

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/What-is-emancipatory-about-21st-century-feminism>



Feminism

# What is emancipatory about 21st century feminism?

- Features - Feminism -



Publication date: Friday 29 May 2026

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**Feminism is pluralistic, with significant political and ideological differences, sometimes even antagonistic ones. Therefore, in this text I will always refer to the feminism that, with a global perspective, addresses the full range of conflicts generated by the system, which it considers its responsibility, and which expresses its desire to change everything through struggles that look toward an emancipatory horizon for everyone.**

What is emancipatory about feminism, what hopes can it open up in the midst of a reality plagued by monsters of a savage racist and patriarchal capitalism, which not only reconfigures geopolitics, but also puts our very existence at stake and which, as Wendy Brown points out (Brown, 2019), paints a world without a heart.

## The heartless world

The genocide of the Palestinian people is a stark example of how the colonialist, militaristic, and racist policies upheld by global powers leave only death and destruction in their wake. It is proof of the dehumanising processes that have been unfolding. This is becoming a laboratory where the trivialisation of evil will not be tolerated, because before the eyes of the entire world, Palestinians are being dehumanised and deprived of their rights, their living conditions destroyed, and ultimately presented as expendable. What kind of humanity does this shape?

It is part of the necropolitics that includes the kidnappings and murders of migrants in Minneapolis by ICE, the murders that raised the cry of Black Lives Matter, the deaths at the Melilla border fences, those of the 7291 elderly people in the old peoples homes in Madrid during the period of Covid, the murders of women and sexual and gender dissidents, those of the defenders of environmental rights, victims of the fight against extractivism, of which Berta Cáceres, ten years after her murder, continues to be a symbol.

All of this is reflected in important mobilisations, which do have heart and denounce the widespread impunity we are witnessing.

Other factors that mark the present have to do with the struggle for imperialist hegemony which, in the current phase of crisis of patriarchal, racist and ecocidal capitalism, also implies the permanent plundering of territories and bodies (as conceptualised by Central American women). The military rearmament, as Trump shamelessly claims, is nothing but a war for natural resources that will accelerate and intensify its destructive effect on the nature that sustains us.

This widespread violence necessitates the strengthening of authoritarian states in order to attempt to impose a solution, if one exists, to such a crisis. This is the purpose of gag laws, immigration laws, immigration detention centers, EU migration and asylum policies, and migrant concentration camps. But the strengthening of state control has multiple facets, one of which is the security-focused, punitive, and carceral logic aimed at social discipline. As part of this, these measures serve to control and moralise women's lives and bodies, forming part of the permanent state of war against them described by Silvia Federici.

Security-based approaches are highly effective in violating economic rights, as well as in defending a freedom completely divorced from social justice. They succeed in generating economic insecurity, social unrest, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. And this, which is something the system itself generates, is paradoxically being capitalised on by the far right through so-called culture wars. In this way, they are achieving, on the one hand,

penetration into the social fabric and, on the other, the construction of a new identity: that of the aggrieved man.

Fear is a cornerstone of their strategy, allowing them to create imaginary enemies. It is the fear of the other, of the unknown, of migrants, trans people, those who deviate from the norm, feminists. And, paradoxically, it is through the instrumentalisation of women's rights that, from their denialist stances, they legitimise the invasion of countries or racialise sexual violence. This last aspect is part of their Islamophobic strategy, with which they seek electoral gain by attributing violence to Muslim culture and presenting the aggression of a Muslim man against a woman as a group threat. This trap, however, is one that feminist groups have not fallen into, despite having to report alleged sexual assaults in their towns and cities alongside the criminalisation of the migrant community by right-wing institutions and parties. Once again: "not in our name."

The radical right believes that feminism, the LGBTQ+ movement, and migrants have produced a crisis of values and are a threat to their homeland, in what Sara R. Farris calls feminisationalisms. As Nuria Alabao points out (Alabao, 2025), the extreme right shares a common element: the staunch defense of anti-gender, racist, xenophobic, anti-environmental, and anti-feminist policies, always under the umbrella of their notion of national identity. This is the glue that binds them together, despite their differences across countries, and in this context, women and migrants are often scapegoated.

In many analyses, culture wars are reduced to a mere struggle over narratives. However, they are indeed part of a struggle, but one of meaning and legitimisation of class-based, racist, and patriarchal economic and social practices. They demonstrate how economic liberalism and deep-seated conservatism are equally constitutive expressions of contemporary capitalism.

Reality is full of examples. Racism is what legitimises semi-slave labour conditions and the extraction of huge profits in the strawberry-growing towns governed by the Partido Popular [People's Party or PP] and far right VOX parties in Andalusia. Racism also determines access to housing, employment, and healthcare.

The denial of male violence goes hand in hand with the defense of the liberal family model as a space for reformulating the economic and reproductive order through, on the one hand, the re-familiarisation of social reproduction and the denial of the right to reproductive decision-making and, on the other hand, through a return to the conservative image of the male provider (even though this has no relation to reality).

And without intending to exhaust the examples, the criminalisation of trans people subjects them to absolute material and vital precarity by not being able to access employment or satisfy a need as basic as the right to identity.

## **Social transformation is possible because collective hope is possible**

To paraphrase Yayo Herrero (Herrero, 2025), the necessary condition that opens up possibilities for action is to be aware of the seriousness of what is happening, to build hopes, paths that illuminate the possibility of a desired, yet uncertain, destination.

How to act in the face of the enormous urgencies of the present while thinking about the future has always had and continues to have many different paths. From the struggles marked by a new internationalism in the defense against the attacks of extractive capital, to the struggles for housing and the creation of a new type of organisation, to the struggles of a new internationalism in protest against the Palestinian genocide, or many feminist, queer and

## What is emancipatory about 21st century feminism?

---

anti-racist struggles that reverberate and become transnational.

We are not starting from scratch, but the brutality of the situation and the weakness of the political and social left raise many questions from within those very spaces. How to articulate the struggles, how to build a common horizon from the plurality of subjects, how to participate in an urgent and necessary dialogue so as to make progress in social transformation and not get trapped in the limits that the system establishes.

In this conversation, there are some aspects that resonate particularly with the intersectional feminist movement. One of the recurring themes is the fragmentation of struggles. Another is to characterise it as an identity movement worldwide, that is, focused on what are considered demands of the cultural sphere, in a vision that from my point of view is mistaken and reductionist.

Undoubtedly, this is also part of the always intense intra-feminist debate, but it is very problematic that in the general debate part of reality is disregarded, the capacity (or at least the will) that feminism has shown to articulate in its political action, and in its discourse, the material conditions of existence with the social conditions (also called “cultural”). This is what Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2006) expressed back in the 90s, and which has been so relevant, as the interaction between redistribution policies, that is, economic policies that appeal to capitalist exploitation processes, and those of social recognition of subordinate and invisible identities and collectives.

Ignoring the relevance of important sectors of a movement that, from an intersectoral approach, managed to expand its political and social space like never before, is to short-circuit part of the necessary conversation and joint action. This feminism, also identified as anti-capitalist, demonstrated the viability of combining mass mobilisation with radicalism. This was evident in the feminist strike movements, and this is the enormous political capital with which it continues to operate, even in situations of lesser social mobilisation like the present one.

The debate also resurfaces with those who only legitimise the feminist movement through its most economic interpretation of class affiliation, a view closed to new conceptualisations arising from changes in its own composition due to modifications in the new forms of capitalist exploitation and domination. This is problematic because it can hinder alliances precisely from the material realities of concrete struggles.

In some ways this is a return to the classic theories of the 1970s on which numerous Marxist feminists, such as Zillah Eisenstein or Heidi Hartman, among many others, began a fruitful theoretical production. They pointed out the limitations and weaknesses of classical Marxist theory and its difficulty in explaining the oppression of women in its complexity, insofar as it only addressed the capitalist conditions of production and the relations of exploitation that resulted from them, but without addressing those of social reproduction. They thus opened a new field for understanding the ways in which patriarchy is inscribed and constitutive of capitalism and, therefore, for the articulation between class and gender as forms of power that organise society.

Much has changed since then, and there has been significant development, both theoretical and political (in this respect, the care-workers strike in the Basque Country is an essential reference point). Thanks to feminist economists (Cristina Carrasco, Amaia Pérez Orozco, Sandra Ezquerro, among many others), the complexity of how the system works has been further explored and revealed. To begin with, starting from the redefinition of the concept of work (so present and central in feminist strikes), and placing the relationship of the processes of production and reproduction as part of the functioning of capitalism, understood as an integrated system (Pérez Orozco, 2014).

The concept of social reproduction has also been broadened by pointing out that the spaces where the workforce is reproduced (so-called care work) are not only households, but also institutions such as health, education, etc.), and that these also consist of racialised jobs and have a transnational dimension as a result of the global care industry

chain.

# On account of intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality has a long history, specifically within Black feminist thought in the United States. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, following a critique of legal procedures and theories concerning workplace discrimination against Black women, its origins can be traced back to the political practices of a collective of Black lesbian feminists: the Combahee River Collective (1974-1980). In a 1977 [statement](#), they pointed out:

the crossing of diverse identities that struggle for recognition and also articulate an emancipatory action (...). We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously..

This is a line that Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa, 2016) has been currently developing by introducing the notion of border identities.

As Carolina Meloni points out (Meloni, 2012), Black feminist thought and activism has a long history. Authors such as Angela Davis and her call for the “intersectionality of struggles,” and Bell Hooks and her “feminism for all” have delved into the theoretical and political implications of racism as constitutive of capitalism and the interconnection of oppressions.

This is a full-fledged critique (also shared by the queer world) of classical and hegemonic feminism for being exclusionary, for confining women to a fixed and seamless identity, interpreting in a linear way what it means for society to assign women to a gender and making it appear in their thinking and practice as the only determining factor in their lives. In concrete practice, the way in which other inequalities established by class, race, ethnicity and sexuality can interact in their identities and lives is not considered, which is what ultimately explains the multiplicity of expressions of patriarchy and which adopts sexism (Montero 2009).

This approach, present in some classical and institutional feminisms, presupposes a uniformity in the experiences of women; it results in a normative and essentialising vision that establishes the experiences of some as general and common to all.

These all-encompassing ideas about women have an effect on political discourse and action because they exclude everything that does not fit into the representation of women; it is not included in strategies and practices. It is a policy of a feminism that, in this way, grants itself the power to represent everyone and present its agenda as the authentic feminist agenda. Transphobia, the denial of the queer movement's critique of binary thinking, and the rights of sex workers all have their origins here.

Intersectoral feminism is not a formula, it is a proposal to articulate the struggles and the feminist narrative and, therefore, it requires talking about subjects, because conflict exists and requires subjects who lead the collective action of revolt and of an emancipatory approach.

## What is emancipatory about 21st century feminism?

---

Every conflict implies a certain affirmation of identity, a collective identity that explains who we are, who makes up that subject, and it does so while simultaneously embracing the individual identity, that of who I am.

The subject of feminism speaks of collective, changing, and diverse identities that encompass and politicise experiences of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination lived individually. It politicises them by giving them social expression through their connection to social structures and power relations within the process of organisation and struggle.

It does not compile a list of individual experiences and identities to turn them into a recipe book; that is what constitutes the individualism characteristic of the neoliberal subject. As Andrea Peniche points out (Peniche, 2020), this approach also problematises the idea of "identity as experience and experience as the sole legitimiser of discourse, turning it into a cultural reductionism devoid of political strategy."

Intersectionality is a notion of enormous political potential because it allows us to understand how our reality and subjectivity operate, our belonging to social hierarchies and the power relations established by class, gender, and race, something that always occurs in specific social and historical conditions.

The intricate web of struggles that feminisms have deployed in this cycle speaks to a multifaceted subject that has allowed for the amplification of the struggle's objectives. This subject is made up of all those excluded and criminalised by the system, those who suffer new forms of exploitation, any kind of sexist or institutional violence, sex workers, racialised women, migrants, lesbian, cis, and trans women, those who identify as queer, precarious workers, care workers, those who work in the productive sector, young people and pensioners, those who fight for housing and against energy poverty, those who wear the hijab, day labourers... all those who are at the forefront of social conflicts and rise up against the injustices generated by the system.

As I said, this isn't a list of identities, but rather collective subjects who are leading the conversation about feminist strategy, driven by the desire to avoid hierarchising oppressions, struggles, or demands, and instead work towards spaces of real, not rhetorical, convergence among diverse and heterogeneous groups. It's an ongoing challenge, not without its tensions and difficulties, but something profoundly transformative.

An example of all this is represented by the female farmworkers of Huelva. Pastora Filigrana, from the Seville lawyers' cooperative, explains how the strawberry-growing region of Huelva is a laboratory where one can see how this system works, a system that intertwines the violence of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and the exploitation of the land and natural resources. "All aspects of the neoliberal system in a single region."

For her part, Ana Pinto, from the Association of Day Laborers of Huelva in Struggle, shows how the fight against the conditions of exploitation in the countryside "is" the exploitation of the labour force of the migrant and racialised bodies of thousands of women, against the living conditions, sexual violence against the workers and the fight for the defense of the land – how these are all part of the same struggle. And she calls for "feminism to join our feminist, anti-racist and environmental struggles, which should be the struggles of all women, of a feminism that puts the dignified life of all women at the centre and cannot leave anyone out."

What should we call this feminism? Popular, grassroots, class-based, anti-capitalist, anti-capitalist and anti-racist, intersectional, queer? Not all of these terms have the same meaning, and we could debate them, but I think they all point in the same direction. From my point of view, despite its somewhat jargon-like nature, intersectionality opens up better possibilities for expressing and understanding the complexity and political power of the struggles that have been developing in this era.

## What is emancipatory about 21st century feminism?

---

From this perspective, we participate (with varying degrees of success) in alliances to defend public services, regularise the status of migrants, defend the rights of employed people, secure housing, strengthen community bonds, combat patriarchal violence, promote sexual and reproductive rights, and advocate for the rights of transgender people. It is a robust approach, born from and shaped by these very struggles. Some of these struggles resonate powerfully.

A good example is the march held on January 31, 2026, organised by a women's collective (the Tabadol Association of Sector 6 of La Cañada Real) and other groups, demanding the right to land, housing, and life. Thousands of people live in La Cañada and have been suffering for the past five years from electricity cuts, demolitions, and eviction from their homes. Houda Akrikez read the march's manifesto, from which I have included some excerpts.

We march with other struggles that know that what happens here directly affects them (Housing Movement, anti-racist collectives, environmentalists, neighbourhood associations, LGBTI groups). Feminists march with us because they know that demolitions are also violence. Because when a home is destroyed, it is women who bear the brunt of the impact. They are the caregivers, the sustainers of daily life, the ones who reorganise survival when the state withdraws. Feminists march because they know that without housing there is no autonomy, without territory there are no networks, without stability there is no freedom. Because there is no possible feminism if we accept that poor women, migrants, Roma women are expelled from their homes in the name of progress. To defend the idea that La Cañada should stay is to defend a popular, anti-racist, grassroots feminism that puts life at the centre.

This is what explains the potential of feminism (Gago, 2019) and the conditions under which it can confront this heartless world.

The objective of neoliberalism targets the very heart of the feminist proposal; it represents a fierce attack on the social sphere. As Wendy Brown points out, it is an attack on that space where communal life takes place, social bonds are established, identity and participation are recovered, exclusions and inequalities are made visible, demands are established, and protest is articulated.

It is the defence of an individualism that would turn us into economic subjects ready for the market, denying the interdependencies and links between us and the planet.

It is a direct attack on what gives meaning to collective organising, collective projects, the creation of community ties, and the aspiration for a real and effective universality of rights. It explains the fierce attack on feminism in its emancipatory version and the subsequent response.

Feminism, as a counter-hegemonic movement, seeks to challenge capitalism, dismantle patriarchy and coloniality, and end the power relations that define them. It aims to transform dominant ideas and values, as well as the social structures and conditions that sustain exploitation and various forms of oppression.

It is a process of shared construction that is also a commitment to an organisation that builds a feminist and anti-capitalist political collective, whose ultimate goal is the radical transformation of everything for everyone.

Breaking the narrative of the only possible world means building that new common sense in multiple conversations and struggles.

## What is emancipatory about 21st century feminism?

---

To paraphrase Eleni Varikas (Varikas, 2000):

the way in which problems are perceived and the solutions that are proposed are necessarily marked by our position in social relations, by our belongings (...). The vision of the set of problems posed by communal life involves the recognition that its multiplicity of contributions to the definition of communal life is not a danger but an unexplored source of unfulfilled social possibilities.

Translated by David Fagan for *International Viewpoint* from *Viento sur* number 200, March 2026

### References

- Alabao, Nuria (2025) *Las guerras de género. La política sexual de las derechas radicales*. Pamplona: Katakarak.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (2016) *Borderlands/la frontera*. Madrid: Capitán Swing.
- Brown, Wendy (2019) *Estados del agravio. Poder y libertad en la modernidad tardía*. Madrid: Lengua de Trapo.
- Fraser, Nancy (2006) *¿Redistribución o reconocimiento? Un debate políticofilosófico*. Madrid: Morata. ( (2004) *Redistribution or Recognition: A Philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso.)
- Gago, Verónica (2019) *La potencia feminista. O el deseo de cambiarlo todo*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños. ((2020) *Feminist International: How to Change Everything*. London :Verso.)
- Herrero, Yayo (2025) *Metamorfosis. Una revolución antropológica*. Barcelona: Arcadia.
- Meloni, Carolina (2012) *Las fronteras del feminismo. Teorías nómadas, mestizas y postmodernas*. Madrid: Fundamentos.
- Montero, Justa (2009) *Sexo, clase, raza y sexualidad: desafíos para un feminismo incluyente*. <https://feministas.org/sexo-clase-raza-y-sexualidad/>
- Peniche, Andrea; Sena Martins, Bruno; Roldao, Cristina y Louçã, Francisco (2020) *Nao posso ser quem somos? Identidades e estratégia política da esquerda*. Lisboa: Bertrand.
- Pérez Orozco, Amaia (2014) *Subversión feminista de la economía*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños. Varikas, Eleni "¿Una ciudadanía "como mujer"? Paridad versus igualdad". *viento sur*, n o 52 (2000).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.