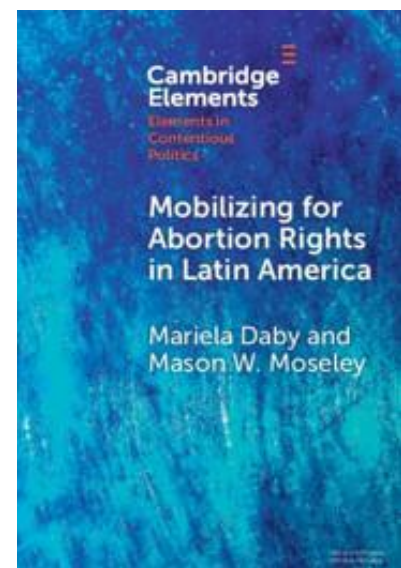


MOBILIZING FOR ABORTION RIGHTS IN LATIN AMERICA

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Abstract

This is a review of the book *Mobilizing for Abortion Rights in Latin America*, written by Mariela Daby and Mason W. Moseley. The book is part of the Cambridge Elements series and analyzes feminist mobilizations for abortion rights in Latin America, highlighting the importance of deploying massive and inclusive mobilizations to achieve political change. It begins with an overview of the shifting landscape of abortion rights, focusing on factors such as secularization, public opinion, and leftist governments. The authors include case studies such as the successful legalization of abortion in Argentina, driven by the *Ni Una Menos* protests, and also mention advances in Chile and Mexico, as well as setbacks in Nicaragua. The book

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argues that broad and unified feminist movements are essential to securing abortion rights, as demonstrated by Argentina's experience, where abortion was framed as a social justice issue and unifying symbols like the green handkerchief were adopted.

In my review, I highlight that, while the book provides valuable lessons for feminist movements globally, particularly in the United States after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, it could include a more critical analysis. To support this, I discuss the case of the decriminalization of abortion in Colombia up to 24 weeks, achieved through the unconstitutionality lawsuit filed by the *Causa Justa* movement, which, however, did not rely on massive protests, as well as Poland's failures despite large-scale mobilizations. Both cases reveal the complexities of relying exclusively on popular mobilizations. I also emphasize the need for greater inclusivity in abortion rights activism, highlighting the importance of addressing the perspectives of historically excluded groups, including migrant, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and LGBTQ+ communities. In conclusion, I suggest that the book could delve deeper into strategies to sustain movements during political or economic crises, advance reproductive rights in authoritarian contexts, and analyze both the strengths and limitations of Latin American feminist movements to offer a broader and richer perspective.

Keywords: Feminist movements; Abortion rights; Latin America.

Resumen:

Esta es una reseña del libro *Mobilizing for Abortion Rights in Latin America*, escrito por Mariela Daby y Mason W. Moseley. El libro forma parte de la serie *Cambridge Elements* y analiza las movilizaciones feministas por el derecho al aborto en América Latina, destacando la importancia de desplegar movilizaciones masivas e inclusivas para lograr cambios políticos. Comienza con un panorama del cambiante escenario del derecho al aborto, enfocándose en factores como la secularización, la opinión pública y los gobiernos de izquierda. Las autoras incluyen estudios de caso como la legalización exitosa del aborto en Argentina, impulsada por las protestas de *Ni Una Menos*, y mencionan también los avances en Chile y México, así como los retrocesos en Nicaragua. El libro argumenta que los movimientos feministas amplios y unificados son fundamentales para asegurar el derecho al aborto, como lo demuestra la experiencia de Argentina, que enmarcó el aborto como un tema de justicia social y adoptó símbolos unificadores como el pañuelo verde.

En mi reseña, destaco que, aunque el libro ofrece lecciones valiosas para los movimientos feministas a nivel global, particularmente en los Estados Unidos tras la revocación de *Roe v. Wade*, podría incluir un análisis más crítico. Para ello, presento el caso de la despenalización del aborto en Colombia hasta la semana 24, lograda mediante la demanda de inconstitucionalidad presentada por el movimiento *Causa Justa*, que, sin embargo, no contó con protestas masivas, así como los fracasos en Polonia a pesar de movilizaciones multitudinarias. Ambos casos revelan las complejidades de depender exclusivamente de las movilizaciones populares. También subrayo la necesidad de mayor inclusión en el activismo por el derecho al aborto, enfatizando la importancia de abordar las perspectivas de grupos históricamente excluidos, incluidas comunidades migrantes, indígenas, afrodescendientes y LGBTQ+. Concluyo sugiriendo que el libro podría profundizar en estrategias para sostener los movimientos durante crisis políticas o económicas, avanzar en derechos reproductivos en contextos autoritarios y analizar tanto las fortalezas como las limitaciones de los movimientos feministas latinoamericanos para ofrecer una perspectiva más amplia y enriquecedora.

Palabras clave: Movimientos feministas; Derechos al aborto; América Latina.

Resumo:

Esta é uma resenha do livro *Mobilizing for Abortion Rights in Latin America*, escrito por Mariela Daby e Mason W. Moseley. O livro faz parte da série Cambridge Elements e examina o direito ao aborto e os movimentos feministas na América Latina, destacando a importância das mobilizações massivas e inclusivas para alcançar mudanças legislativas. Ele começa com uma visão geral do cenário em transformação do direito ao aborto, focando em fatores como secularização, opinião pública e governos de esquerda. Estudos de caso incluem a legalização do aborto na Argentina, impulsionada pelos protestos do movimento *Ni Una Menos*, além de comparações entre os avanços no Chile e no México e os retrocessos na Nicarágua. O livro argumenta que movimentos feministas amplos e unificados são essenciais para garantir o direito ao aborto, como exemplificado pela abordagem da Argentina, que enquadrou o aborto como uma questão de justiça social e adotou símbolos unificadores como o lenço verde.

Na minha análise, destaco que, embora o livro ofereça lições valiosas para movimentos feministas globais, particularmente nos Estados Unidos após a reversão de *Roe v. Wade*, ele poderia se beneficiar de uma análise mais crítica. Por exemplo, a conquista do direito ao aborto na Colômbia por meio de litígios estratégicos sem grandes protestos, e os fracassos na Polônia, apesar de protestos massivos, revelam as complexidades de depender exclusivamente de mobilizações populares. Também ressalto a necessidade de maior inclusão no ativismo pelo direito ao aborto, enfatizando a importância de abordar as perspectivas de grupos marginalizados, incluindo comunidades migrantes, indígenas e LGBTQ+. Concluo sugerindo que o livro poderia explorar mais profundamente estratégias para sustentar os movimentos durante crises políticas ou econômicas, avançar o direito em contextos autoritários e analisar tanto as forças quanto as limitações dos movimentos feministas latino-americanos para uma perspectiva mais abrangente.

Palavras-chave: Movimentos feministas; Direito ao aborto; América Latina.

The book *Mobilizing for Abortion Rights in Latin America* by Mariela Daby and Mason W. Moseley is part of the Cambridge Elements series, which publishes pieces that focus on topics within the field of contentious politics and social movements. The book is divided into four chapters. It begins by discussing the shifting landscape of abortion rights in Latin America, exploring factors like secularization, public opinion, and, among others, influences of leftist parties. The second chapter focuses on Argentina's successful abortion legalization, driven by feminist movements like the one that emerged after the NUM (*Ni Una Menos*) massive protests. The third chapter compares different paths to abortion rights feminist mobilization, highlighting both progress (in Chile and Mexico) and setbacks (in Nicaragua). The final chapter draws lessons from these cases, including the Peruvian case, offering insights for other regions, with

special attention directed to recommendations for the pro-abortion rights movement in the United States.

The authors compile evidence from previous research at the beginning, noting that: “Countries will experience changes in abortion policy when they are governed by a leftist party or governing coalition, when the issue is supported by a majority of citizens, and when society becomes more secular over time” (p. 1). They explore these hypotheses and demonstrate how they are insufficient to ensure advances in abortion rights in the region, particularly in the case they focus on the most, Argentina. Based on this, the authors present the central premise of the book, with the main argument being that “where activists successfully build a massive, inclusive, and diverse feminist movement that supports abortion rights, abortion rights become attainable. In contrast, when feminist movements are not massive, inclusive, and diverse, abortion rights are likely to be retrenched or not extended” (p. 69–70).

The evidence to support this conclusion is drawn from various methodological approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data. These include field trips, direct observations, participation in local meetings, in-depth interviews, and analysis of both social and mainstream media. Quantitative methods are also employed, incorporating public opinion surveys to measure attitudes towards abortion in the region through the Americas Barometer. Overall, the book is a great effort to understand abortion rights from a regional perspective. It makes a detailed work by including cases that are not necessarily all successful but present a combination of different strategies. For example, it discusses Mexico’s high-impact litigation before the Supreme Court alongside Nicaragua’s setbacks after the failure to consolidate a strong feminist movement in an increasingly autocratic context. The book also highlights other contexts, such as Peru, where the authors, building on existing literature, point out the limitations of strategic litigation when not grounded in strong grassroots movements.

In this sense, the book is an excellent resource for recapitulating recent advances in abortion rights in the region. It is also regarded as an important work for synthesizing the lessons learned from Latin American feminist movements, offering insights to feminist movements globally. The authors place particular emphasis on the United States after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, aiming to shed light on lessons from the Latin American experience, especially Argentina, for U.S. movements: mobilize in the streets, connect abortion bans to violence against marginalized women, use unifying symbols like the green handkerchief, shift the focus from individual choice to public health and social justice, and unify around a single goal, such

as codifying *Roe v. Wade*, to strengthen the movement's impact' (pp. 72–73). By distilling these lessons, the book becomes a significant piece in recognizing the epistemic strength and creativity of Latin American feminist movements, shifting focus from the dominant white liberal feminisms of the Global North to the successful movements currently unfolding in the Global South.

Key concepts used by the authors, and important premises of the book, include the notion of a 'social movement community', building on social movement theorists like Suzanne Staggenborg. The authors use this framework to analyze the unique platform that links reproductive rights to gender violence (p. 31). In Argentina, the *Ni Una Menos* (NUM) platform, which emerged as an outcry against femicides, created a political space to consolidate force around women's rights and later propelled the fight for abortion rights in the country. This movement, as the authors demonstrate (p. 31), framed abortion as a social justice issue and helped create a political identity for a generation of young women who were not part of traditional political parties but united through feminism.

In the third chapter, the authors address the cases of Chile, Mexico, and Nicaragua, presenting detailed timelines for each. They highlight different outcomes: Chile seemed poised to expand abortion rights through a new constitution in the context of the *estallido social*, led largely by young feminists; Mexico made strides by relying on both the Supreme Court and massive mobilization to advance the decriminalization of abortion, bypassing conservative lawmakers; and Nicaragua underscores the danger of losing rights, showing the crucial importance of a unified women's movement. After analyzing these cases, the authors conclude: "These cases highlight the key role of a unified and inclusive feminist movement. Without a consistent, resonant frame, the feminist movement will struggle to organize, mobilize, and lobby for its goals. Feminist movements are likely to succeed only when they build a broad coalition to decriminalize abortion" (p. 66). They also argue that "Abortion legalization movements are likely to succeed when they are supported by a massive and inclusive feminist movement on the streets, one that can pressure elected officials and judges through mass mobilizations and at the ballot box" (p. 66). Finally, they note, "The possibility of advancing progressive legislation in countries without massive activism does not seem promising" (p.66).

The conclusions drawn by the authors have significant importance to feminist organizing, but they do not necessarily address the various stages of collective mobilization. Depending on structural conditions, these efforts may not always include massive protests to

advance abortion rights. Additionally, there are historical examples of large-scale movements that, despite taking to the streets, have failed to achieve meaningful political gains in abortion rights. Therefore, when analyzing the effectiveness of massive mobilization and feminist activism as key actors in advancing abortion rights, it is crucial not only to consider their potential but also to examine their challenges.

According to CINEP's social struggles database (The Center for Popular Research and Education)² in Colombia, during the period of the lawsuit before the Constitutional Court, ten feminist mobilizations were registered with the aim of advancing the full decriminalization of abortion. This demonstrates that while the Causa Justa movement acted as a unified Coalition, it was not necessarily a massive movement on the scale of Argentina. Despite this, the movement still achieved the most comprehensive framework for the decriminalization of abortion up to 24 weeks. The context opened after the signing of the peace agreement contributed to this success, which was built on strong alliances with different actors, a detailed analysis of the Court's composition, the historical accumulation of over two decades of activism, the use of political opportunities before the Constitutional Court, strategic litigation, a strong media strategy with different communication outlets, and, though not exclusively, street mobilizations (MOSQUERA VERA, 2023).

Simultaneously, there are examples like Poland, which, though not situated in Latin America, presents a different phenomenon. Poland currently has some of the strictest abortion regulations, where abortion is nearly entirely prohibited. Despite two waves of massive mobilization and framing the issue as a social justice concern, building large coalitions and symbols (such as the red lightning bolt) around abortion rights, no progress has been made. The first wave occurred in 2016 with the famous black protests, and the second in late 2020, when over 985 protests took place between October and December, primarily organized by young women (ZAKRZEWSKA; DUBROW, 2021). Despite these efforts, no advancements in abortion rights have been achieved, highlighting the limitations of street mobilization and feminist activism when structural factors, such as the previous ruling political party (PiS) and the composition of the Constitutional Tribunal, remain conservative.

² Direct communication between the author and Santiago Garcés Correa, researcher in the social movements division at CINEP.

The book could be enriched by examining not only the principles and political agendas of feminist movements but also their challenges, particularly in incorporating intersectional perspectives within the abortion rights movement in Latin America. The authors highlight the importance of women's mobilization in securing abortion rights, especially in Argentina, where journalists like Luciana Péker have referred to the movement as 'la revolución de las hijas' (the revolution of daughters). However, it is important to recognize that the movement is not homogeneous, and greater attention must be given to the inclusivity of migrant women, black women, and indigenous women within the abortion rights agenda. The inclusivity of the movement requires further analysis, as peasant women, afro-descendant women, indigenous women, and working-class women are not always fully represented as protagonists in the movement, and more work is needed in these areas. To analyze both the composition and potential of the movement, we must also address its weaknesses to understand its current state and how it can be expanded to become more comprehensive and intersectional. This includes considering the right to abortion not only for women but also for queer individuals, including trans men, nonbinary people, and others who may need abortion services, and are part of the struggle.

Lastly, the third point I would like to highlight about the book is that in future regional analyses, it would be very interesting to explore the communicative bonds between feminist movements that have historically worked together through The Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentros, which started in 1981. Understanding how these transnational spaces of connection have helped shape a continental struggle for abortion rights, just as they did for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which also originated from the Encuentros, would provide valuable insight. Such an examination could inform abortion rights movements globally, particularly in regions where a unified continental struggle, like the one in Latin America, is not as evident. This analysis could shed light on how abortion rights movements and reproductive justice activists in other parts of the world can learn from the Latin American experience.

The questions about the potentials and limitations of massive mobilizations also direct attention to understanding the different cycles of movements, which cannot always sustain mass mobilizations in the streets. Movements experience periods of ebb and flow, and in such contexts, it is crucial to understand how to continue advancing when democratic conditions are absent and how to protect hard-won progress in situations where the precariousness of life

increases, as is the case with Argentina under Milei's government. In this context, where abortion rights have been displaced in the political agenda due to more urgent concerns about the material conditions necessary for life, an urging question arises on how these achievements can be sustained and defended, not only in terms of preserving the normative framework but also advancing full implementation, which is currently at risk due to cuts in basic social services, including the right to health. Moreover, how can conditions be created to advance abortion rights in authoritarian contexts, where massive mobilizations are not possible, such as Nicaragua? From a regional perspective, how can movements be built to include indigenous feminism, communitarian feminism, afro-descendant experiences, migrant experiences, and queer and trans experiences, creating frameworks that are more comprehensive and inclusive?

In conclusion, this book provides valuable empirical evidence and a significant historical overview, making an important contribution to the literature on feminist movements and abortion rights in Latin America. While the book is thought-provoking and raises pertinent questions, especially in the current political context, it is crucial to critically reflect on the dynamics of these movements. Understanding the strength of the *Potencia Feminista* (as expressed by Verónica Gago) is essential, but there is also a need for political and intersectional imagination to continue advancing these struggles at both the regional and global levels.

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