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# Feminism at the Borders: The Navigation of Gender Issues by Mexican-American Women Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

Carolina Fuentes

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FEMINISM AT THE BORDERS: NAVIGATION OF GENDER ISSUES BY MEXICAN-AMERICAN  
WOMEN ALONG THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

Carolina Fuentes

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Sustainable  
Development at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

August 2022

Advisor: Aynn Setright, Ph.D.

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## **Abstract**

Feminist movements have taken on various iterations since they first began, particularly as the movements expanded beyond predominantly Western and white spaces. This research study explores how gender equality is perceived and navigated along the U.S.-Mexico border area, taking into account the various Latin American and U.S. feminist developments that have shaped the current landscape of the border. 11 Mexican and Mexican-American women living in U.S.-Mexico border states were interviewed to gain an understanding of their definitions, perceptions, and opinions on feminism and gender-related issues given their bicultural contexts. These conversations revealed that ideas of rights and equality were central to many interviewees' definitions of feminism. Although some interviewees shared a few reservations around the movement due to stereotypes, perceptions around it were overall positive. Most participants saw clashes between ideas of gender equality and traditional Mexican values, particularly around gender roles and economic inequality. Some navigated and challenged these clashes within the confines of traditional expectations, while others broke farther from traditional norms. Participants' roles as mothers, teachers, and mentors were prominent places for them to influence others with their ideas on how to carry out gender equality. The findings of this research demonstrate how gender equality is constantly being defined, shaped, and promoted by women who live in this unique region.

## Introduction

Feminism has passed through several evolutions in the last century. From demanding voting rights in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the outcries against femicides in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Mexico, people around the world have joined forces to call for gender equality in its various forms. Decade after decade, women have continued to advocate for their needs, challenge systems of oppression, and take their destiny into their own hands. Today, issues and concerns over gender justice are still present and ever changing. As we grapple with the seriousness and complexity of these issues, we see more and more that they require a multifaceted advocacy approach to bring about effective change.

Unsurprisingly, feminism has not developed without its share of resistance. This resistance is not only due to the disruption of Latin American patriarchal norms but also to the hegemonic grip of white, Western ideas of feminism. Many have critiqued it for being painted by middle-class white American perspectives and ignoring the reality of women of different ethnicities, races, and socioeconomic standings (Prindeville, 2000; Pesquera and Segura, 1993; Warren, 1987). People of various ethnic, socioeconomic, sexual, and gender identities call for intersectional feminisms that consider their various identities when examining gender issues. Justin Garcia (2021) paints a picture of such intersectionality as a concept that “complicates traditional approaches toward the study of race, gender, class, and sexuality by treating these factors as interconnected variables that shape an individual's overall life experiences, rather than as isolated variables.”

Adding complexity to this issue is the fact that many activists advocate for gender justice and equality in many ways but do not consider themselves feminists. In the cases of Indigenous women in Latin America and the U.S., many demonstrate the same values and goals as self-described feminists—such as ending violence against women, attaining education and economic empowerment for all genders, and

achieving equal distribution of household tasks—without subscribing to the term “feminist” (Prindeville, 2000). This is not uncommon to see among these communities, as this term is often linked to white and mestiza<sup>1</sup> middle- and upper-class women. It is often seen as synonymous with Westernization and identifying as such can seem like advocating for colonialist Western ideas that sought to erase the traditional culture of indigenous peoples (Hymn, 2011; Park, 2011).

Notwithstanding this apparent opposition, Latin American perspectives are providing necessary critiques of the white, Western hegemony of feminism. Different regional feminisms have emerged as a result of this, such as indigenous and antiracist feminist movements. The two are often in dialogue and inform one another due to the overlap of their issues. Other region-specific feminisms, such as borderlands feminism and borderlands ecofeminism, have emerged around the world and are part of a larger global movement that is redefining gender equality. Such critiques have introduced new iterations of feminism, challenging the idea of a universal feminism (Hymn, 2011).

With this knowledge of culture- and region-specific dialogues and critiques, this research looks at women’s ideas of gender equality along the U.S.-Mexico border. This area—spanning the U.S. states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas—is painted by the interaction and merging of U.S., Mexican, and indigenous culture and values. It carries the weight of still prevailing racism, the history of contested land between the U.S. and Mexico, and migration and violence at the border. With this background in mind, this project seeks to answer the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Mestizo: (in Latin America) a woman of mixed race, especially one having indigenous and Spanish descent. (Oxford Languages, n.d.)

- In an area where interaction and merging of U.S., Mexican, and indigenous culture and values take place, how are gender issues navigated and negotiated by Mexican women on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border?
- How are U.S. and Mexican values influencing Mexican women's perceptions and practice of gender equality?
- How are women influencing their communities with their own version of feminism (or non-feminism)?

This paper reviews the historical roots of feminism in Latin America and describes the region's relationship with and approach to the movement given its indigenous ties. Next, it examines the Mexico-U.S. borderlands region and the different feminisms that have emerged here given its unique sociopolitical context. It then discusses the conceptual underpinning of this research, situating the aforementioned questions within the theoretical frameworks that emerge from the literature review. From there, the paper describes the research methods used along with its limitations and an acknowledgement of positionality. Finally, it presents the data collection along with an in-depth analysis of women's opinions on gender issues. Finally, it discusses the implications of the results and provides suggestions for further research.

## **Literature Review**

Feminism in Latin America broadly gained prominence during the many military dictatorships of the 1970s. However, the decades previous to this era are an influential part of its history that is often overlooked by historians. In fact, the agency of women in Latin America to effect social change traces back centuries. It is difficult to decide at what point to begin examining the evolution of women's movements, but for the purposes of this review, we will begin with the early 20th century.

*Early 20th Century: Feminism and U.S. Empire*

Latin American *feminismo* in the early 1900s is largely marked by its relationship to its northern neighbors. Katherine Marino (2018) relates that during these years, U.S.-Canadian feminism had focused its efforts on legal equality, as this worked well for the suffrage movement in the States. As feminists like Doris Stevens began expanding their influence to Latin American countries, they defined their inter-American approach to feminism with this focus of suffrage (Marino, 2019). The partnerships that formed between U.S. and Latin-American feminist leaders in the late 1920s came in the decades following many U.S. expansion projects, including the annexation of Puerto Rico in 1898. These partnerships did not come without U.S. imperialist tendencies. For example, in the early 1900s after the 19th Amendment was passed, suffragists lobbied for Congress to impose women's suffrage on Puerto Rico against the will of the Puerto Rican legislature (Sneider, 2008). Carrie Chapman Catt, head of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, even stated in 1899 that “it was the ‘duty’ of U.S. women to lift the inhabitants of its new island possessions up from ‘barbarism’ to ‘civilization.’” (Sneider, 2008, p. 8).

However, Latin American women had had their share of movements and influences that continued from the previous century. Many of these spurred in the context of political revolutions. Manuela Sáenz from Ecuador supported revolutionary causes in South America and in the process protested for women's rights. In Sáenz's case, she leveraged her romantic relationship and collaboration with Simón Bolívar to access masculine spaces, where she asserted her influence (Hennes, 2011). These experiences led Sáenz to later write a discourse on friendship, where she challenged the status quo of women as simply wives and mothers and argued that they also be seen as friends and collaborators (Chambers, 2001). These ideas became justification for including women in politics, which also tapped into cultural fears that women could undermine the state if given this autonomy (Chambers, 2001).

Argentine novelist, battlefield nurse, and First Lady Juana Manuela Gorriti wrote extensive work on tyranny and the oppression of women in the 19th century. Her writing influenced both women and men, including Venezuelan officer Abel Delgado, who echoed Gorriti's ideas and advocated for women's

inclusion in law and politics (Meachem, 2010). In early 20th century Mexico, *Soldaderas* supported and led efforts in the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. Their wide ranging roles– from camp followers to combatants to commanding officers (Cano, 1997) – broke through gender stereotypes and later became symbols of revolution and self-empowerment for Mexican and Chicana feminists (Arrizón, 1998).

Clearly, Latin America already had its share of feminist progress. Thus, the presence of U.S. feminism was met with assertive opposition by leaders such as Ofelia Dominguez, who were vigilant to imperialist tendencies that were becoming evident. Doris Stevens’ unilateral leadership over Pan-American feminism was seen as an extension of U.S. imperialism and thus resented (Marino, 2018). The following years were met with clashes between Spanish-speaking leaders and their U.S. and Canadian colleagues. This resulted in the production of a robust *feminismo americano* with its own focuses (Marino, 2018).

Marino (2018) explains that rather than a resistance solely to legal forms of oppression, Latin Americans developed a wider encompassing *feminismo* that pushed for a liberation from multiple forms of oppression beyond the domestic realm. These were various and overlapping: patriarchy, U.S. imperialism, facism, and racism. As Latin America is large and heterogenous, meanings of feminism became flexible. They varied from region to region, but some common goals included:

- Individual rights under the law: voting rights, civil rights, economic rights, social rights
- Equal pay for equal work
- Protection of rural and domestic workers through extension of labor legislation
- Rights of children born out of wedlock and of their mothers
- Promotion of Latin American leadership and opposition to U.S. imperialism

(Marino, 2018)

Thus, despite the power of influence of American versions of feminism, Latin Americans had and continued to carve their own paths towards female liberation and community empowerment.

### *1970s - Present: Resistance to Dictatorships*

In the following decades, South and Central America were marked by military dictatorships such as Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, Juan Perón in Argentina, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. During this time where human rights violations were continuously committed under state repression in South and Central America, women in these countries organized in their outcries against such violations. Specifically, they used the cultural respect for mothers and grandmothers to denounce the violent silencing of trade unions and opposition parties and the “disappearances” of activists (Duarte, 2012). These movements established an important foundation for future feminism that emerged, as women questioned the ties between militarism and masculine domination and in this process carved out political agency for themselves (Duarte, 2012).

This movement had its limitations, however. Specifically in Mexico and Argentina, the feminism that developed predominantly among the middle class in universities lacked close ties to grassroots movements (Sternbach et al. 1992; Espinosa 2006). This legacy has allowed only a certain group of people to dominate the discourse of Latin American feminism. “Those who work in favor of abortion laws, sexual and reproductive rights, and equal access of women to formal politics continue to control the most important spaces within the movement in terms of influence and access to resources...This feminism is more present in the media, has won greater public space, and enjoys better access to economic resources.” (Duarte, 2012, p. 158-159). It is no surprise then that there is oftentimes resistance to feminism by rural and indigenous people in Latin America.

### *Indigenous Perspectives*

Despite this disconnect, different perspectives have worked to gain ground in Latin American feminism. Indigenous perspectives, for example, carry additional layers of race, ethnicity, and a history of colonialism within the context of Latin America. They advocate for gender rights while also resisting colonialism, the two issues often overlapping. This theme is also seen outside of Latin America as Coburn (2020) speaks of indigenous women's social scientific writing in Canada as "concerned with *resilience*, or survival, *resistance* or challenges to colonial power and relationships, and *resurgence*, or a turning-inward to renew Indigenous knowledges and practices" (p. 430).

In Mexico, the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* (EZLN, or *Zapatistas*) in the 1990s were largely responsible for sparking resistance to capitalist exploitation of Mexican indigenous land and people as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Included in this resistance movement was the demand for attention to women's rights both outside and within the movement. These demands were the result of decades of women organizing within their circles where they questioned and challenged the status quo for their communities and for themselves. Such involvement and agency have had an enormous influence in the shaping of indigenous, Zapatista, and feminist approaches to revolution.

As indigenous women's perspectives become more vocal, this kind of feminism takes its shape and becomes more pronounced. Duarte (2012) describes two currents that have emerged within indigenous feminisms. In the first current are women who adopt some aspects of the dominant liberal feminism and weave them into their struggles. The Zapatistas are an example of this movement as they incorporated the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law (1994) into their broader demands. In the second current are women who, rather than dialoguing and debating with feminist ideas, prefer indigenous cosmovision as their guide for approaching equality within the genders (Duarte, 2012).

We see the role that indigenous cosmovision plays as women mobilize to defend and care for their land. Even when the women are Christian, indigenous women have incorporated *Teologia India*

(indigenous theology) and panentheism “which fuses human, natural, and spiritual domains in a vital holism that resonates with Mayan cosmologies” as they join efforts to care for their land and create nurturing communities (Marcos, 2018, p. 90). The role of indigenous values is also seen in the incorporation of *Vivir Bien* (literally translated as living well, roughly translated as “well-being”), which Sanchez (2012) explains not only refers to economic growth but to the respect of cultural identity and harmony between humans and mother earth, thus benefiting humanity (p. 18). This vision guides the fight for indigenous rural women’s visibility and the call for higher educational investments for them, acknowledgement of their role in the economy, and urgent inclusion in political and community participation (Sanchez, 2012).

### *The Borderlands*

We now arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border, the “*herida abierta* (open wound) where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25). The border was created to separate two worlds but instead has created a third, hybrid reality that spans across Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The previously mentioned influences of Latin American feminism have their particularities in this region marked by U.S., Mexican, and indigenous culture. Northern Mexico is known for its stronger U.S. influence relative to the rest of Mexico. In the U.S., the southern border states hold a prominent Mexican influence, having once been a part of Mexico. Additionally, the area is marked by clear inequalities between the borders, bringing together what Ganster & Lorey (2008) call proximity, interpenetration, and asymmetry. These terms refer to the juxtaposition of inequalities that are clearly seen between the two countries, but also to the constant crossing of people, goods, and activities (Donnan & Wilson, 2010). All of these dynamics lead to a negotiation of identity in northern Mexico and southern U.S. border states.

Through her own negotiations of identity in this world, Gloria Anzaldúa introduces the concept of Borderlands consciousness. A Chicana born in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, Anzaldúa voices her experiences as a Mexican American, lesbian, feminist woman. In her book, *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 2012), a compilation of poems and essays, she illustrates the reality of life in the borderlands: “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (p. 25). In spite of the displacement, exclusion, and discrimination existing in the border, Anzaldúa proudly embraces her identity as a woman from the Valley while also openly critiquing the patriarchy and heteronormativity that prevails in her culture. In doing so she not only brings visibility to the existing realities of the borderlands, but also opens possibilities for new realities where women in this space can experience liberation. Through her writing, Anzaldúa takes the role of *curandera*, or healer, of conquest (Hartley, 2010).

Such a paradigm is not unique to Anzaldúa’s time. Her writings reflect a culmination of *fronterizos*, borderlands people, who have fought racism, maneuvered sexism, and advocated for their communities all while straddling the U.S.-Mexico border. Jovita Idar’s work is a prime example of such efforts. This Tejana activist from the 1900s made her mark in Texas through advocacy and in Mexico by participating in the Mexican Revolution. As a teacher and journalist, she advocated for better education for Tejano children and women, fair labor conditions for workers, the maintaining of the Spanish language and Mexican culture in Texas (Jones, 2020). In Mexico, she participated in the Mexican Revolution by joining *La Cruz Blanca* (The White Cross), a voluntary nursing unit during the war (Masarik, 2019). Jovita’s various efforts were aligned with maternalist politics at the time, which primarily focused on the protection of mothers, children, and sometimes other vulnerable members of society (Masarik, 2019). Through this approach to her activism, Jovita and many others navigated the gendered and racialized hierarchies of the U.S-Mexico borderlands and created a political voice for herself without highly disrupting gender expectations (Masarik, 2019).

In the twenty-first century, this region continues to be marked by the interaction of two cultures, but also by violence at the border, migration of people from Mexico and central America, and concerns over climate justice. Borderlands ecofeminism has emerged as a response to these issues and to environmental movements which have lacked the perspectives of Chicax people. This framework takes these current dynamics into account and views them through an anticolonialist and antiracist lens, acknowledging that Mexican American people (and especially women) have been seen as more primitive in relation to the more “developed” and “cultured” Anglos (Holmes, 2016). As it grapples with these issues, it asks: "What are the lessons that ecofeminists might learn from Mexicanas?" (Peña, 1998, p. 52)

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

A review of literature on Latin American feminism reveals different branches of thinking that emerge. Indigenous feminism, grassroots movements, and ecofeminism all influence and interact with more feminisms, such as the Borderlands feminism that Anzaldua and others introduce. Borderlands theory and borderlands feminism each have their particularities that reflect the unique and complicated space in which they reside. As previously mentioned, these are marked by violence at the border, inequalities, racism, and history of contested land. Additionally, a main theme in borderlands theory is the reality of not being accepted on either side, creating an “outsider within” status (Anzaldúa, 2012). However, Anzaldúa (2012) also declares that such a status gives *fronterizos* the ability to see the arbitrary nature of social categories and to hold multiple perspectives as they fight against oppression.

Borderlands theory has often been discussed in terms of oppression and exclusion. However, as Anzaldúa points out, special abilities are gained in the midst of such struggles. Furthermore, Denise Segura and Patricia Zavella (2016) have expanded borderlands theory and emphasize that feminists should study the relationships between agency and structure within regional and historical settings (Martinez, 2022). “Understanding the intersections of historically specific regional dynamics, institutional

configurations, and cultural expressions would generate exciting theoretical and empirical work on gender and borderlands” (Segura & Zavella, 2016, p. 537). This study seeks to build upon such work by not only studying how women in this region think, but how they hold agency and influence within their environments. Given that the interviews were with women from both sides of the border, analyzing the results through these conceptual frameworks can reveal their complex experiences and identities (Martinez, 2022). It can also reveal possible contributions of women from this region to discourse on gender equality, contributions that are informed by their abilities to exist within and between two cultures. Such conceptual frameworks and themes of multiple cultures, outsiders within, and agency within this reality will guide the research and will be used to compare with the information that emerges from the interviews with primary sources.

## **Research Methods**

The study was conducted using an ethnographic approach, as it explored specific aspects of culture and society within the U.S. Mexico border region. According to Sidky (2004), ethnography documents cultural similarities and differences through empirical fieldwork and can provide insights about human behavior within a social and cultural system. Data was collected through formal individual qualitative interviews with Mexican and Mexican-American women. Qualitative interviews have been used to explore various research topics (Prindeville, 2000) as this allows participants more freedom in their answers while still maintaining a structured format (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

A total of 11 women were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 22-57, and they all had received some form of post-secondary education. Three of the interviewees lived in Mexico, but several of the U.S.-based interviewees had grown up in Mexico. A table of the interviewees with their demographic information is included further in this paper. These interviews took place in person and through video

calls. They were conducted in English and Spanish, or a mixture of the two languages, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission.

Recruitment for interviewees began in the researcher's city of residence, San Antonio, Texas. Only 150 miles from the Mexican border, San Antonio's large Mexican and Mexican-American community made a prime location to begin the recruitment process. Convenience sampling was employed by first contacting Trinity University and Texas A&M University-San Antonio, where the researcher had established contacts. Recruitment was also done through social media, contacting local nonprofits, and reaching out to other personal and professional acquaintances living in border states. These contacts and interviews led to snowball sampling as interviewees shared their connections with other women who might be interested in participating.

The research study invited people who met the following criteria to participate:

- Women-identifying
- Ages 18+
- Of Mexican descent (could be born and raised in Mexico, Mexican by one parent, fifth generation Mexican living in the U.S., etc.)
- Living in a U.S.-Mexico border state or raised in a border state: Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California

### *Interviews*

The interviews were semi-structured with some set questions for all participants as well as options for open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Participants were informed that the interviews would last anywhere from 30-60 minutes. Interview lengths varied based on how much the participants discussed but lasted an average of 35 minutes. Participants received a consent form to sign before participating and had the option of giving oral consent (see Appendix B). They were given the opportunity to ask questions

before providing consent, and the researcher again provided the opportunity to ask questions before beginning the interviews with them.

Interview questions were descriptive and structural questions with the intention that guiding questions would allow for open conversations where the participants could share what they felt to be the most relevant (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). All participants were asked a small set of questions about their demographics and their definition of feminism. Afterwards, the researcher could pick from a set of suggested questions available as the conversation took its course. As the interviews took different directions, follow up questions not included on the list were sometimes asked. The study was originally set up so that participants would participate in a follow up focus group discussion with other interviewees. However, due to time and scheduling limitations, these focus group discussions were not offered and the study focused on the individual interviews.

#### *Positionality and Possible Impact on Research*

The researcher herself identifies as feminist, liberal, Mexican-born, and U.S. raised. Interviews took place with participants of diverse viewpoints and life experiences. Some were fully supportive of feminism, while others had some reservations. Controversial topics were also touched on, such as abortion, sexuality, protests, and the role of religion in women's issues. This carried the potential of hesitancy in sharing certain opinions, depending on how familiar interviewees were with the researcher. With these socio-political differences in mind, the researcher focused on maintaining a nonjudgmental and observant role as participants shared their opinions. This intention was reiterated to them, and participants were encouraged to be as honest as possible with their answers. Follow up questions for elaboration were asked as interviewees shared particular experiences or stances, no matter how unpopular or controversial those statements were. Answers to questions were often repeated back to the interviewees to ensure correct understanding of their responses.

### *Limitations*

A limitation of this research study was its capacity to recruit a more ample number of participants. Ideally, 15-25 interviews would have been conducted and would have strengthened evidence for recurring themes in the interviews. However, because there was no financial compensation for participating in the interviews, the number of participants able and willing to provide 30-60 minutes of their time was limited. To compensate for the limited participant pool, outreach was made to a wide variety of participants representing different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and political leanings.

Although a diverse set of participants was recruited, 6 out of the 11 participants were based in the San Antonio area. Therefore, research results and conclusions may speak more to the stories of women who lived in South Texas and who have contact with American feminism through their own experiences in the U.S. These experiences may differ from women living in other major border regions such as the Rio Grande Valley in Texas or Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua. Notwithstanding this skew towards San Antonio residency, participants as a whole represented several cities in the U.S. and Mexico. Even some of the San Antonio residents had also lived in other cities in the border region.

The nature of data collection has its advantages and disadvantages. As mentioned, it is possible that interviewers may have held back on some opinions where they would otherwise have been blunter (for example, if data were collected through anonymous surveys with sliding scale questions or free responses). On the other hand, interviews allowed for more nuanced responses, explanations behind ways of thinking, and sharing of personal life experiences. Although varied and less standardized than a survey, the responses from these semi-structured data allow for valuable insights that can capture the nuances of different individual's realities.

### *Research Ethics*

Prior to their interview, participants were informed of their rights as research subjects. Before the start of the interview, the researcher confirmed with participants that they understood the consent form and asked if they had any questions. Because participating in interviews involved sharing personal opinions on potentially controversial topics, there existed a risk of emotional discomfort. There also existed a potential for conversations to lead to revisiting traumatic events such as migration experiences, gender violence, discrimination, or other hardships. For both of these reasons, participants were allowed to share as much or as little as they wished, skip questions, or end the interview early. Additionally, resources for support for women were also provided to every participant (see Appendix C).

Participating in interviews involved sharing personal opinions on potentially controversial topics, leading to risks of emotional discomfort. To mitigate these risks, participants were given the autonomy to share as much or as little as they wished for any given question and end the interview at any point. Participants' names were also replaced with a pseudonym for anonymity. Because convenience sampling was used and some professional and personal (but distant) connections were interviewed, there existed a possibility of bias in answers. To reduce such bias, the researcher focused on distant connections and did not interview anyone with whom there was a power dynamic, such as student employees.

## **Results & Discussion**

To provide context for the research findings, a table has been included below listing the participants' pseudonyms, their current area of residence, the primary language of the interview, their education level, and occupation. Following the table is a description and analysis of themes that emerge in response to the original research questions:

- How are gender issues navigated and negotiated by Mexican women on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border?
- How are U.S. and Mexican values influencing Mexican women's perceptions and practice of gender equality?

- How are women influencing their communities with their own version of feminism (or non-feminism)?

The following sections draw answers to these questions by stating participants’ definitions and perception of feminism and discussing how they relate to existing literature. They then share participants’ experiences of gender equality clashing with Mexican values and analyze how they have navigated the different layers of values, expectations, and their own preferences. Other themes emerging from this are discussed, such as religion and the role of strong female figures in participants’ lives. Following this is a discussion of how participants influence their communities with their own ideas of womanhood and equality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these results, their significance to development and social movements, and points for further research.

Participant’s quotes have been included with permission. Quotes in Spanish have been translated to English and include the original quote as a footnote. Translations do not always capture the nuances of a phrase in its original language, so it was important to include the original quote in Spanish for any Spanish speaking audience of this paper to view. Furthermore, the two languages are maintained in the spirit of borderlands reality, where languages, cultures, and experiences coexist and interact.

**Table 1**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Current Location</b>	<b>Interview Language</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Gina	22	U.S.	English	Bachelor’s Degree (in progress)	Student
Anita	54	U.S.	English	Law School	Title IX Coordinator
Vanessa	43	U.S.	English	Bachelor’s Degree	Scholarship Coordinator
Nichole	27	U.S.	English	Associate’s Degree	Personal Trainer
Nataly	24	U.S.	English	Bachelor’s Degree (in	Student

				progress)	
Miriam	46	U.S.	Spanish	PhD	Professor
Rocío	51	U.S.	English	PhD	Professor
Ana Luisa	56	Mexico	Spanish	Bachelor's Degree	Retired Teacher
Sonia	57	Mexico	Spanish	Bachelor's Degree	Retired Teacher
Rosy	33	Mexico	Spanish	Bachelor's Degree	Social Worker
Sara	36	U.S.	Spanish	Master's Degree	Homemaker

It is important to note that although 8 out of the 11 interviewees were U.S. based, many of those had lived in other cities in the U.S. and Mexico. Altogether, participants lived or had lived in Mexico City, Piedras Negras, Monclova, Monterrey, Juarez, El Paso, Albuquerque, San Antonio, Houston, Austin, Boston, New Orleans, New York City, Fraipont (Belgium), and Lille (France).

### *Definitions and Perceptions of Feminism*

Before discussing how they navigated gender issues, it was necessary to get a sense of participants' own perceptions and identification with the term. All participants were asked to define feminism in their own words. While each definition was unique to the individual, certain themes were brought up by multiple women. The idea of "rights" was often mentioned. These rights were applied to multiple contexts: the right to not be constrained to housework and work outside the home, the right to develop professionally, and the right to share their opinions. As Miriam described, "What feminism is, is simply feeling the right to be who you are as a woman...to not be afraid to be a woman, you know?"<sup>2</sup> Many

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<sup>2</sup> "lo que es el feminismo es simplemente sentirte con derecho a ser quien eres siendo mujer...[que] no tengamos miedo de ser mujer, me entiendes?"

participants also spoke of equality between men and women. This could look like equality in pay and in social roles. Some participants emphasized that this was equality with men, not superiority over them:

If we're just focusing on the importance of women, that's where...of course I support it, but to a point where we don't make it so that we're better or worse than men."<sup>3</sup> (Sara)

What I sometimes interpret from feminism is...as if they had an annoyance or a rejection towards the masculine gender. And far from seeing it that way, I simply see it as giving fair worth both to men and women. Without contempt for what a woman does or how she is. That to me would be feminism.<sup>4</sup> (Ana Luisa)

As for their perceptions of feminists and their own identification with the term, there were generally accepting opinions. Their intensity of support varied; some were conditional, and others critiqued it. Miriam, for example, related that although first wave feminism was important, she dissented against it because it was far too essentialist in its approach to womanhood and women's sexuality. Rocio loved feminists, but also acknowledged the contentious path of the movement due to the past lack of inclusion of feminists of color and queer feminists:

We've had the contentious past and the sense historically the white feminists focus primarily on class issues rather than, than feminists of color who focus on racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, et cetera. So the idea of the different layers of oppression that a feminist has will be those that are brought into the struggle.

Existing literature reflects this awareness of the complexity of oppression. Garcia (2021) relates that identity markers in the past were treated as isolated variables and did not consider how different factors interact with one another to create an individual's unique life experiences, struggles, and privileges. Oppression is much more complicated than sexism or classism existing in a bubble. Borderlands theory reveals further dimension to this topic, arguing that one form of privilege or oppression does not trump another. According to Martinez, (2022), "Borderlands theory does not rank oppressions, nor does it

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<sup>3</sup> "Si nada mas nos vamos a enfocar en la importancia de la mujer, pues ahí es donde... claro que sí lo apoyo, pero a un punto donde no pongamos como que somos más, verdad, o mejor que los hombres."

<sup>4</sup> "Lo que yo interpreto de repente en el feminismo es, eh, como si se tuviera una molestia o un cierto rechazo al género masculino. Y lejos de verlo de esa manera, simplemente veo como que darle el justo valor tanto a los hombres como a las mujeres. Sí, sin menospreciar lo que hace o lo que es una mujer, eso para mí sería feminismo."

conceptualize them as static; instead, oppressions are fluid systems that take on distinct forms that revolve around specific contexts” (p. 4). Miriam and Rocio were both aware that traditional feminism had missed incorporating other factors, including experiences like theirs as queer, immigrant women.

7 out of the 11 participants identified as feminists, stating they agreed with the ideas and also carried out these ideals in their own lives by studying, having a career, and teaching gender equality to their children. The extent to which they identified as feminists varied, however. Out of these seven, five placed themselves fairly “neatly” into this category; that is, they did not share reservations with their identification with this term. Two of the participants identified as feminists with the condition that it focused on equality and not superiority or resentment of women towards men (Ana Luisa, Sara). Ana Luisa, in fact, initially was unsure if the term was appropriate for her but later said she could use the term depending on how it was used.

Interestingly, the remaining four participants were not all clear “no’s.” The only participant who directly said no, Nichole, did not identify as feminist because she did not actively do things to promote it:

I don't go through the effort of doing anything about it or showing any further support than like kind of agreeing verbally in the comfort of my own home. Um, if I maybe took the time to like, do more research or get involved with some sort of group, maybe I would consider myself more of a feminist.

However, Nichole expressed that her views were typically in agreement, and she would even defend these views when having conversations with others who were against some feminist proposals. The other three—Nataly, Anita, and Gina—were similar. They agreed with most feminist views but did not necessarily adopt the label. In their case, it was because labels did not carry heavy importance to them.

I'm not much for labeling. I feel like when you label yourself, you tend to kind of stay in that frame of what they represent, what they mean, but opinions can be alternative. (Nataly)

It's kind of odd for me in a way to..in some ways it's cause it's all labeled...but I think I just really want it to just be equal.” (Gina)

You know, I have a lot of views that I would put in that area, but I'm not sure that I would call myself a feminist. Like if somebody asks me to describe myself that wouldn't be one of the words that first came to mind, but it's probably accurate. (Anita)

These responses reflect Prindeville's (2022) statements that many people have the same values and goals as feminists without subscribing to that label. Hymn (2011) and Park (2011) relate that feminism is often seen as synonymous with Westernization and advocating for these ideals can seem like a betrayal. In this case, participants' responses did not match those statements. No one spoke of feminism as a Western or U.S. phenomenon. In fact, Ana Luisa and Nataly were directly asked about whether they saw feminism as American, to which they both responded "no." Both participants saw it as a culture change that many people still resist, but not as a purely American ideal. They have not been called American for embracing these ideals either.

The fact that feminism was not associated as American may suggest the impact of Latin American activism. Rather than the U.S. maintaining hegemony on feminism, Latin American movements such as the ones mentioned earlier have created waves of impact so that the movement is not seen as a purely American phenomenon. Rocío reflected this when asked what came to mind when she thought of feminism:

I also think of course of Chicana, feminist, that very famous Chicano feminists, um, throughout, let's say the 1800s all the way to the present. Um, some of them would be like Jovita Idar, other Latina feminists that were participating in the magonista, rebellion to create the Mexican revolution.

...the idea of las soldaderas, the Adelitas, the women that just really fought really hard to maintain their culture as well as their linguistic, as well as their, um, I guess personal rights and their community's rights.

Additionally, these women's areas of residence—San Antonio, Texas and Piedras Negras, Mexico (a border city)—may impact why they do not see feminism as American as is sometimes seen in other parts of Latin America. As Donnan & Wilson (2010) stated, the border is a place of juxtaposition and of constant crossing of people, goods, and activities. The divide between the Mexican and the American can be extremely prominent, but it can also be blurred. It would then be reasonable to propose that the muted rigidity between the two cultures leads to fewer concerns for feminism as an external source that disrupts traditions.

The lines between the two cultures may be more fluid than what might be seen in indigenous cultures farther south in Mexico, who experience a different paradigm.

Anzaldúa (2012) posits that the fight against oppression can also take this approach of blurring sides. She argues that fights for equality cannot remain reduced to "sides." Just as life along the border is not a matter of being "here" nor "there," but having elements of both sides, so must the struggle or resistance embrace this consciousness. "At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 100).

### *Navigating Values*

Participants were asked whether they saw conflicts between Mexican values and ideas of gender equality. All but one said they did. A major arena of this conflict was witnessing the differences in treatment of the boys and girls in the house. Participants shared many examples of the different kinds of treatments and responsibilities distributed among male and female siblings.

...and then being a girl and having certain curfews and seeing how that didn't quite apply to my brother who was only 13 months younger than me...But when he's a boy or whatever, yeah. I don't know, there was like, it was very, a lot of very unsaid things in terms of how we were treated differently." (Vanessa)

And there was always the preference for the boys and the preference for the boys to not do much around the house and, and the girls, even if we were little, I could have a 14 year old brother and I could be 6 or 7 years old. And I'm still in charge of doing dishes. I'm still in charge of sweeping and mopping...I'm still in charge of serving them first, rather than having any kind of equality." (Rocío)

In addition to the distribution of chores, participants also mentioned seeing very gendered chores around the house (such as girls being tasked with indoor chores while boys are tasked with outdoor chores).

Gendered tasks extended to the adults as well. Many participants mentioned the expectation of women to not work outside the home and focus on home and family responsibilities, although not all of them followed this themselves.

Two U.S. based participants, Vanessa and Gina, specifically expressed a frustration and bewilderment for seeing women serving the men in the house. Vanessa related that despite her mother being a strong individual, she served her husband first. Gina expressed awkwardness and confusion when asked to serve the males:

Yeah, it was kind of awkward for me. Like, well, when they [say] ‘Can you give me a soda?’ I’m like, well, why...you can’t get it yourself?’ Like, stuff like that.

Interestingly, the participants who discussed these differences among siblings were all U.S. based. Rocío was U.S. based but grew up in Mexico until she was 16, so her experiences with this did occur in Mexico. The others had grown up in the U.S. either most or all of their lives. These findings may suggest a difference in lens that is adopted on either side of the border, despite the physical proximity between the two countries. They may see different styles of parenting in other non-Hispanic families and compare them to their families, leading to a greater focus on equal treatment between men and women in the private sphere. Admittedly, this is a small sample size and a larger study could provide further insight into differences between U.S. and Mexican Latinas along the border.

Other participants expressed less conflict with Mexican values. In their cases, they were aware of the *machismo*<sup>5</sup> in Mexican culture but experienced fewer clashes personally. Rosy, for example, described both her family of upbringing and her current family she has created as a feminist household and was unsure about how much of a conflict in values she has experienced. The one topic where she did see conflict was the topic of abortion in mainstream Mexican culture. That is an issue that the culture still pushes back against, she says. Some participants said they experienced more freedom in their family life growing up. Nichole shared that the Mexican side of her family (she was Mexican by her mother’s side) did not enforce many of the stereotypical roles she saw in Mexican Catholic households. She attributed

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<sup>5</sup> *Machismo*: “a strong sense in masculine pride: an exaggerated masculinity” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Oftentimes it is associated with “a man’s responsibility to provide for, protect, and defend his family.” (Morales, 1996)

this to the religion her grandparents adopted. She shared that as Jehovah's Witnesses, they did not necessarily enforce gender roles in careers.

The man is still, if there's a husband, he is still head of the household, but there's no like, oh, now you're married. Now you're stuck. Like there's no stuck at home. You can still do whatever you want to kind of, you know, you just, you still just respect your husband as head of the household...He takes his wife's opinion into consideration when making decisions for the household, but she's not refined to the homemaker, the mom, so whatever, she can still have her career. And you know, as long as it doesn't conflict with serving God.

Similarly, Miriam had a family life that was different from the rest of Mexico. She came from a very liberal family where she would read her mother's *Fem* magazine, a prominent Latin American feminist magazine. Additionally, she attended a very liberal school where "it was very common, very normal to have several boyfriends, several girlfriends. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. That to me was something normal."<sup>6</sup> Miriam felt very free to be herself in these spaces, she says. However, as soon as she stepped out of the house, she faced a drastically different reality where she faced the possibility of violence in the metros and the discomfort of the male gaze. Additionally, she was not interested in the aesthetic of Mexican women at the time which involved makeup, skirts, heels, etc. She adopted her own style which she later found out was a queer aesthetic. However, she also avoided these common clothing styles for women out of a need for protection from the male gaze.

So it was like daily, daily I went out like a warrior to defend myself...I had a very uh, very battle-like attitude in this sense despite being very small, I'm of small stature.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, when Miriam moved to the U.S. she felt freer and safer to explore more traditionally feminine clothing styles. Less concerned for her safety and the discomfort of the male gaze, she began wearing short skirts and dresses while in New Orleans to experiment and also combat the Louisiana heat.

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<sup>6</sup> *Era muy común, muy normal que tuvieras varios novios varias novias no importa. Realmente no importa, entiendes, eso era para mí como algo normal.*"

<sup>7</sup> "Entonces, total, era como diario, diario salía como una guerrera para defenderme. Tuve una actitud muy este, muy así como aguerrida en ese sentido, a pesar que soy muy chiquita, soy de pequeño tamaño."

She explored these feminine styles for a time then returned to her usual style “because I got kind of lazy to be feminine since I had already tried it, you know?”<sup>8</sup>

In both Miriam and Nichole’s cases, we see multiple layers being navigated as Anzaldua (2012) and Martinez (2022) have previously illustrated. For instance, as Nichole navigates gender issues, she does so while being part of a bicultural family (Mexican American and African American) and a Jehovah’s witness. For her, these identities have made gender roles less intense than they would if she were Mexican Catholic. However, interpretations and implications of husbands as leaders of the household are still debated, as we will see later with Gina’s example. Nonetheless, Nichole’s multiple identities create spaces where she has had more relaxed gender roles than what is usually imagined in a traditional Mexican Catholic household. Miriam has had a similar reality in her family of origin where it was less traditional than mainstream Mexican culture, but she still faced gender-related aggressions once she stepped out her home. Nonetheless, she carved out her own space of expression through clothing against the backdrop of gender violence, rigid roles, and heteronormativity.

### *Negotiating Roles*

Given that participants had their own definitions of gender equality and various stances on issues of gender, they also had unique ways of navigating gender roles. Sonia, for example, was vocal about her disapproval of women becoming too “liberated” and ignoring their families.

So even though feminism has come, values as a woman and as a mom, well, those shouldn’t be lost. And they’re lost when you go into excess. I say this because I was a teacher and a lot of kids would tell me that their moms went out to drink with their friends and they hadn’t come home yet and their dads brought them to school. You know? Those are all the excesses that I don’t agree with.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Muy interesante. Pues ya después Nueva Orleans como qué me dio, medio flojera siendo femenina pero pues ya lo experimente, no?”

<sup>9</sup> “O sea que aunque entró el feminismo, pero los valores como mujer y como mamá, pues eso, no deben de perderse... Y te lo digo porque muchas mamás yo fui maestra y muchos niños eso me comentaban que su mamá se salió a tomar con las amigas y que llegó y que no ha llegado y que me trajo mi papá. ¿Me entiendes? Todos esos excesos son los que. No, no estoy de acuerdo.”

Although she shared this cultural value of prioritizing family, this does not mean Sonia stayed in the home without a career or social life. Sonia worked in the school system for 30 years and initially made more money than her husband. She shared that she recently made an out of state trip with her childhood friends. She has very much developed her career and personal life, but she ensured her daughters were cared for and the house was tended to. To achieve this, Sonia and her husband made agreements on who was responsible for certain tasks and expenses.

Sonia also assigned tasks to each of their children and ensured they completed them before moving on to other activities. She herself prepared lunches for her daughters before school and checked their homework at the end of the day. Although Sonia had many responsibilities in addition to her work outside the home as is the case for many women, she also had an authority in the home as she oversaw discipline and assigned various household tasks

Ana Luisa shared similar views on family responsibilities. She expressed her preference for women to focus on the family and felt it was part of her role as a woman.

If the man can be the provider and it's not necessary for the woman to leave, I would prefer that we stay and raise the kids, because that is a job that, at the end of the day, forming a family, educating a human being is to me part of the work of a woman.<sup>10</sup>

Ana Luisa was not very rigid in this, however. She also stated that if a wife earns more than her husband, they could come to an agreement where she works and the husband stays home. Her focus was on ensuring that the family was cared for and that children weren't sent to daycares whenever possible.

Sara was younger than the previous two participants but was also raised in Mexico, and she felt that Mexican culture did influence her decision to stay home with her children during this season of her life. She did not plan to stay home her entire life, but she did want to stay with her two young boys during

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<sup>10</sup> "...Si el hombre puede ser el proveedor y no es necesario que la mujer tenga que salir, yo preferiría que que nos pudiéramos quedar a criar a los hijos, porque ese es un trabajo que a final de cuentas el formar una familia, el educar al ser humano es es parte del trabajo como para mí como mujer."

their formative years “so that I could know my sons and they could know me.”<sup>11</sup> Like Sonia and Ana Luisa, Sara valued a focus on family also did not fully carry this out in the traditional way. In Sara’s case, her husband works from home and is very involved in raising the boys. Household chores are distributed more evenly, and she does not follow the infamous custom of always serving her husband. They serve each other, she stated.

Miriam veered farther from tradition even though she was raised in Mexico. She did not share Sonia’s concern over “forgetting” her family.

I have a daughter and feel very relaxed because here where I live it doesn’t matter, like, I can work and be a mother too. I can travel, I can leave my daughter with her dad. We’re divorced so my daughter lives with me two weeks per month.

Miriam was concerned about balance like Sonia was, but in her case this balance was focused inward. The balance was more about how much responsibility was fair for a woman with a family to take on. Miriam did care about her daughter—she mentioned her several times in the interview—but she also was comfortable splitting the custody of her child equally with her ex-husband. Whereas Sonia developed her career and took on the additional role of administering household chores and disciplining her daughters, Miriam developed her career while not feeling the need to be responsible for the majority of her daughter’s parenting.

Some participants were in relationships with people who had been raised differently from them. For example, Nataly came from divorced parents and when with her mother, they both took care of the house. Her partner came from non-divorced parents who followed traditional roles, and Nataly shares that they both had different expectations of household responsibilities. She and her partner navigate these differences through conversations over having equal distribution of household tasks.

The participants who had a preference for stay-at-home moms emphasized stay-at-home parenting because they felt children needed attention from caregivers and they wanted to promote healthy family

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<sup>11</sup> “*para conocer a mis hijos y que me conozcan a mí*”

bonding. They shared flexibility in terms of who cares for the family, for how long, and to what extent. This flexibility suggests that the value behind this is family unity and enjoying life's stages. Whereas some families may place higher rigidity on women taking the role as primary caregivers, these women found ways to pursue their careers and distribute household tasks in a way that contributed to value family life and was sometimes less disruptive to gender expectations.

### *Influencing Others*

Participants were asked whether there were specific gender issues that were important to them. Financial independence was important to many, and this was emphasized through access to education and economic justice. Pursuing higher education was something that Gina highly believed in even though much of her extended family did not aspire to a master's degree like she did. For Rosy it was also very important that her daughters earned a university degree. She saw education as a life skill for achieving independence. Ana Luisa and Nataly focused directly on the financial part of economic justice. Ana Luisa spoke of the importance of economic equity in how finances were distributed. She saw this in divorced couples where many women were left caring for their children without receiving appropriate financial compensations. She also noticed that it was common for parents to set aside more money for their male children when writing their will with the reasoning that the males would be the heads of their households who would be providing for their families. She herself went against this expectation by assigning more money to her daughter in her will so that she could have financial support in the event that she got divorced as she had. For Nataly, equal pay was important, but she focused this more on the structural practices of the workplace. Equal wages for equal work, banishing workplace discrimination, and providing maternal and paternal leave were all ways in which she said culture needed to shift in order for women to have full independence.

Other participants focused more on the private sphere. Miriam noticed how common it was to see women achieving successful careers but also taking on all the responsibilities of the house and being called superwomen for this. She called out this glorification of superwomen as a glorification of injustice.

It's like, glorifying injustice, you know? It's like, "oh you're a superwoman. I'm not a superwoman, I'm being treated really bad, okay? Really badly, ok, by this other person, right? I straight out don't understand how they cope because I've never been like that. I've never been able to do everything."<sup>12</sup>

Sara was also interested in promoting gender equality in the home and how she educates her two boys about this. For example, she will redirect her boys (and husband) when making statements such as "we're strong because we're boys" and tell them that girls can also be strong, tall, etc. Through practices like these, she tries to break the rigidity of gender roles and expectations for her boys.

Participants were asked how they influenced others about these issues, and parenting was the most frequently mentioned form of influence. Vanessa shared that she was thoughtful in how she encouraged and discouraged her children. She was careful not to intentionally gender them in tasks like household chores, for example. Ana Luisa cared about women having economic independence, so she always encouraged her daughter to study and have a career so she would not necessarily need to depend on a man. Nataly, who had no children of her own, said she would promote these values to children in her life, when appropriate. Several participants were educators, so the classroom was another sphere of influence. Rocío used her classroom to discuss the various social, political, economic issues in the world from a Latinx perspective. Ana Luisa also used her position as a teacher to talk about gender issues with the parents of her students.

Participants' spheres of influence partially echo the political maternalism that activists like Jovita Idar took on. In Jovita's context of the early 1900s, "maternalism was the transformation of women's

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<sup>12</sup> *Es como glorificar algo que es una injusticia me entiendas. Es como, oh that's a, you're a superwoman I'm not a superwoman, I'm being treated really bad, okay? Really badly, ok, by this other person, right? Es como que dos de plano no, no entiendo como cooperan, porque yo no, nunca he sido así, yo nunca he podido hacer todo.*

private, familial responsibilities as caretakers of the domestic realm into public action” (Masarik, 2019, p. 288). Although not all of these participants are purposely political when influencing others, they do use spaces traditionally associated with womanhood—parenting, teaching, care taking—to effect change in younger generations. Although these spaces are more traditional and less disruptive to gender roles, influence here is powerful and can oftentimes be the source of massive culture shifts as younger generations grow up. Further, some of these participants have still been unconventional within these more traditional spaces for women.

### *Maternal Figures*

In addition to participants’ influences as mothers, teachers, and mentors, it is worth noting the mention of their own maternal figures in these interviews. Many participants spoke of their mothers or grandmothers as people who highly influenced them. When asked what she thought of when she thought of feminism, Rocío answered:

That first thing that I think of is my mother who I believe was, was a very strong, feminist. Even though she still had tendencies of machismo from, from the Mexican culture. She was always defending her daughters and her sister...My mom always instilled in us a sense of justice.

Anita also learned lessons from watching her mother and hearing her advice:

My mom was one of 11 children....But my mom was the only one to move out of the house without being married first. And her lesson to me has always been, you need to be able to support yourself cause you can't count on any man to be able to that for you.

Both of these participants drew clear connections between how their mothers lived and how this shaped them as adults. Rocío continues instilling a sense of justice in her community and Anita has a successful career as a Title IX Coordinator. Vanessa also took after her mother and the other women in her life, but she also made further observations:

And so like going back to talking about my mom and how she's just a strong person and personality and all that....when I think of most of the women in my families, it's interesting that I was probably labeled as stubborn and questioning and stuff because I kind of feel like most of them were that way.

I think of so many of them as being like the leaders of their households...and so I think there's something there, right? Like there's this ability to, to let women lead and voice opinions and be strong.... And so then it's like, an interesting thing to think though, as Mexican or Mexican American households being still run by the men in the family or whatever, because I don't really see that necessarily. And I didn't really see that growing up necessarily.

Vanessa noticed that despite cultural norms of men being heads of their households, the strong personalities of the women in her family made them seem like the true leaders. The leadership of the women in Vanessa's family has been a prominent memory, one that points to the agency of women within their families. Not only is this an agency; it can be a springboard for female empowerment and ownership into broader areas of society. Such instances are not uncommon in Mexican households. As Vanessa said, "there is something there."

### *Religion*

Participants were well aware of the role of religion in shaping gender norms. Nataly, Gina, and Nichole talked about common interpretations of Biblical passages leading to women being homemakers and men having authority in the home<sup>13</sup>. All three of them had Christian family members or were Christian themselves, and they each responded differently. Nataly spoke about her family being Christian and how Biblical commands may have influenced her extended family's dynamics, but she did not speak about applying this to her own life or debating it. As a Jehovah's Witness, Nichole did not see passages like this one as commanding women to be home makers. As mentioned earlier, they could take on any role or career they want, but Jehovah's Witnesses still believed the man was to remain the head of the household. Gina adopted a slightly different interpretation of the Biblical command for women to submit to their husbands:

But sometimes like, I mean, it actually says like the husband has to be, they loving and caring and like love them as the God loves the church, stuff like that<sup>14</sup>. So I think. That in that way

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<sup>13</sup> "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body." (Ephesians 5:22-23)

<sup>14</sup> "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;" (Ephesians 5:25, KJV)

becomes submissive in a beautiful way. It doesn't become like antagonizing towards your person and your career and everything.

Furthermore, Gina's faith was a source of courage for her to be herself and become free from other people's opinions, especially when she was going against the norms such as in pursuing a master's degree or even pushing back against always serving the males. Finally, Sara went beyond gender roles and saw religion as something that has tried to suppress women and feminine energy.

In order to maintain this image of submissive women, you can see it in a lot of religions, not just in Catholicism but I mean in like the extremists, like with Muslims women can't show anything, right? They're totally submissive, right? They don't have any liberty. But also, for example you see it in this religion in Utah, in Mormons, they are men with a lot of women, right? The same thing, like, control. Like, what are they afraid of?<sup>15</sup>

As seen here, participants saw slightly different ways in which religion has influenced gender equality, usually by holding it back. However, some participants, like Gina, were able to find agency and even empowerment through the same religion. These experiences reflect a broader discourse that has been taking place between feminist thinking and theological doctrine. Aquino (1998) describes that this discourse "seeks to understand, discern, interpret, and accompany women's and men's experiences of God in order to construct new models free of patriarchal domination, exploitation, inhumanity, and violence" (p. 89). The agency that Gina and Nichole have found in their faith reflect the different ways in which this discourse may be influencing religion today. As seen earlier in Nichole's case, it is seen in the church doctrine where Jehovah's Witnesses do not dictate that women must be primarily home makers. In Gina's case, we see it in her personal practice, where a new model is constructed that is free of domination.

## **Conclusion**

Through semi-structured interviews, this study explored women's ways of viewing and navigating gender in U.S.-Mexico border states. Although they each had their own definitions of feminism, many of

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<sup>15</sup> "Para poder mantener esta imagen de las mujeres sumisas, se ve y se ve en muchas religiones, no solo en la católica te digo como en las extremistas, así estén musulmanas también de las mujeres no pueden enseñar nada, verdad? Están este, Pues totalmente sumisas, verdad? Es este no tiene nada Así que libertad. ¿Pero también, por ejemplo en en vez en estas religiones de los de Utah en los mormones, o sea, ellos son hombres y con muchas mujeres, verdad? Este sí, igual. O sea, el control. El control. ¿O sea, a qué le temen?"

them saw it as a movement concerned with rights and equality for women. Stereotypes of women as anti-men and negligent mothers were slightly present in some participants' descriptions, but participants generally saw feminism in favorable terms as long as it did not follow these stereotypes. Most participants saw clashes between ideas of gender equality and traditional Mexican culture, but they found ways to acquire and practice gender equality according to their personal values. Some of them lived unorthodox lives in varying degrees, from being working mothers to dressing "unfeminine-like." The vast majority of them promoted equality through their influence on others, many of them as teachers and mothers. The influence of their own maternal figures and their relationships with religion added additional layers to their experiences as women in the border.

In defining their own views on how equality should be carried out and in creating their own spheres of influence, participants showed agency in shaping gender equality. Every person, whether intentionally or not, navigates and negotiates gender expectations, but they do so within different historical, sociopolitical, and historical contexts. This study sought to understand how women navigate gender within the context of border regions during the twenty-first century. Various other forces interact here: religious structures, their various socioeconomic statuses, immigrant status, influences of non-Mexican cultures, and influences from their own families. Participants extrapolate pre-existing values brought about by these forces, such as family focus, and incorporate them into their current realities with their unique options and challenges.

Segura and Zavella (2016) have urged feminists to study the relationship between agency and these various structures. This study sought to do that by exploring the interactions of these forces within the individual participants. It found that many times they navigated these forces, whether consciously or not, to define and live out a more equal way of life for themselves and their families. These interviews not only provide a glimpse into current viewpoints along the border, but they also demonstrate the active role of women in this region in further shaping what gender equality can look like. Like the more formal Latin

American women's movements, these individuals are contributing to the ever-changing nature of feminist thought through their everyday conversations and practices. Mainstream feminism may be influencing women at the border, but women at the border are also doing their part to inform mainstream feminism. Acknowledging their viewpoints and practices is a step in challenging the traditional hegemony of feminism and contributing to the inclusion of multi-dimensional realities of women all over the world. Further, such dynamics continue to challenge the paradigm of a universal feminism and propose that different manifestations of gender equality can exist.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Given more time and resources, the field would benefit from a larger and more in-depth version of this study. A larger sample size would be able to provide more thorough answers to the questions posed, and it would also provide insight into new questions that the current study brings up, for example:

- An in-depth look into the differences in opinions and lifestyles between women on each side of the border
- A study on the differences and similarities in such topics between women along the border and women in non-border regions of Mexico
- Generational differences around such topics
- The impact of language on how feminism and gender issues are described
- A direct dive into opinions on specific gender-related issues, such as:
  - Abortion
  - LGTBQ+ issues
  - Gender violence
  - Women's sexuality
  - Gender roles (many participants discussed this, but a study with specific questions on their opinions on this would provide further insight)

- A deeper look into the discourse between religion and women's issues along the border
- Women's perspectives and influence on environmental issues. Although ecofeminism was discussed in the literature review, environmental issues were not brought up by participants.

A larger sample size would also provide more variety in backgrounds from participants. In this study, all participants had received at least an Associate's Degree. A study with a wider distribution of education levels may provide more diverse and nuanced opinions on the questions that were posed. It is also important to note that although the indigenous perspectives were discussed in shaping feminism, none of the interviewees were part of indigenous communities. A participant pool where indigenous backgrounds are present would provide a richer insight into the influence of this cosmopolitanism.

Nonetheless, this study can hopefully serve as a springboard for future research that looks into the lives of women along the border. Such studies can further describe the many dimensions of the U.S.-Mexico border and the unique, complex people of this region.

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## **APPENDIX A – Interview Protocol and Questions**

At this point, the interviewee will have read and completed their consent form. If opting for verbal consent, the consent form will be read to them, and they will verbally respond.

These questions are meant to be prompting questions that the interviewer can select from to begin the interview. Not all questions will necessarily be asked. Participants' answers may also lead to other questions for clarification or to further discuss a topic that has been brought up.

### **Interview Questions**

#### *Demographics:*

How old are you?

What is your area of residence? How long have you lived there?

Have you lived anywhere else before? Where and for how long?

#### *Opinion questions:*

Are you familiar with the term feminism? If so, what is your definition of feminism? [This question will be asked at every interview]

What do you think of when you think of feminism?

Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?

How do you feel about feminists?

Do you feel that feminism is polarizing? If so, can you provide some examples?

Do you feel feminism is helpful to society? If so, in what ways? Can you provide some examples?

What do you think is necessary to achieve gender equality? Or do you think we have already achieved it?

Do you ever feel that your Mexican values clash with values of gender equality? Do you feel they can be compatible? Why or why not?

Do you think men and women have different kinds of struggles? Do you feel that one group has it “harder” than the other?

Are there specific gender related issues that are important to you?

Do you do anything to spread awareness and about these issues with those around you? This can look like community service, instilling certain values to any children in your life, incorporating this awareness into your work, social media posts, etc.

## Interview Questions - SPANISH

¿Cuántos años tiene?

¿En qué ciudad vive? ¿Cuánto tiempo ha vivido allí?

¿Ha vivido en algún otro lugar? ¿Dónde y por cuánto tiempo?

¿Conoce el termino “feminismo?” Como definiria este termino?

¿Qué cosas vienen a la mente cuando piensa en el feminismo?

¿Usted se considera feminista? ¿Porque si o porque no?

¿Qué piensa sobre las o los feministas?

¿Siente que el feminismo es polarizante? ¿O sea, que crea extremos de opiniones y divisiones en la sociedad?

¿Piensa que el feminismo ayuda a la sociedad?

¿Qué piensa que se necesita hacer para alcanzar la igualdad de género? ¿O piensa que ya se ha logrado?

¿Algunas veces siente que hay conflicto entre los valores mexicanos y los valores de igualdad de género?

¿Piensa que pueden ser compatibles? ¿Porque sí o no?

¿Piensa que las mujeres y los hombres tienen luchas distintas? ¿Piensa que uno de estos grupos batalla más en la vida que el otro?

¿Hay ciertos temas de género que son importante para usted?

¿Hace algo para crear conciencia sobre estos temas? Esto podría ser servicio a la comunidad, inculcar ciertos valores con los niños, el trabajo que hace, posts en las redes sociales, etc.

## APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT



**TITLE OF THE STUDY:** Feminism at the Borders: Navigation of Gender Issues by Mexican women along the U.S.-Mexico Border

**RESEARCHER NAME:** Carolina Fuentes

My name is Carolina Fuentes I am a student with the SIT Sustainable Development program.

I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA in Sustainable Development. Your participation is voluntary.

Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, please sign this form and you will be given a printed or electronic copy of this form.

*When giving oral consent, the following script will be read:*

*Please listen to the information, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you may say "yes" if you consent, and I will record it in my field notes.*

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to understand how women who identify as Mexican or Mexican-American and live in border states of Mexico and the U.S. think about gender issues, feminism, and cultural values. It also seeks to understand how they influence those around them regarding these issues.

### STUDY PROCEDURES

I will conduct an interview with you through video chat or in person and ask you some questions about your opinions on gender issues, feminism, and your life as a Mexican or Mexican-American woman. I may ask you follow up questions based on your answers to get a better understanding.

We will have this interview for one hour maximum. You will also have the option to participate in a second interview with a group of other women who are participating in the study if you are interested. This optional focus group will take place through video chat or in person depending on participants' preferences and ability to meet.

Interviews will be video recorded and for me to reference later as I gather data. Your interview recording will be stored in a password protected drive that only I can access. You may still participate in this study if you do not

wish to be video recorded. In that case I will take notes during our interview.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Participating in this interview may come with minor risks. The following is a potential foreseeable risk:

- Emotional discomfort: The interview will require you to reflect on things like your opinions, values, or life experiences. While this may be beneficial as it can allow you to gain a better understanding of yourself, it may also lead to feelings of sadness, anxiety, or conflict.

You have the right to share as much or as little as you would like about your opinions and experiences. You may skip any questions and end the interview at any point. A list of local psychological, legal, and health resources has also been provided to you should you need assistance after this interview.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There are no direct benefits for participants in this research. An indirect benefit for you may be a better understanding of yourself as you reflect during and after this interview. If you participate in a focus group, you may also indirectly benefit from potentially meeting other like-minded people.

Information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future, as those who read this research can have a better understanding of the thoughts and experiences of women along the U.S.-Mexico border.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. I will take the following measures to protect your information:

- To keep your answers anonymous, you will choose a pseudonym. Your answers to interview questions may be shared in the research study, but they will only be tied to your pseudonym.
- Recorded interviews and interview transcripts will be stored in a password-protected drive for five years. After five years, this data will be deleted.
- The only people who will have access to the recorded interviews will be myself, (Carolina) and my faculty advisor (Aynn Setright) on an as-needed basis.
- Please note that email communication is neither private nor secure. Though I am taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through e-mail could be read by a third party.
- Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology being used. We cannot guarantee against interception of data sent via the internet by third parties.
- Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by Texas law. I am required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect.

## FUTURE USE OF DATA

Insights from this research study may serve as a basis for future research studies, but only information shared on the research paper will be available to the public. I will not share any files (including your video interview) from the password protected drive with anyone besides my faculty advisor, Aynn Setright.

## VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participating in this research project is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable with no penalty to you. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

## RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, you can contact me at [carolina.fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu](mailto:carolina.fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu) or my advisor, Aynn Setright, at [aynn.setright@sit.edu](mailto:aynn.setright@sit.edu).

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT—IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

This study has been reviewed and approved by the SIT Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the IRB at: [irb@sit.edu](mailto:irb@sit.edu).

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"I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older."

*Participant's signature:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Researcher's signature:* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

## CONSENT TO QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW

I may wish to quote from the interview with you either in the presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym (fake name) will be used in order to protect your identity.

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice.

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I agree to consent to quote from an interview

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I do not agree to consent to quote from an interview

### CONSENT TO AUDIO-RECORD INTERVIEW

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I agree to consent to audio record an interview

\_\_\_\_\_(initial) I do not agree to consent to audio record an interview



## Formulario de Consentimiento de Investigación

**Nombre del Estudio:** El Feminismo en las Fronteras: El Manejo de los Temas del Género en la Frontera de los Estados Unidos y México.

**Investigadora:** Carolina Fuentes

Me llamo Carolina Fuentes y soy estudiante del programa de Desarrollo Sostenible de SIT.

Te invito a participar en el estudio que estoy realizando como parte de mi maestría en Desarrollo Sostenible.

Favor de leer la siguiente información y hacer preguntas sobre cualquier parte que no entiendas antes de decidir participar. Si aceptas, por favor firma este formulario y mándalo a [carolina\\_fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu](mailto:carolina_fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu).

*Si el consentimiento se obtiene oralmente se leerá el siguiente texto:*

Escucha la siguiente información y has preguntas sobre cualquier parte que no entiendas. Si decides participar, puedes dar tu consentimiento diciendo “sí.”

### Propósito del Estudio

El propósito de esta investigación es de entender como las mujeres que se identifican como mexicanas o mexicoamericanas y que viven en los estados fronterizos de México y los Estados Unidos piensan sobre los temas del género, el feminismo, y los valores culturales.

También busca entender como este grupo de mujeres influye a los demás con respecto a este tema.

### Procedimiento del Estudio

Se conducirá una entrevista por video chat donde te hare preguntas sobre tus opiniones sobre temas del género, el feminismo, y sobre tu vida como mujer en esta parte del mundo.

La entrevista durará una hora al máximo y será grabada. La grabación se guardará en una nube con contraseña que solo yo puedo acceder. Si no deseas que se grabe tu entrevista, aun puedes participar. En ese caso tomaré apuntes durante nuestra entrevista.

### Posibles Riesgos e Incomodidades

La participación en este estudio viene con leves riesgos. Un posible riesgo seria:

- La incomodidad emocional: La entrevista hará que reflejes en tus opiniones, tus valores, o tus experiencias personales. Esto puede tener sus beneficios ya que puede ayudarte a conocerte a ti misma, pero también puede causar tristeza, ansiedad, y conflicto.

Tienes el derecho de hablar de todo lo que quieras, y de no hablar de ciertos temas. Puedes omitir preguntas que te hagan sentir incomoda y puedes terminar la entrevista en cualquier punto. Adjunto al e-mail de Carolina está incluida una lista de centros de apoyo psicológico, de salud, o legal.

### Posibles beneficios del estudio

No hay beneficios directos para los participantes de este estudio. Un beneficio indirecto para ti sería mejor entenderte a ti misma mientras platiquemos durante la entrevista.

La información de este estudio puede beneficiar a otra gente ahora o en el futuro, ya que los que lean esta investigación podrán entender las experiencias y opiniones de las mujeres en la frontera de México y Estados Unidos.

### La Confidencialidad

Cualquier información identificable obtenida en este estudio permanecerá confidencial y solo se compartirá con tu permiso y como la ley lo requiera. Tomare las siguientes medidas para proteger tu información:

- Para mantener tus respuestas anónimas, escogerás un seudónimo. Tus respuestas a la entrevista pueden ser compartidas en el estudio, pero solo estarán conectadas con tu seudónimo.
- Las grabaciones de las entrevistas y las transcripciones se guardarán en una nube protegida con contraseña por cinco años. Después de los cinco años, se borrarán los datos.
- Las únicas personas con acceso a las grabaciones de las entrevistas serán Carolina Fuentes y Aynn Setright, su consejera de la facultad, a medida que sea necesario.
- Toma en cuenta que no toda tu información es completamente privada o segura. Aunque estoy tomando precauciones para proteger tu privacidad, debes saber que cualquier información que se mande por e-mail podría ser leída por una tercera persona.
- Tu confidencialidad será mantenida en la medida permitida por la tecnología que se esté usando. No podemos garantizar la prevención de la interceptación de la información que se mande a través del internet por una tercera persona.
- Tu confidencialidad será mantenida en la medida permitida por la ley de Texas. Estoy obligada por ley a reportar sospechas de abuso o negligencia infantil.

## Participación Voluntaria

Tu participación en este proyecto es completamente voluntaria. Puedes decidir no participar antes de que empiece el estudio. También puedes saltarte preguntas que te hagan sentir incomoda sin cualquier penalidad. No estás renunciando a ningún derecho, demanda, o remedio legal por tu participación en este estudio.

## Información de Contacto

Si tienes alguna pregunta o quieres más información sobre este estudio, me puedes mandar un correo electrónico ([carolina.fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu](mailto:carolina.fuentesdiego@mail.sit.edu)) o puedes contactar a mi consejera docente, Aynn Setright ([aynn.setright@sit.edu](mailto:aynn.setright@sit.edu), se habla español).

## Derechos del Participante – Información de Contacto del IRB

El Consejo de Revisión Institucional (IRB) de SIT ha revisado y aprobado esta investigación. Si tienes alguna pregunta, preocupación, o queja sobre tus derechos como participante en este estudio o sobre el estudio en general y no puedes contactar a la investigadora, por favor contacta al IRB ([irb@sit.edu](mailto:irb@sit.edu)).

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*+001-802-258-3132*

“He leído la información en este formulario, entiendo su contenido, y estoy de acuerdo con participar en este estudio. Reconozco que tengo 18 años de edad o más.”

Firma del participante: \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

Firma de la investigadora: \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Consentimiento para citar de la entrevista

Tal vez desee citar algo que hayas dicho durante la entrevista en mi presentación o en artículos que se hagan sobre este estudio. Si hago esto, usare tu seudónimo para proteger tu identidad. Por favor escribe tus iniciales en la opción que corresponda con tu decisión:

\_\_\_\_ (iniciales) Acuerdo a consentir a que se cite de mi entrevista.

\_\_\_\_ (iniciales) No estoy de acuerdo con consentir a que se cite de mi entrevista.

#### Consentimiento para grabación audiovisual de la entrevista

\_\_\_\_ (iniciales) Acuerdo a consentir a la grabación de video de mi entrevista.

\_\_\_\_ (iniciales) No estoy de acuerdo con consentir a que se grabe mi entrevista.

## **APPENDIX C – Resources for Participants**

### **Resources for Women in San Antonio**

[The Refugee and Immigrant Shelter for Education and Legal Services \(RAICES\)](#)

[Family Violence Prevention Services](#)

[SAMM Ministries](#)

[Planned Parenthood South Texas](#)

[The Center for Healthcare Services: Mental Health and Substance Abuse Solutions](#)

[Texas Health and Human Services Search Tool](#)

### **Centros de Apoyo Para Mujeres en Coahuila**

[DIF Coahuila](#) (SISTEMA PARA EL DESARROLLO INTEGRAL DE LA FAMILIA Y PROTECCION DE DERECHOS DEL ESTADO DE COAHUILA DE ZARAGOZA)

[Centro de Orientación y Protección a Víctimas de Violencia Intrafamiliar](#)

[Fundación Luz y Esperanza](#)

[Centro de Atención a las Mujeres, Piedras Negras](#)