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# Gender and sexuality in Mexico: an interview with Gloria Careaga

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**Abstract** *In this interview with Gloria Careaga, one of the most important researchers of gender and sexuality in Mexico, we explore the relationships between gender and sexuality in her country. We also consider the contributions made by Careaga to the field of public health.*
**Key words** *Gender, Sexuality, Public health*

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Gloria Careaga is professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM. She graduated in social psychology, and is one of the leading researchers in gender and sexuality in Mexico. She is co-founder of the University Program for Gender Studies (PUEG), where she was Academic Secretary from 1992 to 2014. She currently coordinates the Department for Studies in Sexualities. Careaga is an active participant in the feminist movement and in the movement for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and intersex people (LGBTI) both in Mexico and internationally. From 2008 to 2014, she was Co-Secretary General of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). Her areas of interest include human rights, population, development and sexuality, guaranteeing her a privileged place as an interlocutor with teachers and researchers in the area of public health, both in Mexico and internationally. Careaga has coordinated seven anthologies and published multiple articles and book chapters, including: 'LGBT Migration to Mexico City'[1] and 'Sexuality, and Stigma and Human Rights - Challenges for access to health in Latin America'[2]. She was awarded the Omecihuatl Medal by the Federal District's Women's Institute and the Hermelinda Galindo Award by the Human Rights Commission of the Mexican Federal District.

In May 2017, Gloria, ever kind and friendly, accepted an invitation to answer questions posed by Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira and Wilza Villela.

**The concept of gender became more widespread and gained greater acceptability in the early 1980s in Mexico, a country which was a pioneer and driving force behind these debates. Could you tell us a bit more about this story, particularly its importance for practices in the health and education sectors and for public policies in both sectors?**

Although the first seminar about gender in Mexico was held at the Colegio de México in 1983, Mexico really became much more ensconced in the theme in the 1990s, when the concept began to have a far greater impact on universities and in the public sphere. It was the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 that really marked the start of including gender policies in public policies.

This conference was historic in that it marked the recognition of women's status as an important component of development, the recognition of diversity in families, the definition and recognition of reproductive rights and the recognition of sexuality outside the formal matrimonial set-up (marriage), meaning that it was necessary to give attention and counseling to young people, both female and male.

The recognition of reproductive rights undoubtedly led to openings in the legalization of different methods of contraception, the reconceptualization of women beyond their maternal roles, and the possibility of reviewing legal frameworks for interrupting pregnancy. Thus, the phrase "my body is mine" becomes a reality in the right to make decisions about reproduction.

I also believe that the recognition of sexuality outside the formal marital structure helped to push forward the development of sex education programs in many countries. Unfortunately, not only is this an issue in Mexico that has not yet been defined, it is not even been addressed. When it comes to public policies in Mexico, sexuality is still a major, deep-rooted taboo.

**If we take stock of the issue of gender, would you agree that there is a need for a "critical review". Could you elaborate further on that appraisal and explain to us what you consider to be a "critical review"?**

Progress in the drive for gender studies and gender policies seems to have been a setback for much work about feminism. It reaffirmed a binary view that considers only two representations of gender (man and woman), much of it based on the legitimized gender system, which rejects the basis of gender as a dynamic and malleable category that has multiple representations, which some authors consider to mean an infinite continuum of possibilities. In addition, it has even gone so far as to discard or disregard men, as well as different expressions of masculinity, in considering that gender refers only to women (heterosexual, cisgender, etc.). LGBT approaches have pushed for a term for gender expressions that has not been used to broaden perspectives or refine the analysis.

We can even say that gender studies have been limited to a hegemonic version that involves women, adults, the urban, middle classes, those with higher levels of education, heterosexuals, cisgender people. Only those women who are interested in addressing a specific group take into consideration women, lesbians, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, rural, trans, etc., but as a specific study group, not as part of the overall social conglomeration.

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In my view, many studies are interested in focusing on certain aspects of life, without a conversation between the different fields and with an important gap in the analysis of the personal and the intimate. The feminism of equality has predominated significantly, which means it is necessary to evaluate how much it has contributed to social transformation.

**It would be interesting to hear your thoughts on academic discussions about sexuality in Mexico. Given the ample dialogue you have with Brazilian researchers, what are the differences in studies between the two countries?**

The analysis of sexuality in Mexico is, I think, still poor, and seems to be of greater interest to students than to the broader academic community. And this itself is a serious risk. I note that undergraduate studies at different levels have grown, but there is a shortage of teachers with the necessary background to guide these pieces. The university evaluation system allows teachers to take on these tasks, without the grounding to be able to contribute to quality research, and this may even give rise to greater confusion. In Mexico, the study of sexuality has almost been given up for lost, the Ministry of Education has no interest in establishing a sexual education program that goes beyond the prevention of pregnancy and the transmission of diseases. The program has focused on issues around reproduction and is, as a result, limited to the process of education.

It is not yet possible to consider sexuality as another element to people's lives, alongside their activities, relationships, and their life itself. I believe that even the study of sexuality does not yet have the academic recognition necessary to support the work of academics in different areas. In terms of formal courses, only the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla offers a study program about sexuality in their Masters course, and the Center for Gender Research and Studies at UNAM offers a Diploma, that is a kind of tool for professionals and activists to update their knowledge, but with no clear academic recognition. In Mexico, there are only two academic events that consider sexuality to be an important field of study: the Meeting of Research on Sexuality in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the International Congress for Understanding the Body (although this is a broader congress that includes sexuality as one of its core themes). These two events occur every two years, alternating between one and the other. Some of our studies are discussed in other spaces or countries, including those about masculinity and / or gender.

It is interesting, then, that the study of sexuality here has not shown more interest in feminism, despite the clear increase in sexual violence that women face. Gender studies have chosen to focus on the study of queer, trans, rather than analyzing the role in the maintenance of relations of subordination, the issue that was raised in the 1970s. In addition, the focus of this analysis is very influenced by the analysis that comes from the global North, rather than an exchange within the Latin American region that recognizes our own reality.

In Brazil, the analysis of queer has probably been given a high priority, but the scope of the discussion is very broad: there is almost no university that does not have a research nucleus on sexuality, and there are so many academic events on the issue every year in Brazil, that it is almost impossible to follow them all. In the same way, the interest in and development of the subject can be seen in the number of participants in such events, which can be more than a thousand. In Mexico, the limited development of the subject also means participation is very limited, and a lot of effort is needed to incentivize students to participate. However, I have found that there are spaces for the study of gender that are distant from the hegemonic center of Mexico and that provide other perspectives on this field; while they do not necessarily constitute an important axis, they show that there is an interest in approaching sexuality through different disciplines and approaches.

**Some of your new research explores new perspectives in the analysis of masculinities, and you have published the book 'Debates on Masculinities, Power, Development, Public Policies and Citizenship'[3]. Could you tell us a little more about it?**

The book came about after reflecting on the ways in which social organizations and some scholars had begun to approach work on sexuality, and an exchange with Connell[4], which led to trying to put forward a view of masculinity as a dimension of social structures, not just as something that was in men's bodies. It was an interesting experience that led us to organize several seminars where the place of masculinity was analyzed by scholars from different disciplines. Unfortunately, a change of leadership at the PUEG meant that the results were scaled back, and the

Editorial Committee organized the publication in a very different way, giving priority to foreign researchers, but losing the logical thread of the discussion. Nonetheless, we considered that it was necessary to publish it, since in some way it touched upon the central aspects of the proposal and allowed me to continue to reflect and discuss with those who are in this field of study.

Today, I believe that the study of masculinities has a broad scope, and although men remain the main focus of attention, it is interesting to see how their analysis is approached from different perspectives. I think the work that feminists in India are doing is the most innovative, but the field at the international level has produced important research and the exchange and the discussion has its own spaces, both electronically and in person. Nowadays, there has been a revival in interest in having regular national and international meetings. In Mexico, the study of masculinity does not have the academic and financial support that is required, but there is a group of scholars who, although they are scattered around the country, have provided continuity and, I think, have made important contributions. Unfortunately, dialogue with feminism is poor.

**Finally, there is an important debate in Mexico on femicide and violence against women. What are your views on this discussion? What steps are you taking (from the position of universities and social movements) to address this problem in your country?**

Violence against women has increased substantially, as a result of the general climate of violence that has been going on in Mexico for almost 10 years. The numbers of disappearances and femicides that occur every day in different parts of the country are alarming, and it is difficult for one person alone to follow what is going on or to understand all the factors that are involved. There is no doubt that these occurrences are part of the actions of criminal organizations and the state, but they are a resource used by other men to reaffirm men's control over women.

In Mexico, gender policies were specifically targeted at women, without taking into account the need to involve men in the process. Beyond the climate of violence, many men feel resentful that their views were not taken into consideration and that the policies show clear support for women and girls. Perhaps they feel that they do not have support to face the economic and social crisis that we are experiencing and women are the ones who pay the price.

We could hold the view that a state of emergency has been called, which involves universities and agencies that were established in order to provide care to women. But unfortunately, the proposals to stop this violence do not manage to address the inertia. There is an on-going discussion about the need to give protection to women, that fails to address the conditions of men. Some sectors have even identified men as the culprits and have encouraged further separatism that prohibits men from participating in ways to find solutions or even to show solidarity.

The Mexican government has done little to challenge an image of machismo that has characterized us as a people, and perhaps the market alone has led to the construction of other ways of being a man. However, these other views tend to prevail in a context of political correctness and 'micro-machismo' that confuses more than it resolves the issue, particularly for younger generations, since it is harder to uncover the machismo that lies behind it.

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