the circumstances of reality, our surroundings, the world that is there, and that would help them not only academically, but also to be able to live and develop.

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by our male colleagues—and some of the women—and the determination to change mentalities and consciousness through teaching. With regard to the former, Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco tells us that the biggest problem was the debate among colleagues, above all with the men who held power in the academic institutions who thought that the work done in those research programs was activism. For that reason, some authorities did not place the same academic value on these studies as on that of other fields. That was one of the weightiest discussions in those years, the years of transition between the complete non-existence of research about women, feminisms, and gender and their becoming legitimate programs. Regarding teaching, Marisa Belausteguigoitia says that, in her case, feminist activism still exists in the classroom, encouraging her students to carry out activities based on theoretical knowledge. For Laura Cázares, the important thing is to eliminate the dismissal of women's writings, and, through a feminist, gender perspective, reveal to male and female students alike that women's writing has been erased. And Gloria Prado talks about the importance of inclusion, with which she created an innovative perspective, proposing to understand it hermeneutically, disseminating it so it can be accepted as a fundamental area of study.

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Many decades later, the UNAM and Colmex programs (CIEG and CEG, respectively) have become research centers that have generated theoretical and applied knowledge about the causes and possible solutions to the social, economic, political, and cultural inequalities between men and women and advise government bodies and social or-

ganizations. At the Ibero, where the chair for gender studies is named after Gloria Prado, for example, the aim is to have an impact on society. The method is to create spaces for students to work with marginalized groups, women who have suffered violence and rape, indigenous peasant women living in Mexico City, etc., through fieldwork, in order to go beyond the classroom and combine academic work with social practices. At the UAM, what was a specialization has become a doctorate in feminist studies.

Life had an impact on society, which today is aiming to have an impact on life.

Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco asks a question that I think is relevant for closing this very short review: Without that critical mass of knowledge about women, about gender, about queers, lesbians, gays, transsexuals, transgender people, etc., how can decisions be made that later become public policies with respect and dignified images and representations? It is important to think about how the future of these gender relations will play out as society transforms. Because feminisms are not abstract theories; rather, they think, rethink, and transform themselves in relation to the context they find themselves in.

Women's studies, gender studies, initially sought equality. As analyses about difference advanced, these groups of scholars realized that what was needed was equity.

Today Mexico's academy dedicated to gender does its work with a trans-disciplinary approach; it produces critical, theoretical, and applied knowledge from the awareness that it must respond to the challenges emerging in our country in the current historic moment and that all of them are crisscrossed with gender issues. This is why it is fundamental not to forget to shine a light on, analyze, and interpret them from a perspective that includes gender. ■■■

## Notes

1 I want to thank Tere Jiménez for doing the interviews that were the basis for this article. Dr. Marisa Belausteguigoitia was the director of the University Program for Gender Studies (PUEG) and currently heads the UNAM Center for Gender Studies Research (CIEG); Laura Cázares is a professor-researcher at the Iztapalapa campus of the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM); Dr. Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco was the director of the Interdisciplinary Women's Studies Program (PIEM), now the Center for Gender Studies (CEG) at the Colegio de México (Colmex); and Dr. Gloria Prado was the director of the Department of Letters at the Ibero-American University (UIA) and the founder of its Critical Gender Studies Doctoral Program.

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