

# March 8, 2019: A snapshot of new participants in the feminist mobilisation

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## Abstract

This article explores a “new feminist subject” in the context of the mobilisation for Women’s Day (8 March 2019) in the city of Bilbao. Through a convergent quantitative–qualitative design methodology, issues relating to feminist identity and elements connected to neoliberalism that make up the feminist movement were addressed. The objective was to detect the new elements or nuances of neoliberal ideology that converge in the identity of the women who participated in the social protests and organisations linked to feminism. Among the participants in the M8 protests, the existence of new neoliberal indicators in women who call themselves feminists is verified. This article’s contribution is thus essential to understand the current establishment and explosion of feminist activism and the ideological overtones of new participants in feminist activism. Future research will shed light on the persistence or consolidation of this neoliberal drift in the feminist movement.

**Keywords:** feminism; neoliberalism; social movement; feminist identity; activism

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**Resumen.** *8 de marzo de 2019: Una instantánea de los nuevos participantes en la movilización feminista*

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Este artículo explora un “nuevo sujeto feminista” en el contexto de la movilización por el Día de la Mujer (8 de marzo de 2019) en la ciudad de Bilbao. A través de una metodología de diseño convergente cuantitativo-cualitativo, se abordaron cuestiones relacionadas con la identidad feminista y elementos conectados con el neoliberalismo que conforman el movimiento feminista. El objetivo fue detectar los nuevos elementos o matices de la ideología neoliberal que convergen en la identidad de las mujeres que participaron en las protestas sociales y organizaciones vinculadas al feminismo. Entre las participantes en la celebración del M8, se verifica la existencia de nuevos indicadores neoliberales en mujeres que se autodenominan feministas. La contribución de este artículo es así esencial para comprender el establecimiento actual y la explosión del activismo feminista así como los matices ideológicos de las nuevas participantes las movilizaciones feministas. Investigaciones futuras arrojarán luz sobre la persistencia o consolidación de esta deriva neoliberal en el movimiento feminista.

**Palabras clave:** feminismo; neoliberalismo; movimiento social; identidad feminista; activismo

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### Summary

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## 1. Introduction

As a professor at a university, it is intriguing to see a growing number of women displaying slogans on their computers or phones featuring feminist symbols in support of the feminist struggle. However, when the feminist struggle is addressed in informal conversations, few of these women are able to explain or argue the prevailing inequality in society from a feminist perspective. This begs the question of whether these women are an example of what Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010) refer to as “alleged feminists”, or whether, as per authors such as Pando-Canteli and Aurrekoetxea-Casaus (2020), these women are the expression of “multiple ways of understanding the movement itself, polyphonic, dynamic and fluid”, in reference to the feminist movement and its protest marches.

On the other hand, we recently witnessed an increase in participation in protests organised by feminist associations on 8 March 2019 (hereafter M8), which saw many women boycott Basque universities that day. The increased attendance at these protests and demonstrations was very different to previous years.

This massive increase in attendance at Women's Day protests on 8 March 2018 and 2019 piqued our "sociological imagination", as Wright Mills (1959) described it, arousing a desire to investigate this phenomenon, which at first seemed new due to the strong response to these calls to demonstrate, and which raised certain concerns.

First, the increase in participation at the M8 2019 protest cannot be understood without considering the momentum built by protests in previous years, which had seen increasingly high levels of participation from women who until then had not taken part in demonstrations organised by feminist associations and groups. Montero Corominas (2018) points out that it was the momentum created by feminist organisations that compelled many women who had not felt inspired by feminism before to respond to the call for the first time.

However, without detracting from the merits of feminist organisations, the success of mobilisation must be considered within the current climate of outrage and despair over the ever-increasing number of women dying as a result of misogynist violence. Specifically, the success of these events was due to a milestone in public demonstrations: the mass protests in the streets of Spain's main cities fueled by outrage over the sentencing in what is known as the San Fermin Wolf Pack rape trial, and assisted by the catalytic role of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook (Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, 2020; Castells, 2015; Fernández-Romero & Sanchez-Duarte, 2019; Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2019).

To summarise the case: In July 2016, during the San Fermin festival in Pamplona, five men were accused of gang-raping an 18-year-old girl. The verdict of the trial was made public on 26 April 2018, after years of leaks in the media of audio recordings and videos of the sexual assault and even leaking of the woman's personal data. In the verdict, the young men were convicted of sexual abuse but acquitted of the crime of rape, since the attack had not involved violence or intimidation. Basing its sentencing on articles 181.3 and 181.4 of the Spanish Criminal Code, the court found that the group attack was a continuous crime of sexual assault, coercion and unlawful sexual intercourse, but was not a crime of violence; it found that the sentence should allow for the possibility that consent had been given by the victim.

The verdict described the crime as sexual abuse with coercion, which means that the men had taken advantage of a situation of manifest superiority because the woman had not shown resistance, so it could not be considered rape. Reporting of the case in the traditional media and on social media, together with the publication of the verdict, provoked a wave of demonstrations in Spanish cities that was unprecedented for an issue relating to the fight against sexual violence; and which authors such as Moreno & Camps (2021) called a turning point in the feminist movement and its expression in the public space.

Public opinion was shocked by the ruling. This case of group sexual violence had been widely followed by the media. It provoked public outcry and led thousands of people to take to the streets to support the victim of the sexual

assault. At the same time, it served to bring to light, both At the same time, it served to bring to light, both judicially and politically, the hidden situation of consent in cases of sexual violence. Regarding group sexual violence, the data of the Macro-Survey of Violence against Women 2019 – Government Delegation against Gender Violence (2020) highlights the fact that 12.4% of women who have suffered sexual violence outside a relationship say that in some of the sexual attacks more than one person participated. Between 2016 and 2019, there were 147 cases of gang-rape in Spain (geovienciasesexual.com, 18 September 2019). For the first time, this internet portal collects data on multiple sexual assaults, adding a situation to the debate that seemed to be hidden, which is that sexual assaults can be committed in a group or a “pack”, like a pack of animals falling on a prey, popularising the term “gangbang” for its identification with sexual practices in pornography. After the San Fermin gangrape case there have been many other similar cases involving underage women and/or women under chemical or alcoholic coercion, but none of these cases have had the same public reaction as the San Fermin Wolf Pack rape case.

In this climate, it could be said that the M8 2018 protest marked the prelude to the successful protests of 8 March 2019, which saw a quantitative increase in participation compared with previous protests organised by feminist associations and groups. Official data on the M8 2019 demonstrations indicated that between 350,000 and 370,000 people attended the demonstration in Madrid, compared to 170,000 in 2018. Elsewhere, there were figures of 220,000 in Valencia, 200,000 in Barcelona and 60,000 in Bilbao (El Correo, 2019/03/09), although the organisation that created the “Emakumeok planto-Nosotras paramos” [Women’s Strike] motto reported 70,000.

In a retrospective look at previous feminist protests, figures issued by the Government Delegation in Madrid (Infolibre, 8 March 2020) indicate that in 2000 the Madrid protest only gathered 1,000 people, rising to 1,500 in 2001 and dropping to 800 in 2002. About 4,000 people attended the demonstration in 2014, and 5,000 in 2016. In 2017 there was a substantial change: the march organised in Madrid with the slogan “Juntas y fuertes, las feministas siempre. Huelga internacional contra el heteropatriarcado” [Together and strong, feminists always. International strike against heteropatriarchy] brought together 40,000 people. But it is in 2018 that the number quadruples to 170,000 people. And in 2019 the figure reaches 370,000. The numbers are impressive for any public protest.

The increase in participation in these protests raises several questions. Firstly, behind this data, there are women who consider themselves feminists but have never participated in any other 8M demonstrations before. We understand that one of the main motivations for their participation is outrage at sexual violence, which has been described by different authors and research already mentioned. The question is: who are the women who participated in the 8M demonstration for the first time? Considering them to be women of their time, and of their social and economic context, it can be assumed that they are located within a social and economic structure

marked by neoliberalism. This begs the question of whether we might find traces of neoliberalism in their views and attitudes.

In an attempt to answer this question, the aim of this study will be to explore the presence of aspects of political and economic neoliberalism in the opinions and attitudes of women who participated in the protests on 8 March 2019 for the first time. This approach is predicated on the premise that feminism is not a monolithic construct, but is constantly being built.

## 2. The M8 2019 protests in the context of contemporary feminism and neoliberalism

This article starts from a conceptual context that helps explain how the discourse of contemporary feminism is characterised by the inclusion, to a greater or lesser degree, of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is not simply a policy program whose effects are limited to the economic sphere, and feminism may be permeated by these neoliberal values, which are based on self-determination and meritocracy rather than collective gender awareness.

Feminist identity is not a homogenous edifice. In fact Zucker and Bay-Cheng (2010), referencing Huddy (2001), point out that there are degrees of strength in feminist identity. Other authors have addressed the differences between women who self-identify as feminists and those who reject such identification either out of fear of the stigma attached to identifying with the feminist activist collective (Fitz et al., 2012; Robnett et al., 2012) or because of neoliberal beliefs (Dyer & Hurd, 2018; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010).

Until just a few years ago, authors such as Burn, Aboud and Moyles (2000), Huddy, Neely and Lafay (2000), and Meijs, Ratliff and Lammers (2017) indicated that many women accepted the principles of feminism but did not consider themselves feminists as a result. For example, Huddy, Neely and Lafay (2000) noted US citizens' low identification with feminism. Between 26% and 33% of women and between 12% and 17% of men in the US identify as feminists. In Spain, 58.6% of Spanish women and 45% of men considered themselves feminists, according to a 40dB survey for the newspaper *El País* conducted in October 2018 with a sample of 1,007 interviewees (Ferrin, Fraile & García-Albacete, 2018).

Given these data, it is worth asking what values make more women identify as feminists. Given the current neoliberal context, it is easy to assume that these values are driven by neoliberal beliefs. Authors such as Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (2002) indicate that the new feminist identities capture elements of the context and internalise them, but there are other authors who go further and indicate that it is not an assimilation of neoliberal values, but rather that it is neoliberalism that is appropriating feminism. Prüggl (2015:614) points out that neoliberalism put the feminist movement at risk since "something is lost (...) and perhaps gained" in the process of appropriation of elements carried out by neoliberalism.

Starting with the approach proposed by Prüggl (2015) and the goal of answering the questions posed, it was necessary to contextualise the M8 2019

protest to identify the elements that differentiated this protest with respect to the M8 2018 protest and which made it original and worthy of academic analysis.

In the academic debate about feminism's shift toward neoliberal forms or the coopting of feminism by neoliberalism, the M8 2019 protests provided a unique opportunity to detect whether this process was taking place, as this protest took place in a climate of electoral battle where different political parties freely exposed their different positions about this feminist protest and, therefore, the feminist discourse.

In the days prior to the M8 2019 protests, women with public political roles, such as the leader of the liberal party Ciudadanos, held a series of protests against the media, offering a new topic for discussion on the feminism debate: the narrative for the "liberal" feminist. Her statements, including "We are free to claim equality" or "Feminism is no one's monopoly," brought some previously unspoken nuances to the public political scene. Meanwhile, the journalist Edurne Uriarte asserted that it was possible to be right-wing and feminist at the same time, in clear harmony with what was being referred to as "liberal feminism," which was very different to the liberal feminism that had emerged with radical and Marxist feminism during the second wave of feminism (Kemp & Brandwein, 2010).

In this context, the right-wing party Partido Popular, which had joined the M8 protests the previous year, changed its position and criticised the monopolisation of the protests by the "extreme left" parties. The party refused to participate in the M8 2019 protest and alleged that it had been organised by feminist organisations that sought division and confrontation between women and men, and even among women with different ideologies. This was not a subtle strategy, as McRobbie (2009) would say, because it undermined the feminist discourse by considering it "anti-male, strident, and anti-pleasure" (Genz, 2006). This incursion of political parties into the feminist debate was new in Spain's political arena and can be described more as political opportunism than true interest in the debate on social equality. In fact, McRobbie (2009) has already warned us of the perception of "feminism" by political parties as a new niche for votes among women who in some way or another identified with feminism.

Partido Popular (right) and Ciudadanos (liberal) proposed an alternative protest: working for a society in which men's and women's merit, capacity and equal opportunities prevail. Fraser (2013) sees this manoeuvre as the relaxation or adaptation of the principles of feminism to neoliberalism. From this position of neoliberal feminism, something more than an adaptation of the principles of feminism would take place, as placing individualisation above the demands for redistribution and economic justice only disregards the existing structural inequality that prevents merit from being considered equally for women and men. Thus, under the premise of false emancipation for women, concessions are accepted in terms of new forms of exploitation of women in the labour market. Ahmed (2010) previously argued that women in the neo-

liberal feminist era no longer worry about salary disparities between men and women, sexual harassment, rape, or domestic violence. This does not mean that the existence of inequalities is not recognised; rather, it is recognised, but the structural roots of this inequality have not been investigated.

Essentially, during those days society witnessed the introduction of a “new feminist subject”, which Prügl (2015) described as the result of the “co-opting of feminism” or the “liberalisation of feminism”. Brown (2005) and Rottenberg (2014) indicate that this neoliberalism is not only “a political rationality in the State’s management” but “it produces subjects, forms of citizenship, and behaviours”, a new, “neoliberal” feminist subject. This new feminist subject perceives the existence of the prevalent inequalities between men and women, as has already been indicated, and accepts responsibility for one’s own well-being and care, which means gender inequality is considered a problem that has an “individual” solution. In this way, it minimises the work of dominant feminism, strengthens liberal rationality, and perpetuates capitalist logic (Aschoff, 2015).

Baer (2016) indicates that in the context of neoliberalism, the hegemonic discourses of “individual choice,” empowerment, freedom, self-esteem and personal responsibility conspire to denote feminism as a second nature and thus make it seem unnecessary for women. Ahmed (2010) further argues that the new feminist subject is guided toward the goal of finding their own personal and happy balance between work and family. Thus, these subjects see themselves as individualised and active subjects responsible for improving their own well-being (Larner, 2000). This implies that any difference that remains between women’s and men’s lives can be explained by the choices that individuals make (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2016).

The truth is that no one questions neoliberalism, and as Newman (2013) says, it turns neoliberalism into a fact. In the debate between neoliberalism and feminism, the discussion is unequal. Neoliberalism is a concept that replaces other concepts as complicated as capitalism, modernity and globalisation (Larner, 2000), and it is feminism that has to be flexible. “Neoliberal feminism,” while it provides arguments in favour of gender equality and women’s empowerment, continues to maintain its ideological commitment to rationalism, heteronormativity and genderless economic structures. Other authors, such as Mohanty (2013) and Rottenberg (2014), suggest that this convergence between neoliberalism and feminism implies the germination of a new type of feminism that tames radical feminism and “eviscerates classical and liberal feminism.” In this context of the progress of neoliberalism, Fraser (2013) perceives a strategy to erase all memory of social equality, namely the fusion of feminism with neoliberalism.

### 3. Methodology

This research study employed a mixed methodology design combining quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve a better description of the object

of study, specifically using a convergent design. Its fundamental premise is that the use of both approaches together provides a better understanding of research problems than using either approach independently (Creswell, 2014). The benefits of these research methods are more complete findings, offering greater confidence, better validation, and the understanding of results (Ugalde & Balbastre, 2013).

The use of this design is justified in the challenges posed by studies in which the research objectives are markedly prospective and exploratory. On one hand, it was necessary to understand the responses to certain variables from a quantitative viewpoint to present the range of these variables. On the other hand, it was necessary to explore some nuances of the masked neoliberal discourse in depth.

To achieve the objective, a convergent design was proposed (Creswell, 2014). In this way, the narratives, conversations and stories from women who joined the feminist protests for the first time will resolve the question of how they, who define themselves as feminists, are establishing and nourishing current feminism with new representations relating to other M8 protests. The first analysis focused on descriptions based on the responses from 373 participants during the demonstration, characteristics relating to their degree of commitment, and their identification with the feminist movement. The second point of analysis used the accounts of 12 women who had recently joined the protest. Here, the solid roots of feminism's discursive elements and an awareness of the risk of embracing neoliberalism within feminism were identified.

For the quantitative instrument, the following issues were posed: dimensions relating to women defining themselves as feminists, their position regarding equality between women and men, their perception of violence, their knowledge of the feminist movement, as well as their degree of participation in protests, among others. The initial categories proposed for the interview guidelines reflected more experiential aspects relating to feminist matters.

The complementary components of both approaches allowed for more precise information and enabled potential questions to formulate new research relating to liberal feminism and nuances of the new feminist identity.

### *3.1. Procedure*

Data were collected during the M8 2019 protest in the city of Bilbao. A questionnaire initiated during the protest was used and completed on the same day and subsequent days because of a snowball effect among the women surveyed. A link to the questionnaire was shared, which the protesters chose to further share with their contacts who confirmed their participation in the protest.

A team of 14 volunteer pollsters spread out along the demonstration route throughout the day, which started at 7.00 p.m. and ended at 10.00 p.m., although more questionnaires were answered after the protest ended. Upon entering the demonstration, pollsters selected female protesters using a convenience sample method.



An ad-hoc questionnaire had been developed, mindful of the limitations of administering it during street mobilisations. The questionnaire consisted of the following sections: The first section addressed the perception of the climate of violence, with questions relating to the fear of walking home alone and perceptions of what a sexual assailant might look like or where they might be encountered. The next section focused on the perception of inequality between women and men in terms of social, political and economic rights. This was followed by a section on feminist identity, which included questions about participation in activities organised by feminist movements and organisations, membership of any feminist organisations, the level of information about activities proposed by feminist organisations, the level of information about gender equality policies, and participation in previous mobilisations for the March 8th protests. Finally, the questionnaire concluded with a question about whether feminism is considered a left-wing or right-wing movement.

A total of 373 correctly completed questionnaires were collected. The sample of feminist women from the quantitative study present at the M8 2019 protest was strongly represented by a group of young women (50.9% between 16 and 24 years), followed by women between 25 and 44 years (19.5%). Women between 45 and 64 years comprised 28% of the total sample, and finally, those over 65 years represented barely 1% of the sample. Although occupation was not a criterion for sample representation, female students (45.3%) again appeared in great numbers compared with employed women, who represented 44.5% of the total sample. In this sample, the groups with the lowest representation were unemployed women (3.8%) and retired women (2.4%). The sample of women dedicated to unpaid domestic work (4.0%) became particularly relevant.

The semi-structured interviews for the qualitative study were based on snowball sampling based on the premise that the women had participated in the last two M8 protests (2018 and 2019) and had not previously done so. A total of 12 interviews were conducted in the days following the completion of the questionnaires, to keep the M8 protest experience fresh among the women interviewed. The selection criteria for the women interviewed were as follows: (a) participation in either or both of the 2018 and 2019 M8 protests, thus fulfilling the new participant requirement; and (b) having a representation of women of different ages, starting with young adults of legal age. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

To bring the analysis together, a design was proposed that started with a table in which theoretical–conceptual dimensions were assembled, which guided the entire process in a way that allowed the quantitative and qualitative data integration to approach the research objectives and respond to the objectives established. The convergent design allowed the methods to be triangulated by comparing and contrasting the descriptive statistical results with the qualitative results. This made it possible to better understand the phenomenon being analysed. The statistical program SPSS version 22 was used for data processing, and the 12 interviews were processed using the qua-

litative analysis program MAXqda, 2018 version, which allowed the data to be analysed following a cyclical strategy.

### *3.2. Ethical considerations*

The research followed all the steps mandated by the protocol established by the University of Deusto through the Ethics Committee. This protocol establishes the need to collect the express informed consent of all research participants, whether the research is of a quantitative or qualitative nature. In addition, the research complies with other requirements, such as the principal investigator having more than ten years' experience in fieldwork and the interviews being conducted by expert researchers. The data collected is stored on university servers protected from any cyber-attacks to which only the principal researcher has access.

## **4. Data Analysis and Results**

The study's results revealed four discursive focal points connected to the study's two objectives. The first three points were the results of attempting to respond to the first objective of this research, in which feminism is considered a movement for equality and is established as a framework for vindication and fighting violence against women. As a result of the analysis, a new perspective of feminism emerged, which transcends affiliation and "traditional" activism. As a result, the movement acquires new nuances. It is not something homogeneous or linked to the stereotypical image of feminist women. The second point of analysis focused on the study's second objective. In the fourth focal point, results related to the threats to contemporary feminism were collected: the neoliberalisation of feminism and the use of pseudo-labels or camouflaging practices, such as the name "liberal" feminism that masks a minimisation of the feminism's value.

### *4.1. Focal point 1: Feminism, a movement for equality*

While it is true that, as Schuster points out (2017: 648), feminism continuously negotiates contradictory perspectives and positions, this study found that the women who took part in the 8M 2019 protests clearly identified feminism as a movement that asserts female and male equality. Thus, 96.2% of the women surveyed perceived feminism as a movement focused on equality between women and men. There was almost unanimous agreement among the women surveyed when affirming the existence of inequality between women and men in relation to their social, political and/or economic rights. However, certain nuances appeared, some surprising: 22.8% of these women indicated that they agreed with the statement that feminism exclusively benefits women.

Similarly, the women who took part in the interviews also identified feminism as a movement that promotes change in society as a mechanism to achieve

ve real equality. The interviewees felt the system was unjust and believed that women should work together to enact change, as Twenge & Zucker (1999) have suggested. This is how one interviewee summed it up:

Feminism is defined as the movement that seeks equality, but I would define it as the movement that seeks to empower women and make them aware that they live in oppression, that they live in a patriarchal, social, economic and political system. (E10, student, 23 years old)

Here, identifying feminism with the goal of equality between women and men, the social debate on the contrast between feminism and patriarchy emerged among the women interviewed, and from which feminism has tried to defend itself. Thus, personal narratives appealed to the message that comparing feminism and patriarchy should be avoided. Other interviewees said:

Having the same rights as men, (...) I think that feminism is equality, reaching equality (...) While many people try to discredit it, many people who are macho and don't want to see it say: "No, there are women who want more power than men." (E1, employed, 56)

It's not that we want women to be better or superior, no, no... we want to be equal in every way, socially, at work... at all levels. (E7, employed, 41)

#### *4.2. Focal point 2: Feminism, framework, and space of vindication versus violence against women*

Data on the surveyed women's perception found that concern about violence against women at different levels is not a minor issue. Approximately 62.5% of the women under 45 years reported frequently feeling harassed by men, either physically or psychologically, but the perception among women over that age also reflected high percentages (above 40%). Even more concerning was the fact that 34.7% of the women surveyed stated that they had been physically or sexually assaulted once or occasionally by a man, and an insignificant 2.2% indicated that the attacks were frequent. If we include the 3.2% that preferred not to answer, the climate of outrage that women experience with regard to the violence they suffer would be more than justified.

This climate was one of the reasons that the interviewed women often used to justify their presence at the protest. Concern about the incessant trickle of cases of gang rapes, as already demonstrated by protests of the "San Fermin Wolf Pack," the "Manresa Wolf Pack," and other media cases, such as the rape and murder of the young Diana Quer, was one of the catalysts for participating in the protests. More importantly, this served as an understanding between the goals of the feminist movement and those of the women who were interviewed. This was reflected in the words of the following interviewee:

I think the boom started in 2018. The San Fermin wolf pack was so controversial that they said: "no more (...)" I think that Diana Quer and the San

Fermin wolf pack was a turning point for society, and women especially, to say: no more, M8 general strike. (E2, student, 20 years old)

In this climate of violence, a key indicator of personal experience of violence is the perception of fear by women when returning home at night. Asked about this aspect, 40.5% of the women surveyed reported being fearful whenever they returned home and 33% perceived that fear frequently. Beyond the data, one of the many examples of the inequality between women and men even in using public spaces is highlighted (Bondi & Rose, 2003; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004)

#### *4.3. Focal point 3: Feminism beyond traditional activism*

It cannot escape anyone's notice that the feminist movement is gaining ground in substance and form (Montero Corominas, 2018). The first step to verify the extent to which the author refers was to describe some of the identifying characteristics of the women who participated in the protest

Regarding the women who participated in the M8 2019 protest, 93.3% felt highly and fairly identified as feminists compared with a 6.2% who felt slightly identified as feminist or were not feminists at all. It is in this last group where the bulk of women who participated in the massive protest can be found for reasons that have nothing to do with their level of feminist awareness; rather, their reasons are linked to emotional contagion or the playful-festive aspect that characterises the latest March 8 protests. The percentages overwhelmingly reflected that, to a greater or lesser extent, participation in these protests is not a trend but reflects that feminist protests are being driven by women with feminist awareness. Another issue will be describing the discursive elements of that awareness. The interesting nuance drawn from these women is that considering oneself a feminist entails a process of awareness; no one wakes up feminist one morning. Even the interviewees introduced a nuance related to the idea of being a feminist, the element of the process, and the construction of identity as a feminist. The women interviewed corroborated this with their personal accounts:

First you have to understand your situation, socially speaking. And when you're already aware of the vulnerability of your situation, only and exclusively because you are a woman in certain environments, that is when you really think of feminism as a method, a form of vindication. (E6, student, 21)

Even if you are not 100 percent aware or don't know a lot about feminism, everyone has a place here to demonstrate and to believe that this model of society is possible. (E2, student, 20)

The participants of this research study showed that feminist activism is taking on other forms and expressions (Kempson, 2015), and goes beyond "traditional" activism that has been identified with protests in the streets, the media and performances such as those by *Femme*. This was confirmed by

the fact that 75.3% of the respondents perceived themselves as activists to a strong or fair degree; nevertheless, that activism does not translate into a militant response, since of all the women surveyed, only 13.4% stated that they were members of feminist organisations and associations.

These data have similarities to the study by Fisher, Jasny and Dow (2018) in which 6.4% of respondents considered themselves to be active members (passive activists 11.8%) and 81.8% were not members of any organisation or considered themselves militants. These women, who see themselves as activists but without militating in any organisation, allude to personal reasons for not taking that step:

For example, in the last M8, I said to myself: I'm going to join the feminist association (...) ...because I like militancy... but at the moment, I think I don't want to take on responsibilities. (E2, student, 20)

These testimonies reveal that in feminist political identity, the political actor is presented according to different degrees of commitment. Behind the reasons for public mobilisation, there may be an identification with the goal, with the organisation, or simply with other participating women (Stets & Serpe, 2019). Membership of a political organisation, whether feminist or union, implies a level of involvement that goes beyond alignment with a common goal. The 8M demonstration highlighted women's willingness to protest in an unprecedented climate of outrage motivated by numerous cases of sexual violence against women. It would be very interesting to do research into whether, after the protests of 8 March 2019, there was an increase in membership of feminist activist organisations. The fact is that since 2019, none of the protests on 8 March in subsequent years have managed to reach the levels of participation recorded that year.

Perhaps one element that promotes affiliation with feminism is that the stereotypes and prejudices linked to feminist women are being broken. Anti-feminist fallacies, as Samamé (2019) would point out, had specific characteristics attributed to them, such as "cold," "unfeminine" and "lesbian", among others. A new profile is emerging of women who identify with feminist ideas but present a series of differentiating nuances with respect to activism.

From society's perspective, feminists are girls on the left who have something to complain about, that the majority are lesbians and want women's superiority over men. From my point of view, they are women fighters who've realised what we are really suffering, and who want to continue advancing out of respect for the women who fought for us. (E2, Student, 20)

However, and in line with authors who point out the barriers to women identifying themselves as feminists (Breen & Karpinski, 2008; Hoskin, Jensen & Blair, 2017), there is still a certain criticism tied to identifying as a feminist. While they are seen as fighters and radicals in their approaches, in a

certain sense, the women who were interviewed feel somewhat removed from these feminists, even acknowledging their value and worth as representatives of feminism. They fail to identify with this group of feminist women due to the confusion between activists, militant members of feminist organisations, and feminist identity. This idea was captured in the following personal account:

Like those feminists who go to all of them... I'd like to be able to go, when they are protesting, I'd like to go but since I don't have time to go, I like what I see feminist women doing. (E12, employed, 55)

This showed that women who define themselves as feminists, distance themselves from those who participate in "real" transformation activities, as Kinser (2004) would say, perhaps not so much as to define these women's feminism as "false feminism" but to confirm the existence of certain degrees of development in the feminist identity.

#### *4.4. Focal point 4. Feminism versus neoliberal feminism*

One of this study's objectives was to identify different discursive elements of neoliberalism among the participants of the M8 protests. This objective was addressed through a question which considered left- or right-wing feminism, in a clear allusion to the statements that certain women on the right made in the days prior to the M8 2019 protests. Among the women surveyed while the M8 demonstration was taking place, 48.3% of respondents identified feminism as a movement linked to left-wing ideological views. Surprisingly, 39.9% endorsed the phrase that the media had been disseminating during the contentious election: "Feminism is neither left nor right." The remaining women surveyed (11.8%) stated that they did not know how to position themselves or they preferred not to answer whether feminism as a movement is on the left, the right, or neither.

In this debate between feminism's political and ideological position, it must be pointed out that neoliberalism has found a platform to generate confusion and to appropriate terminology that aims at depriving feminism of all meaning and feeling, thus concealing the persistence of structural inequalities as a factor that fuels inequality between women and men.

In feminism, political and ideological aspects overlap, and negative ideological connotations must be avoided, since feminism proposes an organisation of social reality, and of principles and ideas that give it an ideological position. Feminism is as much political as it is ideological, and to think that it is transversal to all ideologies is a trap of neoliberalism. One of the interviewees clearly demonstrated this breakdown of ideology and politics:

Is it a left or right-wing movement? Does politics influence it? (...). People position it as left-wing but it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be political. (E7, employed, 41)

Interviewee 2, while recognising the ideological position of feminism, pointed out that it should not support any ideology:

It is a completely left-wing movement, although right-wing movements have joined in the demonstrations this year, doing so by simple posturing and not being left behind, (...) that, although it should not have an ideology, it always has. (E2, student, 20)

According to the data, the slogans used by neoliberal commentators suggest that equality is important for both right- and left-leaning political ideologies. Furthermore, the women who participated in the protests and the women who were interviewed also tended to agree with these slogans.

The voices that advocate the “depoliticisation of feminism” are not “innocent”. Behind these positions, there is not a debate but rather yet another strategy of neoliberalism to distort the message of feminism.

However, there are also accounts from women who identify feminism with leftist viewpoints and imply the incompatibility of feminism with more conservative views:

My personal opinion is that feminism has to be on the left, it cannot be on the right. It is incompatible. (E6, student, 21)

Thus, there is a tendency to separate feminism from a ideology, as a strategy of conservative political parties, as a strategy of conservative political parties or even just a trend.

Liberal feminism has now become trendy with Ciudadanos (liberal political party) with M8 2019, that is simple posturing. (E2, student, 20)

That’s what happens with M8, the right-wing parties, which are obviously traditionalists and cannot support that because no, I think it’s turned into posturing for these parties. (E1, employed, 56)

These personal accounts confirm the perception among women that the conservative and neoliberal parties have a hidden strategy, a “pose”, in an attempt to highlight their “gender awareness”; and that these parties appeal to individualisation as a response to challenges relating to female and male equality, seeking individual responsibility instead of structural solutions, as if women could individually overcome structural barriers to equal political, social, personal and employment rights.

## 5. Final Discussion

The results of this research study must be framed within what Dean and Aune (2015) indicate in their typology of the feminist collective, namely that neither the feminist collective nor feminist women can be considered a homogeneous

whole. In fact, it should be understood that in today's feminism, women from the second, third and fourth waves coexist, although with necessarily different discourses, positions, strategies and narratives (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015), but sharing an economic, political and social context marked by neoliberalism.

Regarding feminist identity, Yoder, Tobias and Snell (2011) found that the feminist subject as a woman who combines activism and feminist discourse is disappearing. The data from this study showed a high level of awareness regarding the persistence of gender inequalities, and personal accounts from women confirmed the usefulness of feminism as a mechanism to fight against inequalities and violence against women. However, nuances appeared when clarifying the feminist-activist binomial.

The women who participated in this research study expressed some reluctance to consider themselves as activists, and they invoked potentially different expressions of activism, such as on social media or in their daily lives, through the awareness and evidence of inequalities in their everyday lives. This could present challenges. The study identifies two distinct yet interrelated concerns: First is the potential for the feminist collective to experience limited visibility or recognition within certain contexts. Second, individuals may develop an awareness of their membership within a broader collective of women who are subject to various forms of systemic inequality.

Today's feminist women are giving way to a new profile of women who identify as "feminists", who share ideas of equality between women and men, and who are "activists" in other non-traditional spaces. They may also emphasise the "individualisation" of their actions in daily practice as a mechanism of collective struggle and demand.

In the second level of discussion, there were indications that neoliberalism is emerging as a presence among women who define themselves as feminists. While the participating women agree with the fact that there is a link between feminism and the fight against inequalities, a considerable number understand that feminism must be disconnected from ideology, and that the "mirage of transversality" must prevail when it comes to embracing feminism.

This research study shows that stripping feminism of any ideological element is beginning to permeate women of all ages, but it is not the only element that is identified here. The individualistic rhetoric of free choice is a concern that dilutes the commitment of women to collective political struggles. The neoliberal emphasis on the values of choice and freedom may raise questions about whether structural limitations restrain individual choices and rights, suggesting that a woman's personal success depends on her "individual capabilities." McRobbie (2009) would say that it is not likely that women reject feminism due to conditioning their decision-making, but what McRobbie did not identify is that neoliberalism has concealed itself as "liberal" feminism and has managed to introduce confusion among women who define themselves as feminists. It is important to remember that this study was conducted among women who define themselves as feminists; therefore, there are no women who reject feminism. The neoliberal emphasis on the values of choice and freedom



may raise questions about whether structural limitations restrain individual choices and rights, suggesting that a woman's personal success depends on her "individual capabilities."

In this sense, authors such as Laval and Dardot (2013) suggest that neoliberal subjection can influence how women relate to feminism. This subjection is based on individualisation and personal responsibility, which can lead women to focus on their own lives and needs rather than joining a movement that seeks to change social structures. This, in turn, limits women's capacity to identify with feminism and participate in it. On the other hand, authors like Cruz and Brown (2016) have argued that neoliberal subjection can also generate a sense of authenticity and self-determination, leading women to seek a feminism that adapts to their individual needs. However, this can lead to the fragmentation of the feminist movement and a loss of its capacity to change social structures.

Budgeon (2015) indicated that the right to choose has been one of feminism's main claims, although choice, in the current context, has increasingly been associated with a new form of femininity characterised as *self-determined, individualised and empowered*. Individual choice has become increasingly complicated and feminist ideals appear at the service of neoliberal forms and when the "right to choose" becomes the central focal point of the approaches. The consequences of this approach to women's experience of choice are visible in different areas, e.g., cosmetic surgery in relation to beauty, reproductive technologies, balance between work and private life, prostitution, etc. Thus, it is common to find accounts of young women who justify prostitution by relying on women's freedom to use their bodies, forgetting the conditions that led these women to that choice. The question arises whether there is true freedom in that choice.

## 6. Conclusions

The research study highlights the complex implications of the controversial nature of feminist identity and how this identity interacts with the current sociopolitical context, political strategies and economic neoliberalism. Despite its heterogeneity, contemporary feminism is unified by shared values of equality and collective struggle, which continue to uphold the principles of the feminist movement. However, the boundaries of these principles are fracturing under the pressure of the neoliberal offensive.

In the M8 2019 protests, many feminists came together: second, third and fourth-wave feminists, cyberfeminists, those who are on the verge of awareness and those who are counting on claiming the role of the demonstration as a way to make inequalities visible.

But mainly it was a form of expression to denounce a situation of violence against women that outrages and mobilises them all. These women who recently participated in the M8 protests joined the protest primarily due to reasons based on their outrage against sexual violence, but the experience of the

protest fuels a feeling of solidarity against an injustice that is already collective. For this reason, their participation adds value and gives meaning to the protest. It may be possible that this demand gets diluted in these women's daily activities and the struggle is left to the most combative women. Further, it is possible that these "eventual" feminists are scorned because they participate for reasons only based on their outrage. But is there a feminist membership card?

It will be necessary to reflect on the reasons the movement for the M8 protest was attacked and questioned, but we must mainly reflect on the disguises that neoliberalism uses to take ownership of the discourse with the single objective of taking part in its

success in order to perpetuate itself by distorting the goals and objectives of the feminist movement. For the moment, this research study has presented the first snapshot of heart of the feminist mobilisation from the point of view of new participants of the M8 mobilisation.

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