

Mexico, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Honduras: Five Latin American Feminist Groups You Should Know About

Friday 11 March 2016, by [DESCHAMPS Marion](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2016).

Women are at the forefront of Latin America's most important struggles. teleSUR English looks at the women's groups that are changing and redefining Latin America politics.

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Mexico's Comando Colibri: Self-Managed Self-Defense Group

Three years ago, a group of Mexican women decided to create a self defense group in Mexico City as a response to the daily violence that women deal with there.

The idea was to break with the victimization of women and to overcome women's daily fear of being verbally harassed and sexually accosted in public spaces.

The coordinator of the movement, Colombian researcher Maria Teresa Garzon Martinez, told Marcha that the collective means to "train for a fight that we will never give."

"I had some personal experience of self defense and I had the opportunity to do thai boxing here in Mexico City. With other girls, we proposed that our instructor give workshops in Viveros Park, without equipment. Later, the Bonebreakers Academy offered its facilities, and technical training from its instructors. Then we decided to take it to the next level and better organize certain aspects. We started training our own female instructors, and opening paid classes in order to cover our basic expenses."

"We like to talk about the almost perfect victims," a sentence they found in a Shakira's song. "Women, or a certain type of bodies that include women, have been socialized in the common representation that they are slimmer, weaker, more easily scared. According to this representation, women would not fight back in a situation of attack, making them the perfect victims for any assailant."

For this reason, we do play the victim role, but almost perfect victims, trying to make the game fail and turn in our favor. We need to unlearn many things and learn new ones, but with training women become more aware of the possibilities of their body.”

The idea for the name, “Colibri,” or hummingbird, came from an African version of a common story, where a little bird fights a forest fire alone: while the other animals ran away, the colibri goes to the opposite direction toward a lake and carry one by one drops of water to the fire. “We are sure that if we do what we are meant to do as women and as feminists, despite being the most vulnerable group of the world population, then we will be able to live in the woods again. We do not want to survive, we want to live life itself, and therefore make life more bearable to live.”

Ecuador’s Flor De Azaela: The Oldest Sex Workers Movement in Latin America

The Flor de Azalea collective is the oldest sex worker movement in Ecuador and possibly in Latin America. It was founded in 1982 and based in the coastal city of Machala.

They get involved in a range of activities meant to defend their rights as sex workers, negotiating with state and local authorities. They especially oppose the criminalization and other legal oppression of sex work and support its recognition as work.

The autonomous collective, whose name means “azalea flower” embraces women who work in the streets as well as closed spaces like night clubs or brothels. Sex workers in the streets are more exposed to police harassment and social stigmatization.

All women in the association are autonomous adults, usually from poor backgrounds and often with partners and/or families.

In Ecuador, the main challenge sex workers face is access to health services.

Argentina’s Casa del Encuentro: Fighting the Wave of Femicide

The Casa del Encuentro, or Meeting House, was founded 13 years ago, but it became a prominent actor in the visibility of femicides in recent years, contributing to the recent recognition of how systemic and deep-rooted the issue is.

In 2008, the association started compiling the first national statistics of femicide. The Casa del Encuentro defines femicide as a political act: murder of a woman by a man who considers her his property. Argentina’s criminal code has recognized femicide since 2012. Those guilty could face life in prison.

The association’s work, along with a series of high-profiled cases of femicides in 2015, prompted Argentines to take to the streets in protest against the normalization of gender violence. The hashtag #NiUnaMenos, which urges against losing one more woman to male on female violence, became viral and was retweeted by personalities like then President Cristina Fernandez, soccer player Lionel Messi and tennis player Juan Martin Del Porto.

But the collective believes that while popular indignation is a positive sign of growing awareness around the issue, femicides will not end until the law on femicide is properly implemented – just three sentences have been handed out since the 2012 bill.

The Meeting House also fights for better training for those working in courts and the police, better sex education at school, and real protection measures for victims of gender violence.

Chile: Fighting for Abortion Rights in One of the Most Conservative Countries in the World

In Chile, a woman who chooses to have an abortion – even if her own life is in danger, if her pregnancy is the result of a rape or if the fetus is considered non-viable – still risks up to five years in prison. Only five other countries in the world contemplate jail for women who opt for abortion: El Salvador, Nicaragua, Malta, the Dominican Republic and the Vatican.

However, President Michelle Bachelet introduced a bill in Congress meant to decriminalize abortion at least in the three cited scenarios, trying to fulfill her electoral promise. But more than a year later the governing coalition, which holds a majority in Congress, is still divided over the bill, especially the provision on rape.

In this tremendously conservative society, a handful of women's rights groups have nevertheless decided to mobilize and voice demands of access to safe abortion when they desire.

Among them is the Miles group, founded in 2010, which launched a video in 2015 that sparked a controversy beyond Chilean borders for drawing attention over the risks Chilean women had to take to abort a pregnancy because of extremely unsafe conditions.

"We are not fighting for anything extraordinary," said Miles spokesperson Claudia Dides, referring to the fact that abortion was allowed in Chile during the whole 20th century until Gen. Augusto Pinochet abolished it in 1989. Legislators should remember that every day on average 17 Chilean press charges over rape, added Dides.

Honduras: Afro-Indigenous Women Lead the Push for Land Rights

Women of the Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people lead the fight against the neoliberal policies of the Honduran state and land privatization. Garifuna culture, found in coastal areas of Belize, Nicaragua and Honduras, is matriarchal, and the community's respect for women's land ownership descended from enslaved and shipwrecked Africans and the Carib indigenous people they mixed with.

Miriam Miranda, coordinator of the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (Ofraneh in Spanish) explains:

"In the last decade, the Garifuna have defined two fundamental areas in our organizing: the role of women and youth. The Garifuna live in a matrilineal society, we play a fundamental role and women are at the forefront of our resistance. Women are making decisions and are the principal safeguards of our people."

Moreover, women carry out the necessary rituals before almost all collective actions to call on the ancestors to protect their communities. It is common at most land takeovers, marches and political gatherings that women take on a variety of roles ranging from community spokespeople to spiritual leaders.

While dependent on the land and sea for their physical nourishment, the Garifuna have also built a spiritual connection to the Central American coast through their religion, Dugu, in which it is women

who lead the “various rituals that require access to the earth and sea in order to fulfill the requests of ancestors.” Women carry out three special ceremonies “Amuyadahani (bathing the spirit of the dead), Chugu (feeding the dead) and Dugu (feasting the dead).”

The relationship between Garifuna women and their land provides the basis for the cultural makeup of the Garifuna people and their traditions.

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P.S.

* “5 Latin American Feminist Groups You Should Know About”. This content was originally published by teleSUR, 6 March 2016 - 11:08 PM, at the following address:

<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/5-Latin-American-Feminist-Groups-You-Should-Know-About-20160306-0042.html>

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