

Decolonizing feminist knowledge: The standpoint of majority world feminist activists in Perú

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fap**Shelly Grabe** 

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Abstract

From its beginnings, feminism has challenged knowledge about women and gender and questioned the methods by which that knowledge is produced. Feminist psychologists are well-positioned to engage in a critical re-examination of the assumptions underlying theory or the constructs employed in the construction of knowledge. Macleod et al. noted that feminists have rarely adopted a single theory, recognizing that every feminism bears the stamp of its place of origin. The current study contributes to feminist decolonizing efforts by using the standpoint of activists in Perú to conduct an examination of feminism. The project involves scholar-activist collaborations with the Global Feminisms Project, at the University of Michigan, and a feminist organization in Perú, Flora Tristán. Nine key feminist activists were interviewed through *testimonio*. Participants held positions including: Indigenous leaders, scholars, Congresswomen, directors of organizations, and youth leaders. Key findings reveal that the feminist activists interviewed believe that production of knowledge is not a monopoly of the academy, feminism is inherently intersectional and is a *process*, not an academic definition, and one crucial for political action.

Keywords

feminism, decolonizing, Perú, scholar-activism, psychology, *testimonio*

Introduction

I think academia has to open its mind, its gaze, its vision, even the methodology of addressing the issues. ... We [feminists] do not need to be read, nor interpreted; what we need is to establish the intercultural dialogues without denying the identity or intellectual property or

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authorship of the people. We can generate a greater powerful knowledge, without censorship or obscuring, or without underestimating these contributions. (Tania Pariona Tarqui, Indigenous Quechua leader, 36 years old at the time of interview)

From its beginnings, feminism has challenged knowledge about women and gender and questioned the methods by which that knowledge is produced. Feminist psychologists, in particular, noted decades ago that as marginalized scholars, feminist scientists were well positioned to engage in a critical re-examination of the assumptions underlying theory or the constructs employed in the construction of knowledge (Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Morawski, 1990). Decades later, Macleod et al. (2014) wrote, in the context of understanding that feminists have rarely adopted a single theory, “as one might expect, every feminism bears the stamp of the material conditions, ideological pre-suppositions and socio-political structures of its place of origin” (p. 6). Yet, much of what has been produced in psychology to understand feminism has been rooted in investigations of predominantly white women from the United States – attesting to the dominance of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) settings in feminist theorizing and publishing (Henrich et al., 2010; Macleod et al., 2014; Marecek, 2012). As such, in their 2014 editorial reflection for *Feminism & Psychology*, Macleod and colleagues set a goal to provide readers with access to feminisms around the world and, in particular, encourage submissions that drew on decolonial theory. The current study takes a decolonial approach by using the standpoint of feminist activists in Perú to conduct a critical examination of feminism.

In a ground-breaking Special Issue – *Feminisms and Decolonising Psychology: Possibilities and Challenges* – Macleod et al. (2020) brought into greater focus decolonial perspectives on feminism and psychology by noting two primary concerns: 1) decolonizing efforts are necessary to deconstruct knowledge generated by psychological science, and 2) dominant versions of feminism, more specifically, have replicated elements of coloniality. Coloniality, as is being used in this paper, is referencing a system of thought that extends beyond the colonization of people, to include a mentality and power structure that positions Western knowledge as universally applicable (Adams et al., 2015; Macleod et al., 2020; Mignolo, 2007). In this manner, the coloniality of knowledge is a contemporary form of colonialism that regulates people through various systems, including academia. Decolonization, therefore, requires the task of exposing and resisting the coloniality of knowledge and uncovering marginalized knowledge.

The aim of the current manuscript is to contribute to feminist decolonizing efforts to better understand feminism itself. The paper is organized based on guiding principles put forward by Macleod et al. (2020), namely that feminist decolonizing efforts should include the following: 1) undermine the coloniality of knowledge, 2) place emphasis on intersectionality by connecting gender with other systems of power including globalization, and 3) use research methods consistent with decolonizing knowledge. By centering majority world¹ women’s voices from Perú in the construction of feminist knowledge, this manuscript aims to “provide insight into gendered realities along multiple intersecting dimensions of difference, privilege, and inequality” (Macleod et al., 2014, p. 5).

Undermining the coloniality of knowledge

The practice of decolonizing feminist knowledge requires critical reflection on the construction of knowledge – in this case, what does feminism mean and how have we come to know that? In Mohanty's (1984) ground-breaking article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", she argued that white Western feminism was constructed with inherent ideas of superiority that either juxtaposed or collapsed the experience of women in the majority world. One obvious problem with the Western framework of feminism, in failing to understand majority world perspectives, is that the work has been theorized and applied as if a Western perspective and experience are universal (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015).

Put another way, if knowledge reflects the position of the knower, then what we currently know about feminism in psychology largely reflects the experience of white college women. In psychology, what feminism means and what it means to be a feminist is largely taken up in the feminist identity development (FID) literature (Downing & Roush, 1985). In a critical review of the FID literature conducted 20 years ago, researchers questioned for whom feminism applied, given that the bulk of research on this topic had been conducted with white college-aged women (Moradi et al., 2002). Nearly two decades later, when Siegel and Calogero (2021) reviewed the most commonly used scales to measure beliefs, behavioral components, perspectives, and/or agreement with core components of feminism, they found that investigations using these measures in the past half century had continued to occur predominantly in the United States among overwhelmingly white samples. Yet, the results from these investigations have come to universally define our understandings of feminism (Moon & Holling, 2020). According to María Lugones, a decolonial feminist approach requires dropping enchantment with "woman" as a universal category (Lugones, 2010). Despite the methodological shortcomings in the literature, feminist psychologists have also long argued that a critical re-examination of knowledge involves appreciating standpoint:

Standpoint theorists assert that a knower's activities and social experiences shape his or her understanding of realities. Moreover, the standpoint of those in power offers a partial and distorted perspective on social life; that of subjugated individuals offers the possibility of a more complete and less distorted understanding. In feminist theory, this idea has been explored most thoroughly with respect to male and female. But it is not gender alone that determines social position – color, class, sexual orientation, and disability also position one within the social hierarchy, and thus presumably afford possible standpoints for creating new knowledge and understandings of reality. (Crawford & Marecek, 1989, p. 480)

Because feminism outside of white Western contexts may take on different forms, the absence of these perspectives from the construction of knowledge limits feminist theorizing.

Feminist perspectives in many Latin American countries, for example, have been influenced by chronic political and economic strife that has mobilized feminist action. In Perú, in particular, a ripe context emerged for women to establish political autonomy

at the end of the 1970s whereby a political perspective was developed based on the realities of women. In this context, regionwide feminist *Encuentros* began as meeting places that provided feminist activists with periodic forums for gaining theoretical and strategic insight into change as well as solidarity from feminists in other Latin American countries (Alvarez, 2000). To date, there have been 14 regional *Encuentros*, starting in 1981 in Bogotá, Colombia, through the most recent in Montevideo, Uruguay, in 2017. The second *Encuentro* was held in Lima, Perú, in 1983, where women from all over Latin America came to share experiences as feminists, researchers, grassroots activists, health workers, university students, union organizers, political exiles, party militants, film-makers, and writers (Sternbach et al., 1992). This meeting set the stage for advancing the analysis of gender power relations as they intersect with other relations of power (Sternbach et al., 1992). These themes were cemented in the 13th *Encuentro* (2014), also held in Perú, with meeting topics centering on interculturality and intersectionality. Although the potential for majority world sites to foment feminist discourse has received ample attention from Latin Americanists, psychology remains remiss in considering how these perspectives deepen understandings of feminism (Alvarez et al., 2003). Given the potential for this standpoint to generate feminist awareness and knowledge, the current manuscript centers the often-missing voices of women from the majority world.

Placing emphasis on intersectionality by connecting gender with other systems of power, including globalization

The demand that the “woman’s voice” be heard, and the search for the “woman’s voice” as central to feminist methodology, reflects nascent feminist theory ... insofar as it presupposes that the silencing of women is systematic, shows up in regular, patterned ways, and that there are discoverable causes of this widespread observable phenomenon. (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, p. 574)

Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is credited with introducing the now widely used term “intersectionality” to describe the analytic approach to understanding lived experience from the lens of multiple intersecting categories of oppression. Only one year later Marfil Francke (1990), a Peruvian sociologist, used the term the “braid of domination” to speak about the intersecting influences of ethnicity, gender and class. Despite the inclusive nature of intersectionality to capture processes related to power and subordination, many initial investigations into intersectionality within psychology have reflected a largely Western bias (Grabe, 2020). According to feminist theorist María Lugones (2010), decolonial approaches, in addition to understanding processes of racialization, would involve understanding feminism through the experiences of colonization, capitalist exploitation, and heterosexualism and more specifically, to understand the resistance of women on the ground to these processes.

Well before intersectionality was given attention by psychologists in a US context (e.g., Cole, 2009), Peruvian feminist activists and scholars were employing and writing about the value of considering different subject positions when doing coalitional

work. Three decades ago, Peruvian author and feminist activist Virginia Vargas wrote that, “The social, cultural, ethnic, and geographical plurality of the women’s movement in Perú shapes the development of the different social actors and their differences produce a driving force” (1991, p. 10). This is perhaps not surprising when considering that Perú has experienced a number of historical periods marked by colonization, capitalist exploitation, and militarized abuses of power. Focusing on an understanding of how multiple forms of marginality and privilege shape lived experiences in the current study may be a means to transform the social construction of knowledge (Grzanka, 2018).

Research methods consistent with decolonizing knowledge

It is likely that both the method of investigation and the content of many accounts would be different if illuminating the lives of the people the accounts are about were the aim of the studies. (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, p. 578)

In a Special Issue on feminist epistemologies, theorist Mariana Ortega (2006) stated that theorizing about women of color without understanding their actual lives or without practical engagement with women of color effectively masks the privilege that allows white feminists to continue producing knowledge about women of color without actually learning anything from them. Decolonial feminism takes this one step further and calls for methodology that produces innovative work investigating sites of resistance that bring visibility to a fuller spectrum of women’s lived experience. This is consistent with María Lugones’ (2010) observation that moving methodologically from women of color feminisms to a decolonial feminism involves considering feminism from and at the grassroots. This is similar to Mohanty’s (2003) call decades earlier when she argued that understanding struggles of justice must involve illuminating “Third-World women’s” engagement with resistance to oppressive regimes in relation to states and histories of imperialism.

In “Activist Scholarship: Antiracism, Feminisms, and Social Change”, Sudbury and Okazawa-Rey (2015) define activist scholarship as “the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and in the service of, progressive social movements” (p. 3). In this manner, scholar-activist approaches are models of active engagement between the academy and grassroots that hold the potential to decolonize knowledge (Grabe, 2014). One example of this is what some scholars call “accompaniment”, whereby researchers remove their agenda from the ivory tower of the academy and work in solidarity with individuals from marginalized communities engaged in struggles for justice (Adams et al., 2015; Grabe, 2016a, 2016b). This approach emphasizes engagement with local practices, rather than knowledge abstraction removed from the sociocultural context. Similarly engaged approaches employ a “theory from the south” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012) perspective that centers the experience of majority world communities as a privileged site for the construction of knowledge. In sum, methods consistent with decolonizing feminism need to heed the imperative that the academy not be the only location that determines our research agendas, that hierarchies exist within the sites and locations in which knowledge is produced, and that clarity is maintained about the origin of the production of knowledge (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010).

Method

The current project began as a scholar-activist collaboration with the Global Feminisms Project (GFP) at the University of Michigan, and a community partner working with a feminist organization in Lima, Perú, the Flora Tristán Peruvian Women's Center. The GFP is a collaborative international project which has conducted and archived open-access interviews with women involved in feminist activism, social movements, and women's studies departments in nine different countries prior to Perú.² Flora Tristán is a leading feminist organization existing within a multi-sector, coordinated mobilization of women in Perú with the mission to combat the structural causes that restrict women's citizenship.

For this project, the author and community partner³ were both interested in working from a scholar-activist approach aimed at uniting scholarship with activist testimony to document how women are creating social change and enacting justice. Because the study was designed in accordance with Mohanty's (2003) assertion that understanding women's struggles for justice must involve illuminating "Third World" women's perspective, several steps involving "methodological self-consciousness" were taken to address the author's social location as a middle-class white woman working within a university in the United States (Charmaz, 2017, p. 36). First, because an underlying goal of decolonial research is to reconfigure knowledge production in a manner that shifts power and control beyond the academy, the women selected for the interviews were identified by the community partner (not the author) to prioritize her knowledge and experience. Second, in consideration of how the differing social locations between the author and the participants could impact the co-construction of knowledge, we agreed that the interviews should be conducted by a Peruvian woman, rather than the author, and therefore hired a Lima-based activist, documentary director, and university instructor whose own work was focused on gender justice, to conduct the interviews for this project. Nevertheless, to address issues of respect and transparency, and bring credibility to the research aspect of the project, the community partner suggested the author be present at the outset of each interview to introduce herself and the broader scope of the project. The author read extensively about each woman prior to meeting her in order to acknowledge the importance of each woman's contribution.⁴

Participants and procedure

To establish parity with the other sites in the Global Feminisms Project we aimed to conduct 10 interviews. An intersectional approach informed the general sampling strategy for this study in that an emphasis was placed on identifying women from a range of diverse backgrounds with a focus on women who were widely recognized as actively engaged leaders within the women's social movement. We were able to reach nine women who reflect the complex identities included in the movement, were from several different regions of the country, and ranged in age from their late 20s to their 70s at the time of the interview. The women worked in a variety of different sectors and held positions that included: Indigenous leaders, scholars, Congresswomen, directors

of feminist organizations, obstetricians, trans activists, and youth leaders who have risen to national prominence.

The method used for interviewing centered on the use of *testimonio*. *Testimonio* differs from oral history in that it involves the participant critically reflecting on their experience within a particular sociocultural reality marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In the current study, the interviewees were prompted to discuss reflections of their activism and the intersection of their work with the women's social movement. *Testimonio* challenges objectivity by situating the individual in a collective experience, resulting in "new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and respond to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequity" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363).

All of the interviews occurred in Spanish via Zoom during the COVID pandemic in the Summer of 2020. All of the interviews were preceded by a conversation that explained how the woman's *testimonio* might be used and each interviewee granted permission for their names and interviews to be publicized (Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018). Institutional Review Board approval for these procedures was granted by the University of California (HS-FY2021-39). The interviews lasted approximately an hour and the videos and transcripts are reproduced in full (i.e., unedited) on the Global Feminisms Project website. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a team of undergraduate students⁵ and translated into English by hired staff at the GFP. Analysis of the interviews was conducted on the English transcriptions.

Analysis

The analyses were informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach which requires the researcher to reflexively consider how issues such as worldviews may enter the research process (Charmaz, 2017). More narrowly in grounded theory studies, the researcher's analytic focus emerges during the research process, rather than being determined before empirical inquiry begins (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). In this case, increased familiarity with the data upon multiple reads led to conceptual categories, rather than the findings being hypothesis driven (Charmaz, 2020).

In the current study the author and a graduate research assistant read three of the *testimonios* and met to discern if there were emergent themes in this subset. We operationalized potential themes and through the use of memo-writing and re-reading we independently coded all of the *testimonios*. Following coding, we met to discuss areas of agreement and disagreement, being mindful of how our own social location as white middle-class women may influence how we were reading or making meaning. Any excerpts where there was not agreement were discussed until consensus was reached. Several categories related to feminist knowledge emerged with the study of the data. First and foremost, it stood out that the women interviewed in Perú view themselves as "knowers" who participate in the construction of feminist knowledge. This category is labeled "Have We Got a Theory for You!", borrowing directly from Lugones and Spelman's (1983) article whereby they suggest that feminist theory making might be different if the women for whom it was meant to be about were part of the theory making

process. It also emerged that nearly all of the women interviewed discussed a definition of feminism that was rooted in: intersectionality, process, and applied action. These categories and related findings are discussed in more detail below.

Results

“Have we got a theory for you!”

In Lugones and Spelman’s (1983) paper, “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for ‘The Woman’s Voice’”, the authors argue that feminist theories should be about women who give their own account of what is happening by being based on a “variety of real-life stories women provide about themselves” (p. 575). This perspective emerged across multiple interviews with activists involved in the women’s movement in Perú. For example, Virginia Vargas, a founding member of the Flora Tristán Center, and 75 years old at the time of the interview, astutely shared:

... the production of knowledge is not a privilege nor a monopoly of the academy. The very interesting idea of Boaventura de Sousa Santos,⁶ who talks about the ecology of knowing and meaning: knowledge is not individualistic. That is, just like there is an ecology where all the diversity that breaks the mono culture of view, I think that with production of knowledge the same happens from different experiences and views that open other dimensions of the world. I believe that your experience and subjectivity produce a way of viewing the world which is important, and which gives importance to the academy.

Virginia came to this perspective after a lifetime of achievements working as an internationally recognized activist and scholar with over 40 publications and having been acknowledged with a UNIFEM Award at the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995).

Tania Pariona Tarqui, working from a different social location, also believed in the importance that women telling their own stories held for the construction of knowledge. Tania, who was quoted at the very beginning of the manuscript, is a Quechua leader, politician and human rights activist who was elected to Congress in 2016. In 2018 she was the President of the Women and Family Commission of the Congress. As an activist, she works extensively to establish social equality for Indigenous people, youth, and women. Thirty-six years old at the time of the interview, she had this to say about knowledge:

I know from experiences of Indigenous sisters, activists, and also scholars. This includes how we unravel these knots that do not end up being understood from the Indigenous world-views or from the Indigenous organizations with respect to feminism. It seems fundamental to me to have this type of literature, of research – that is, research and activism are not so different. I do believe that activism can add fundamentally in the generation of new theories, new knowledge and new reflections. In fact, this is not new. Some sisters in Guatemala and Mexico have begun to say, “Listen, my experience is not only of activism. I don’t come to

tell you about my experience. I come to propose a theory of change. I come to propose a methodology to address the view on sexuality, sexual rights and reproductive rights in Indigenous communities, etc.”

It is a reflection on feminist activism in Perú that a former Congresswoman operates from a perspective that values women’s standpoint and, further, understands the value of this in terms of theories of change. At the time of the interview, Tania was responsible for the Women’s Program at CHIRAPAQ (*Centro de Culturas Indígenas del Perú*; Center for Indigenous Cultures of Perú), an Indigenous association that, for 30 years, has promoted the recognition of Indigenous rights, with a special commitment to Indigenous children, youth, and women.

Tarcila Rivera Zea, a more senior Quechua activist who has dedicated nearly 40 years of her life to defending and seeking recognition for the Indigenous people of Perú, elaborated these points when she spoke of subjectivity. Tarcila, in her 60s at the time of the interview, is a leader of CHIRAPAQ, the same organization in which Tania works. What Tarcila shared reflected an evolution whereby feminists have come to value lived experience as knowledge:

We do not repeat feminist concepts as conceived from the outside. I have been questioned as to whether I should speak properly, etc., but I did not come from academia or from theory, because I come from a family tradition where women work side by side with men ... So, I come from an experience of that kind and when I look at the other side it is simply to say, “Well, I’m no less than anyone else.” ... In the women’s movement, it was hard to understand that discrimination was not only gender-based, because if I am a non-academic Andean woman, not a social scientist, who does not have theoretical concepts, no, my word, my opinion did not have the same weight. Now things have changed quite a lot and I think that all the feminists of my generation and I, along with them, have also been learning.

Tarcila is clear that her lived experience doesn’t just matter, but that it has the weight of the academy because it is this experience that forms knowledge. In other words, she is describing that her experience as an Indigenous woman is as valuable as the “other side” (i.e., academia) in understanding feminist concepts. And she is pointed about the fact that those feminist concepts are not borrowed or imposed from elsewhere.

Lourdes Huanca Atencio, the founder and president of an Indigenous organization focused on women,⁷ and 69 years old at the time of the interview, shared her perspective on how knowledge was constructed among feminists:

Feminists have the knowledge, the knowledge that as women we have to make ourselves respected, to value ourselves. As much as I would have liked to enter a school, in having a profession, I did not, it’s not easy for me because of my economic situation. But I feel happy that I have the university of life, that I have a master’s degree on the street. Tell

me “go block” – I block roads without any fear. And I have my doctorate when they’re going to take me to jail for defending my territory.

Lourdes underscores that, for her, feminist knowledge is not a product of the academy, it is a product of women’s lived experience. In fact, she equates her life experience to being degreed – as an analogy – to illustrate that the knowledge she gained, a knowledge that matters, could not actually be obtained in university, but it nevertheless reflects expertise. In sum, the findings in this category of analysis highlight the importance that activist women in Perú place in believing that knowledge ought to be co-constructed, rather than being a privilege only of the academy.

Intersectionality

Women in this sample talked at length about the importance of difference. In fact, the overarching commonality among the definitions women offered for feminism involved the necessity of understanding the value of diverse perspectives and social locations. In other words, for the women in this sample feminism is, by definition, intersectional. This was true for Gahela Tseneg Contreras, who ran to become the first transgender woman in Perú’s Congress in the January 2020 elections, campaigning with what has been described as one of the most courageous and intersectional programs of the emerging and diverse Peruvian left. Although she did not win a seat, she has continued her political activism to transform issues of equity and discrimination among LGBTI individuals. Only 27 years old at the time of the interview, she had this to say about feminism:

I think that something that should be moving the thread of feminism is the spirit of continuing to deconstruct, to listen. Just as it was difficult for our African colleagues to contribute to the Afro-feminist agenda – they fought, they debated, they demanded, and I think they questioned feminism. And did they destroy feminism? No, they fed it and then the lesbian colleagues came, did they destroy feminism? No, they fed it. And the same thing happened with Indigenous women, the same thing happens now with trans women. I think feminism is the movement that is most ready to try to achieve intersectionality. And that’s what encourages me. You end up questioning everything. For example, I have a rural, farmer, street feminism, a decolonial, anti-racist, ecological feminism. A feminism that is not against men, a feminism that fights mainly for women, of course, in all its diversity, but that beyond people, fights for harmony between everything around us.

Gahela’s explanation of feminism references the adaptable and long-lasting nature of the signifier “feminism” and her definition of it underscores a multicultural and intersectional approach to gender equity.

Tania, the young Quechua leader and former Congressperson quoted in the previous section, explains how feminism goes beyond gender as a category of analysis and necessarily needs to include an understanding of additional differences that otherwise interrupt equity:

I have been learning along the way, living together, learning in the very defense of the rights as a woman. And so today I can say with confidence ... There are positions within positions, but I think that this does not diminish, it does not affect the sense of feminism itself, which has to do with this vindication of the rights that we have as women. ... Feminism is [pause] to claim the rights that we have as women, but it does not refer only to a right of gender equality for example. I know that it's a focus that leads us to reflect on gender relations and the power relations that are generated between the genders, but it also goes beyond that for us, Indigenous women, and for me. Feminism also needs reflection from the racial-ethnic approach, from the territorial approach. ... In other words, it's not equality that happens because we are all equal. On the contrary, equality is where differences are recognized. For me, feminism also means transforming those patterns that the patriarchy has been imposing on all our societies and even on the original peoples. ... For that reason, many times when we speak of feminism ... a feminism of our own, a feminism that affirms being Indigenous, without the need to, let's say, necessarily contradict the struggles of other sectors.

Tania's definition of feminism is inherently inclusive. To understand that there are "positions within positions" articulates the reality that within the category "women" there are different social locations that reflect structural dimensions of power that are not experienced similarly among all women. For Tania, the awareness that inequities manifest differently among Indigenous communities directly informs her understanding of how to apply feminism to the transformation of inequitable structures that disadvantage women in their particular social locations.

One prominent feature of feminism in Perú, mentioned briefly by Gahela and Tarcila, but articulated by many of the women in the sample, is that it considers the experience of Indigeneity. Tarcila, the leader of CHIRAPAQ (Center for Indigenous Cultures of Perú), shared an Indigenous perspective of feminism that underscores how plural ways of knowing are relevant in contexts involving intersections of capitalism and racism:

We have fulfilled our role as women, as a bridge of articulation and understanding with the women's movement, but from the Indigenous perspective, and in the Indigenous peoples' movement as women, making them understand that we are strengthening the movement. We have managed to make it clear that we are not your competitors, nor are we enemies, nor are we going to divide the movement. So at this point, Indigenous women's feminism is enriched with a very clear vision of the complementarity and indivisibility of collective rights as Indigenous, and individual rights as people, and as women. Now that there is so much talk about natural resources, the impact of climate change and so on, that is where it is most clearly seen. Collective rights, in relation to territory, natural resources, language, and cultural expressions and not being violated in your body, in your life, or in your territory. In other words, I think this example summarizes both aspects, because Indigenous women also define the act of dumping toxic waste, for example, on their land or in their river as violence that is a collective right, but if that person does not have clean water and is also

physically abused, violated in one way or another within or outside the family or community context, it also has repercussions on life and health. So these are two concepts of rights that for us, after almost 30 years, we can say that it is a contribution.

What Tarcila is articulating, as did others (e.g., Tania), is that neither the experience or understanding of inequity can be rooted solely in being a “woman” or solely in identifying as Indigenous. Earlier in her interview she noted that conversations for Indigenous women in the feminist movement were initially challenging. However, she details how bringing an Indigenous perspective on collective rights to the table strengthened the feminist movement over the past 30 years by contributing an understanding of how structural inequities are also related to capitalism and globalization (e.g., resource extraction or toxic dumping).

Finally, Lourdes’ definition of feminism, explained through use of metaphor, is also rooted in Indigeneity:

in Peru the subject of feminism is growing. ... And solidarity is not only from Peru, but also internationally. That’s a sign of how we’ve been moving forward. ... We are companions who are seeds, native seeds, Creoles, who give hope, who give the light of life. ... But because we are Indigenous, Creole seeds, we are like the river, the river you can put a stone in, you can put a plate in it so that it doesn’t cross the water, but the river looks for its channel and crosses. It crosses. We cross. So that’s what we are, partner. Strong, very strong. Like those wild flowers. We are beautiful and pretty, but we are very courageous. That’s what being a feminist is.

In considering the decolonization of knowledge, embracing metaphor may be a powerful way to reject the legacy of colonialism and to affirm the value of Indigenous knowledge. In sum, feminists in Perú do not identify as feminists based on their subordinated gender alone, but rather with an understanding of a range of social locations and subject positions. Importantly, women in this sample also do not appear to be discussing difference as a way to subcategorize feminisms (e.g., Indigenous feminism, Latin American feminism), but speak more clearly that feminism is, by its nature, intersectional.

Processes of articulation

Many women in the sample described feminism as a process, rather than as something static – a process that is evolving and decidedly instrumental. Kate Soto, only 27 at the time of the interview, spoke about the changing face of feminism. Kate, despite being so young, rose to national prominence when she was recognized by the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations for her work and was awarded the “Order of Merit for Women” from President Vizcarra in 2018. In her interview she explained that feminism is in a constant process of change and growth and that, done well, requires processes of “articulation”:

The feminist movement at this time is in a huge boiling point. We are in a kind of effervescent moment where every day there is a new face of feminism. Perhaps my partners and I were a new face, since now there are 30 or 20 or 15 new faces in different spaces ... articulating with other partners. ... In our country, we are facing challenges of being able to articulate within our diversity, but within these challenges of articulating the recognition of our differences, there is also love and the encounter of each one of us ... I think that meeting and recognizing each other in our diversity will generate this great wave, especially within our country, that is already happening.

Tania Pariona Tarqui speaks similarly about processes of change and how reflection is a necessary component of growth:

It [feminism] is not a concluded process because there are also new themes that invoke us and that call on us to make deep reflections. So, it's not something that has ended with knowing or having participated with feminist sisters and being in the struggle in the streets for substantive equality for women, because I believe that there are other new themes that place us in continued deepening reflections and to continue looking at ourselves, with other eyes or with new eyes.

And, Virginia Vargas, a foremother in the movement, describes feminism as being "in a permanent process of articulation":

Feminism [laughs] I'd say is a permanent and never ending political and social construction, because it is widening and developing. It has certain types of actors or views besides the reality that is also becoming more complex, or you're discovering it in new forms. ... Of course in collective fights there is only one platform to go forward, but it is fed by the different positions and views and subjectivities that are brought by the different people, that is why I prefer to talk about a diverse movement that is in a permanent process of articulation.

...

The Latin American feminists have been a potent impulse for the collective work and the international collective regional work. It has helped a lot to have feminist reunions from '81 up until now, every two years at first and then every three after. Spaces where you can connect, you can talk, you can make campaigns, you can generate networks, ultimately a series of questions. When we were organizing the first feminist reunion I remembered it was Peru's turn. Magaly Pineda,⁸ a marvelous feminist, who died a few years ago, from Dominican Republic, she said "the only thing that we have to have clear is that we don't have a feminist meter, nobody has a right to think that their feminism is better than the other. Without a feminist meter we will advance." That was like the beginning of our creation of feminist dynamics in Latin America.

In describing processes of articulation, the women in this sample are talking about feminism as dynamic, as something that evolves and has a connection to change. They at once recognize that there needs to be solidarity around a common cause and spaces offered for reflection during regional meetings, but there also needs to be enough stretch for expansion and growth.

Applied action

In describing change, many women in this sample also discussed feminism as something that was applied – a platform for action – whether that action involved mainstreaming policies, joining political parties, or putting forward agendas. In one example, Kate Soto discusses the importance of representative politics and policies:

When many of our colleagues manage to gain access to representative positions in national politics ... in policies that can change things for us. ... How do we build different dynamics from our social policies, different approaches from our policies with an intercultural mainstreaming, but not just talk about the mainstreaming of the approach, but also talk about effective policies that can respond to each of these differences? And, within the framework of this public problem, I mention feminists because we are the ones who end up setting the agendas and because we need partners, we also need voices that are there day by day, enunciating it, voices that are demanding it so that there is a response.

Indira Huilca Flores, as a former Congresswoman, represents a woman in the movement who in fact gained access to the kind of representative position Kate spoke of. Indira was a Congresswoman from 2016–21, serving as the President of the Committee on Women and Family and a member of the Committee on Labor and Social Security in which she worked for the rights of women, workers, and the LGTBI community. Indira was outspoken in calling the first congressional plenary session on women held in 2018. In her interview, she discusses the formation of a new political party (New Peru) as a means to further work on gender equity:

All those years during the 2010 decade were years of much social conflict in our country linked to environmental issues, to the issues of Indigenous peoples. And there was also a lot of solidarity from the feminist movement with those processes. So for me, it was like, “Well, this is also part of it,” we are feminists, but this is also part of it. I was very marked by The Baguazo.⁹ When the Baguazo happened people said “that’s a barbarity,” that is, how can they kill people like that with such impunity and without a firm response? ... And that, among other things, pushed me to decide to join a political organization, a party, or a collective that openly manifested itself as a political movement. ... What we wanted was freedom and for it to be a space that would precisely welcome diverse expressions that within the Left had a link to other movements ... that represented a little of all these struggles that we have come to, some people or various people, from feminism, from the struggle of the Indigenous peoples, the struggle for the environment, of the workers. ... It [feminism] is

so massive that you can really turn around and you're going to find a feminist or someone who assumes she's a feminist maybe without ever having been in an organized space, or a collective, or a group or anything, but she says "I'm a feminist". So that's no small thing. That is one, I would say that it is almost like part of a revolution, right, as we are in the middle of a feminist revolution in the world and then of course the forms of doing politics within that, it is a whirlpool, this has changed totally.

Indira articulates how feminism informed the formation of a political party as a means to have a platform for action. And she specifies that feminist forms of doing politics have emerged to be part of the whirlpool in a way that reflects revolutionary change, rather than being relegated to a marginalized space. Virginia Vargas also describes feminism as a strategy that is necessary for putting forward agendas that can dismantle the intersectional problems of patriarchal, economic, and global powers:

... it is not only the strategy with the state what we have to rescue but specifically generating other views, generating other dimensions, fighting for what the government does not want to give you. The fight for the defense of the body and the defense of the territory is fundamental. The fight for different ecosystems; in other words, the fight against voracious capitalism that is leaving the people to die. This gives you an idea of what toxic development means – that is, neoliberal capitalism, colonial and patriarchal as well. That is our agenda, at this moment it's the agenda, and we cannot fight for the right of women, we cannot fight to reach this recognition, if we don't unarm all these powers that are fundamental for the patriarchy.

In discussing feminism as a "fight", Virginia is clear that feminist principles explicitly, and necessarily, inform agendas for action. Finally, Gahela Tseng Contreras shared an impassioned belief that "feminism is a tool of transformation. It is a political response to everything that is happening to us right now" and went on to state:

We can have discrepancies and differences, we cannot agree on everything but I think there is a key factor, structural that unites us: breaking this murderous system. And I believe that the wave is bigger and bigger, the snowball is growing, and at some point we will be so many that they will not be able to contain or silence us.

In sum, among activist women in Perú, feminism is more than an identity or a theoretical debate, but rather a way of characterizing systems of social stratification and strategizing a platform of action.

Discussion

Employing methods that allowed women to articulate their experiences first-hand, through the use of *testimonio*, demonstrated how many feminist activists in Perú viewed feminism as a process that was strategically used as a platform for action or a "tool for transformation". Privileging activist women's voices from the majority world

allowed stories to emerge in a bottom-up way illustrating that, for activist Peruvian women, feminism is more than a theory, it is a process of articulation and an understanding of power dynamics that can be used for change.

Perú represents an important standpoint from which to translate and adapt knowledge about feminism in part because feminist agendas have been used to address gender inequity, despite ongoing contexts characterized by authoritarian governments or periods of intense internal conflict. For example, both the National Gender Equality Policy (2019) and the ground-breaking Gender Parity Law (2020) reflect legislative policies related to equity that are in line with the Peruvian state's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). While findings from the current study cannot detail the ways in which feminism was used in these recent achievements, they do detail the components of feminism adopted by a confluence of actors working to advance gender equity. Elsewhere, in countries such as the United States, the Congress has been unwilling to legislate guarantees that address gender equity (e.g., the Equal Rights Amendment, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) and does not have a Women's Ministry that focuses on strategic legislation for women. Because these recent policy achievements in Perú mark a defining milestone on the path to gender equity, factors related to these outcomes can inform others the world over. In other words, in countries such as the United States or elsewhere, understanding the perspective and definition of feminism that was behind the feminist action in Perú could hold a key to change.

The findings in the current study suggested that key activist women in Perú operate with the understanding that their lived experience ought to inform the construction of knowledge and is an important position from which to work. This is in line with standpoint and decolonial theories. The women in this sample articulate the value of understanding how they know what they know, from their lived experience, not as a function of perspectives that have been imported by outside academics or theorists. This is important because it underscores that these women place inherent value in situating their knowledge and rooting authority in women's lives. In this manner, positioning activist women in the majority world as the "knowers" allowed us to see what features of feminism are most salient in this context. What emerged was that feminism was understood, across various backgrounds and sectors (e.g., Congress, academy, grassroots), to be inherently intersectional and that identifying and understanding multiple inequities was critical to understanding feminism. For example, several of the women in the sample detailed how understandings of gender inequity could not be separated from the lived experience of marginality and exploitation among Indigenous communities. However, rather than coining several feminisms, to reflect different standpoints or "positions within positions", women in Perú articulated a feminism that was inherently intersectional and, by its nature, critiqued multiple systems of power. This differs from the predominant focus on feminism in psychology which has been on identity or prototypical topics such as work-family stress that have been examined among predominantly white women but assumed to have universal application or importance (Eagly et al., 2012). Moreover, the definitions offered in this sample appeared active, not academic,

and the applied understandings illustrated a platform for action and a tool for change. The study may be limited in that the findings stem from a small group of women who were highly successful in making a mark and the findings from their *testimonios* are filtered by a white middle-class woman from the United States. Nevertheless, understanding the nuances behind the knowledge construction and feminism in this sample is an important starting point in a decolonial co-construction of knowledge. The findings have implications for women elsewhere who may be ready to depart from understandings of feminism rooted in identity and be moving toward an understanding rooted in multisystemic structural inequities in a manner that can inform a platform for transformational change.

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Notes

1. Given that the terms “developing” and “third world” are often used by so called ““first world”” nations to describe another country in a manner that implies inferiority, the term majority world, borrowed from Cigdem Kagıtcıbası (2002) will be used because individuals from “developing” countries constitute the majority of the world’s population. Moreover, terms like Global North/South, which attempting to address this issue by using geographical references, are simply not accurate as proxies for economic development because many rich countries exist in the South. Therefore, “majority world” is both less pejorative and more accurate.
2. Brazil, China, Germany, India, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, and the United States. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/globalfeminisms/>.
3. Diana Miloslavich Túpac, the Director of the Political Participation and Decentralization Program at Flora Tristán was the community collaborator for this project. She is an expert on

advancing women's policy and an accomplished author with more than 40 years of experience working to advance women's political participation and human rights in Perú.

4. In addition to these steps, the author and community partner explicitly discussed our respective roles and responsibilities at the outset. The author was tasked with data analysis and manuscript publication with the agreement that the community partner would receive drafts prior to publication. Recognizing the limitations in accessibility of journals, the author will also initiate alternative means of in-country dissemination.
5. The undergraduate research assistants were part of a University of California initiative, the Building Belonging program, designed to increase engagement through faculty mentored research projects. Credit to the students involved in transcribing the *testimonios* goes to: Jessica Valdez Alvarez, Karely Valdez Lopez, Lizbeth Garcia, María Govea Mendoza, Nicole Herrera-Moro.
6. An Emeritus Professor of Sociology (in Portugal) and Distinguished Legal Scholar (at Wisconsin-Madison) who has written and published widely on issues of globalization, sociology of law, epistemology, and social movements.
7. The National Federation of Female Peasants, Artisans, Indigenous, Native and Salaried Workers of Perú, FENMUCARINAP, was founded in 2006 with the purpose of defending and fighting for the rights of women.
8. "Mother of feminism" in the Dominican Republic.
9. The administration of Alan García (2006– 2011) promoted investment policies as part of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States that directly affected Indigenous communities of the Amazon. The "Baguazo" was a political crisis in 2009 when ongoing Indigenous activism in opposition to oil development in the Peruvian Amazon was violently stopped by military intervention.

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