

Review “How Have Revolutions Changed the Lives of Women?”

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The book “How Have Revolutions Changed the Lives of Women?”, compiled by Nastassja Rojas Silva, Valentina Bohórquez Polo and Sergio Angel, published in 2024 by Universidad Sergio Arboleda, constitutes a rigorous and necessary exercise of demystification of three political processes that proclaimed themselves emancipatory: the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. With a prologue by Érika Guevara Rosas, former Americas director of Amnesty International, the work brings together more than twenty academic, activist, and testimonial voices that converge on a shared diagnosis: Latin American revolutions not only failed to fulfill their promises of gender equality, but deepened the subordination of women by instrumentalizing them as sustainers of political projects.

This review aims to critically assess the book from a feminist political science perspective, examining the solidity of its central argument, the systematic deception of the three revolutions regarding women’s rights, the articulation among its chapters, and its contribution to the field of gender studies and comparative politics in Latin America.

The central argument: revolutions as patriarchal devices

The guiding thread of the book can be synthesized in a powerful thesis: the Cuban, Sandinista, and Bolivarian revolutions operated as devices of patriarchal reproduction disguised as emancipatory projects. Far from constituting ruptures with the preexisting gender order, these revolutions recycled it and, in several aspects, radicalized it. The compilers identify a common pattern that runs through the three cases: the co-optation of autonomous feminist agendas, the instrumentalization of women as cheap labor and reproducers of the revolutionary force, and the criminalization of any sectoral female claim under the accusation of being “counterrevolutionary”.

This argument is developed with particular clarity in the introduction, where Rojas et al. (2024) recall the explicit promises of the leaders, Hugo Chávez declared that his would be “a feminist revolution”, Fidel Castro asserted that Cuba was “a revolution for women”, and Daniel Ortega promised

that Sandinismo would be “a revolution of the poor and women”. What the book demonstrates chapter after chapter is the abysmal distance between those statements and the lived experience of women. From a feminist reading, this pattern is not surprising: the masculinist character of Latin American revolutionary projects has been pointed out by authors such as Maxine Molyneux (1985) and Sonia Alvarez (1990). However, the merit of the book lies in empirically documenting that fracture with data, normative frameworks, and concrete testimonies referring to three specific processes.

Cuba: the co-optation of autonomous feminism

The section dedicated to Cuba is probably the densest in the book and the one that best illustrates the mechanism of deception. The chapter by Valentina Duarte and María Paula Infante reveals a little-known fact, before 1959 there were around 284 women’s associations on the island, a dynamic feminist movement independent from the State that had been developing since the women’s congresses of the 1920s. With the arrival of the Castro regime, all those organizations were forcibly merged into the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), under the argument of “fully incorporating into the revolutionary process”. From a feminist perspective, that compulsory unification was not an act of strengthening but of disarticulation: by eliminating organizational plurality, the regime annulled women’s capacity to formulate autonomous agendas and channeled their energies toward the needs of the male political project.

Valentina Bohórquez deepens this line by demonstrating that the presence of women in public office in Cuba functioned as a façade of equality that did not translate into public policies with a gender perspective. The Cuban woman was accepted as a “cover figure” of socialism, as long as she remained within the strict limits set by power. Organizational autonomy outside the FMC was criminalized, and the paradigm of the “new man”, explicitly formulated in the masculine, subsumed all gender demands under the promise that socialism would automatically dissolve inequalities. As Bohórquez warns from a Marxist-feminist reading, that subsumption was functional to the regime because it allowed it to indefinitely postpone the gender question without appearing regressive.

Lina María Muñoz completes the Cuban panorama with an analysis of the rights to education and work, showing that the claims attributed to the Revolution in these areas were in reality continuities of previous struggles that the regime discursively appropriated. Educational and labor initiatives for women did not translate into real equity, but served to incorporate them into the state productive apparatus under conditions of exploitation. The “Incident Reflections” section enriches this diagnosis with texts on jineterismo, the crisis of the “special period” sustained by the invisible labor of women, and state gaslighting described by activist and artist Lynn Cruz.

Venezuela: legislation without implementation

The Venezuelan section shows a different modality of deception: the proliferation of legal frameworks and programs formally directed at women that were never effectively implemented. Alejandra Guerrero Duque shows that the adverse context regarding sexual and reproductive rights that already existed before Chávez was not modified but aggravated by the Bolivarian Revolution. The laws created by Chavismo in gender matters remained as dead letter, while the precarization of health services, hyperinflation, and economic collapse disproportionately affected women.

Alejandra Suárez complements this perspective by analyzing civil and political rights, concluding that with Chávez’s arrival the conditions of civil and political inequality for Venezuelan women were gradually amplified until reaching worse levels than under previous governments. After Chávez’s death, Maduro deepened precarization. Suárez documents the lack of gender parity in all contexts, with women disproportionately suffering extreme poverty, malnutrition, and exclusion from basic services.

The compiler’s reference to the work of Anaís López Caldera on the “feminization of Chavismo” is particularly illuminating, the Bolivarian Revolution did not empower women, but instrumentalized them as a captive electoral base, especially female heads of household from impoverished sectors.

Tania Niño’s text (2020) on the prostitution of Venezuelan migrant women adds a transnational dimension to the analysis: the Bolivarian collapse not only violates rights within borders, but expels women into conditions of sexual exploitation in receiving countries. This chapter constitutes a valuable contribution because it connects the critique of the regime with debates on forced migration and gender vulnerability in the region.

Nicaragua: the most cynical instrumentalization

The Nicaraguan case, as presented by Sara Luna Estupiñán and Andrés Vanegas Peña, perhaps constitutes the most cynical expression of the instrumentalization of women. The authors trace a line of continuity from Somoza to Ortega to demonstrate that the lives of Nicaraguan women have been systematically converted into instruments of political negotiation. The initiatives implemented by different governments proved insufficient in the face of the growing problem of gender violence and the denial of basic rights. The total criminalization of abortion in 2006, agreed by Ortega with ecclesiastical sectors to secure his return to power, exemplifies with brutal clarity how women’s bodies were literally negotiated as political currency.

Caroll Cárdenas López and María José Benavides, however, offer an important nuance, the Sandinista Revolution, despite its instrumentalizing character, made possible the emergence of a broad and dynamic women’s movement that today constitutes one of the main nuclei of resistance against the Ortega regime. This observation is relevant because it shows that women were not passive recipients of revolutionary deception; even within oppressive structures, they generated organizational capacity that today turns against the very regime that co-opted them.

María José Almanza’s essay on Indigenous women in the Sandinista Revolution also introduces an intersectional perspective absent in other chapters: the triple marginalization by gender, ethnicity, and class suffered by women from Indigenous peoples, whose claims were doubly invisibilized under the homogenizing logic of the revolutionary project.

Critical assessment: strengths and limits of the work

The book has multiple strengths that make it a significant contribution to gender studies and comparative politics in Latin America. First, its comparative structure allows the identification of transversal patterns that transcend the particularities of each case: the co-optation of autonomous organizations, the subordination of the gender agenda to the interests of the political project, the criminalization of female dissent, and the instrumentalization of women’s bodies and labor as the material and ideological support of regimes.

These patterns reinforce a thesis that materialist feminism has insistently sustained: revolutions that do not place the transformation of gender relations at the center of their project end up reproducing, under new forms, the same hierarchies they claim to combat. Second, the inclusion of testimonial voices alongside academic analyses constitutes a valuable methodological choice. The texts by Lynn Cruz on state

gaslighting, by Julia Estrella Aramburo on her life in Cuba, and by Silvia Rosero on jineterismo, give the book an experiential density that theoretical frameworks alone cannot achieve. From a feminist epistemology, this articulation between academic knowledge and situated knowledge is consistent with the principle that women's experiences constitute legitimate sources of political knowledge.

However, the work presents limitations that should be pointed out in the interest of critical rigor. The main weakness lies in the heterogeneity of depth among chapters: while the texts of the first section, where country analyses are located, are well documented and have a solid critical apparatus, several of the brief essays in the "reflections" sections lack the same analytical density, generating asymmetries in the architecture of the book. Likewise, the intersectional perspective, although it appears in some texts such as Almanza's on Indigenous women, does not constitute a transversal axis of analysis, which weakens the treatment of the multiple forms of discrimination that intersect with gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and migratory condition. A work that aspires to dismantle revolutionary narratives about women's emancipation would benefit from an explicitly intersectional framework that avoids reproducing a feminism centered on the experience of urban, mestiza, and heterosexual women.

Another relevant observation concerns the absence of a more systematic dialogue with Latin American feminist literature on gender and revolution. The classic works of Maxine Molyneux on practical and strategic gender interests, the contributions of Norma Stoltz Chinchilla (1994) on women and revolution in Central America, or the studies of Julie Shayne (2004) on feminism and revolution in Latin America would have provided a more robust theoretical scaffolding that would strengthen the comparison. This does not invalidate the findings, but it does limit the work's capacity to insert its conclusions into international academic debates on gender and political change.

Deception as a pattern: a feminist concluding reading

Reading this book from a feminist political science perspective allows extracting a conclusion that goes beyond the three cases analyzed: revolutionary deception toward women is not an accident nor a collateral effect, but a constitutive mechanism of political projects that subordinate gender justice to a "higher good" defined in masculine terms. The three revolutions share a logic that Cynthia Enloe (2000) has described as the "postponement" of women's demands, first the revolution, then your rights. That "then", as the book proves, never arrives.

The work also reveals a pattern of institutional feminism emptied of content, the three regimes created official bodies, the FMC in Cuba, the missions and women's councils in Venezuela, the gender secretariats in the FSLN, that in practice functioned as devices of control and neutralization of feminist autonomy. This state feminism, built from above and adapted to the interests of power, radically distanced itself from the real needs of women and served as a pretext to silence those who denounced the persistence of violence, inequality, and exploitation.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson the book leaves for Latin American feminist political theory is the reaffirmation that women's organizational autonomy is an indispensable condition for any genuine social transformation project. Where that autonomy was annulled, as in Cuba and Nicaragua, or attacked, as in Venezuela—the regression in rights was systematic. Women organized autonomously have historically been the only ones capable of forcing states to be accountable in gender matters; regimes that eliminate that capacity do not emancipate, they oppress.

Ultimately, *How Have Revolutions Changed the Lives of Women?* is a work that deserves wide circulation in academic spheres, civil society organizations, and feminist movements in the region. Its main contribution does not lie in extraordinary theoretical sophistication, but in the systematic way it documents an uncomfortable truth for both the dogmatic left and for those who, from academic comfort, continue romanticizing political processes that have devastated the lives of millions of women. The book reminds, with urgency and rigor, that there is no possible revolution without gender justice, and that any promise of emancipation that postpones women's rights is, ultimately, a new form of oppression.

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