**PhD Research Proposal Submitted to the Institute of Development Studies**

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**Title**

Feminist Leadership and Gender Backlash in Peru: The Inclusion of Gender Equality in the New Basic Education Curriculum

1. **Introduction**

Latin America is facing a common form of gender backlash (Balchin 2011; Burneo 2018; Corredor 2019). The historical opposition against the advancement of women’s and LGTBQI rights conforms now a transnational movement that uses the term ‘gender ideology’ to oppose policies around sexuality and education (Balchin 2011; Bracke and Paternotte 2016; Sweetman 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). These groups are linked to the most conservative sectors of the Catholic and Evangelical churches (Barrera 2017; Burneo 2018; Corredor 2019) and they actively engage in the political arena creating new civil society organisations, mobilising people in the streets and forming unprecedented cross-faith coalitions (Corrêa 2017; Motta and Amat y León 2018).

In Peru, the implementation of the new basic education curriculum in 2016 represented an opportunity for these opposition groups to push the agenda against gender equality gains (Motta and Amat y León 2018; Gallego and Romero, 2019; Meneses, 2019). During 2017 and 2019, thousands of people mobilised on under the campaign *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (‘Don’t Mess Up With My Kids’), they achieved to censor two Ministers of Education and blocked the implementation of the curriculum in court (Gallego and Romero 2019).

This organised backlash has an impact on the feminist movement and the gender equality agenda. This study aims to analyse what is the nature of this impact and how the feminist movement is resisting and responding the challenge posed by the opposition actors. The research also intends to unpack the nature of the backlash in the region and how it features as a transnational phenomenon.

1. **Problem statement and research questions**

Following Susan Faludi (1991), backlash refers to the episodes of acute opposition that women’s rights and feminist goals face, which are different to the constant misogyny part of the patriarchal system. Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames (2008) reconceptualise ‘backlash’ in relation to power structures, aiming to find a more neutral way of explaining the phenomenon. Scholars agree that there is a current wave of gender backlash across the globe that serves as a mobilising tool for opposing social change (Kovátz 2018; Krizsan and Roggeband 2018; Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Goetz 2019). Some of its manifestations are related to the de-institutionalisation of women’s protection systems (Goetz 2019); the resurgence of maternalism and familyist approaches in anti-poverty policies (Goetz, 2019); the closure of civic space (Sweetman 2017; Kriszand and Roggeband 2018; Goetz 2019); and the use of social media as a new evangelisation tool (Bracke and Paternotte, 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018).

Ongoing conceptual debates around backlash focus on two areas: how different categories of women experience backlash (Piscopo and Walsh 2020) and which are the ideological variations of the opposition actors (Braithwaite 2004; Jordan 2016; Piscopo 2017; Sen *et al*. 2017). This is fundamental to understand the nature of backlash because it will shape the response of the feminist movement to ensure gender equality gains (Mansbridge and Shames 2008; Piscopo 2017; Sen *et al*. 2017; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). However, scholars agree that the phenomenon is not fully theorised (Jordan, 2016; Sen, Vallejo and Walsh, 2017; Goetz, 2019) and that more conceptual work needs to be done (Piscopo and Walsh, 2020). The interest in the subject is reflected in the prolific academic production in recent years, particularly in the US and Europe. However, there is a gap in the literature referred to the Global South, and more analysis is needed to understand the drivers and specific configurations of opposition actors in developing contexts (Vaggione 2008; Balchin 2011; Sweetman 2017; Goetz 2019).

In Latin America, the contemporary backlash has its own specificities. It is not necessarily linked to the far-right or to nationalism (Bracke and Patternote 2016; Corrêa 2017) but to the most conservative expressions of the Catholic and Evangelical churches (Balchin 2011; Barrera 2017; Serrano 2017; Burneo 2018; Motta and Amat y León 2018). It is also a new form of transnational movement (Corrêa *et al.* 2018) that engages in the political arena through the creation of confessional parties, the mobilisation of people in massive demonstrations and the confirmations of coalitions across different faiths (Motta and Amat y Leon 2018). Activists referred to this form of opposition as *(religious) fundamentalism* (Vaggione 2008; Balchin 2011; Motta and Amat y León 2018) and scholars emphasise how these opposition groups utilise the concept of ‘gender ideology’ to oppose policies around sexuality and education (Serrano 2017; de Figueiredo 2018). In sum, they become a particular social movement that, like any other, makes claims to the state (Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

In Peru, feminist NGOs are collecting information and analysing the actions of this movement; but, there are only few academic publications on the fundamentalist discourse and its political use (Barrera 2017; Motta and Amat y León 2018; Meneses 2019). Moreover, none of these publications address the recent response of the feminist movement. Also, Faludi *et al.* (2020) highlight that it is urgent to link the academic conceptual discussion to the activist’s experience of backlash, unfolding a more comprehensive and understandable approach to shape an effective response. Some scholars have used the theory on social movements and countermovements to explain the dynamics between feminism and opposition actors (Chappell 2006; Corredor 2019) but in general, the social movement theory has not focused on the experience of the feminist movement and its opponents (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Balchin, 2011).

The aim of this study is to fill these gaps in the literature, both theoretical and empirically, analysing the nature of the gender backlash in Peru, the connection of opposing actors at the national and international level, and how this backlash has impacted on the Peruvian feminist movement. The analysis will be guided by the following research question: ***How the feminist movement has resisted and responded the gender backlash in Peru?***To answer this question, I will explore the following sub-questions:

1. What is the nature of the gender backlash in Peru?
2. How are the actors in contention connected at the national and the international level?
3. What are the dynamics between the feminist movement and the opposition actors?
4. **Study justification**

The feminist movement is a fundamental actor to achieve positive policy changes for women’s rights (Htun and Weldon 2010). The fundamentalist agenda represents a challenge for gender equality gains in the region, but also for democracy, as both agendas are intimately linked (Balchin 2011; Alonso and Lombardo 2018). The understanding of what constitutes backlash, its drivers and manifestations, is crucial not just as a theoretical exercise, but as a fundamental insight to shape the feminist response to the opposition dynamics (Sen *et al.* 2018; Goetz 2019; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Depending on the actors and their configurations, these can go from a virulent anti-feminist opposition to a more subtle discourse aiming to maintain the status quo (Mansbridge and Shames 2008; Jordan 2016; Piscopo 2017; Sen *et al.* 2017; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). As Sen *et al*. (2017) highlight: “Different ideological positions and orientations toward gender norms may require different types of feminist resistance” (2017: 5).

The Peruvian experience may act as an inspiration for the feminist activism in Latin America. The aim of the study is to disseminate the findings not only in academic circles but also among the feminist movement in Latin America. The research is proposed as a reflective process for the Peruvian feminist activists and the proposed methods contemplate their active participation in the data collection process. This represents an opportunity for them to analyse and understand the nature of the gender backlash in Peru and how the movement is resisting and responding the action of the opposition actors.

1. **Theoretical framework**

To address my research question, I will draw on the social movement theory and the contentious politics approach elaborated by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) as well as the concept of ‘movements and countermovements dynamics’ defined by Meyer and Staggenborg (1996). “*Contentious politics* involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors’ interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 7).

My study will unpack the contentious politics of opposing movements and will analyse the emergence of the fundamentalist movement in Latin America as a ‘countermovement,’ one that emerges due to the success of the original movement and “makes contrary claims simultaneously” (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996: 1631). Movements react to each other and could even generate a counter-countermovement, different from the original one (Zald and Ussem 1987: 249, in Meyer and Staggenborg 1996: 1632).

According to the contentious politics approach, a particular *episode of contention* may be explained looking at two *processes*: (a) the political identity formation, and (b) the mobilisation itself (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Each process contains *causal mechanisms* that I will use as main analytical categories: (a) the political opportunity structures, (b) the resource mobilisation, (c) the framing of demands, and (d) the *repertoires* of contention. The *political opportunity structures* are the “aspects of the regime that offer challengers both opening to advance their claims and threats and constraints that caution them against making these claims” (Goldstone and Tilly 2001, in Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 49). The political context offers opportunities or threats to social movements when they are visible and perceived by activists as such. The *resource mobilisation* is referred to how identities and existing organisational resources are transformed to serve the objectives of the movements. They are the social movement bases: social background, organisational resources, and cultural frameworks (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). The *framing* of the dispute refers to the narratives about the contentious issue and how movements are able to place them in the collective to gain support. It also relates to the identity formation and grievances of their bases (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001). Lastly, the *repertoires* of contention refer to the innovative forms of collective action: demonstrations, public statements, creation of associations, and lobbying (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015).

I will also use the concept of *critical actors* from Childs and Krook (2006, 2009, in Thomson 2018) to examine and explain the role of activists and government officials in the resistance and response to the fundamentalist movement in Peru. These are defined as individuals who are developing progressive action around women’s rights, initiating reforms or mobilising others for policy change (Childs and Krook 2006, 2009, in Thomson 2018).

The operationalisation of these theory and concepts will contribute to answer the proposed research question, as well as to theorise on the nature of gender backlash and how the feminist movement can resist and respond to ensure gender equality gains.

1. **Methodology**

McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) orientate the study of the contentious politics through the examination of activists’ performance during the episode of contention - using newspaper records, press releases and public communications of political actors, among others- to analyse the causal mechanisms that explain the processes of mobilisation. To answer my research question, I will rely on qualitative secondary data of a single case study that allows deep insight into the contentious politics around gender equality in Peru. The selected case is the reform of the new National Education Curriculum in 2016, which generated a large mobilisation against the implementation of the gender equality approach in the curriculum. This approach was nominally in the curriculum since the World Conference on Education in Jomtien in 1990 (Muñoz, 2006); but, it was not until 2016 that the National Council for Education asked the government to fully develop it across the curriculum and that the opposition groups emerged as an important social movement. Focusing on this policy reform allows me to set the boundaries of my study, in terms of content, actors and timeline of the episode of contention.

I will conduct qualitative research using primary data collection methods such as key informant interviews and focus group discussions, with individuals form three different sets of actors: (a) feminist activists mobilised around the inclusion of gender equality in education; (b) government officials involved in the education policy reform and the episode of contention; and (c) relevant members of the campaign *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (‘Don’t Mess Up With My Kids’). The implementation of these methods will be remotely done until the COVID-19 pandemic is contained in Peru and the travel conditions are safe enough to go to the country. My previous research on this topic and my experience in Peru for 13 years as a development practitioner allow me to understand the context and to have access to most of the key informants proposed, particularly those part of the feminist movement and the government.

I will also collect qualitative secondary data from major national newspapers and investigative journalism portals, official documents, social media, and public communications from campaigners, both in favour and against the implementation of the gender equality approach in the curriculum. This information will allow me to triangulate the data collected from primary sources. For developing the analysis of the data, I will use discourse and content analysis methods based on the concepts from my theoretical framework: (a) the political opportunity structures, (b) the resource mobilisation, (c) the framing of demands, and (d) the *repertoires* of contention. I will code my data according to these concepts and use NVivo as data analysis software. Ethical considerations from the University of Sussex will be followed.

1. **Structure of the study**

The research will be presented under the following structure. First, I will introduce the study, state the problem and the research questions, explain the relevance and pertinence of these questions, and state the main argument that comes from the analysis and review of the literature. Second, I will present a revision of the literature around backlash, social movement theory, feminist theory, and gender equality change, and will state the theoretical framework to be used in the analysis of the case study. Third, I will explain the design of the study, as well as present a detailed description of methods used and limitations founded. Fourth, I will explain the case study and the actors in contention, with a particular focus on the emergence of the opposition actors as a countermovement. Fifth, I will explain the political opportunity structure of both actors. Sixth, I will analyse and compare the resource mobilisation of both movements. Seventh, I will present how the movement and countermovement framed the dispute. Eighth, I will address the innovative forms of collective action or repertoires of contention utilised by both actors. Ninth, I will summarise the findings from the research. Tenth, I will present the conclusion and recommendations.

1. **Anticipated contribution of the study**

There are three areas of contribution of this study. Firstly, it will bring together bodies of literature that do not always dialogue to explain gender equality change: literature on social movements, literature on feminist mobilisation, and literature on backlash. This exercise will represent a contribution to the social movements literature and the understanding of the movement and countermovement dynamics from a feminist perspective. Secondly, there is an empirical contribution related to the understanding of the fundamentalist movement in Peru and its connections at the international level, particularly with the US and Spain, something that remains as a gap in the literature. And lastly, this study will add the findings from the Peruvian experience to the backlash ongoing conceptual debates, having the potential to make an original contribution to this body of literature.

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