

BOOK REVIEW

## Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas: Intersectionality, Power, and Struggles for Rights

Leandra Hinojosa Hernández and Sarah De Los Santos Upton.  
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*Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas* is about how women's bodies are affected by violence and the role of discourse in this violence across Latin America and the United States. Leandra Hernández and Sarah Upton use four case studies to illustrate both direct and indirect forms of violence and the positive as well as negative impacts of language and discourse: abortion legislation in Texas, discourses surrounding the Zika virus and reproduction in Latin America, sterilization in Venezuela and the murder of pregnant women in Mexico, and the feminicide of women in Ciudad Juárez. These examples successfully show the harsh realities of the patriarchal, Catholic governance of women that affects how they can take charge of their own fertility, their parenting, and their right to live lives free of violence.

The book's introduction illustrates the gravity and urgency of understanding reproductive and gendered violence by providing harrowing newspaper headlines and statistics. The introduction also sets out the theoretical foundations of the book, namely intersectionality and discursive violence, and provides an overview of the book's structure. Chapter 1 elaborates on the introduction to explain the context of reproductive rights, particularly for women of color, in the US and Latin America with an explanation of reproductive justice. This chapter also provides some background on how birth control and sterilization have been utilized as egregious, racialized forms of population control that is useful for readers new to this subject. Chapter 2 is the first of the four case-study chapters, with this one focusing on the framing of abortion in the news in Texas, particularly Senate Bill 8, which was part of a strategy to chip away at access to legal abortions. Chapter 3 shifts to Latin America to explore how news reports concerning the Zika virus shaped knowledge about the virus and responsibilities around sexual and reproductive health, effectively illustrating the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in making allowances for condom use but not for abortions. Chapter 4 is a theoretical chapter that covers two case studies: feminicides (the murder of women because of their gender) of pregnant women in Mexico and the voluntary sterilization of women in Venezuela. These case studies, which may not initially seem comparable, are brought together to propose the term *reproductive feminicide*. The final case-study, in chapter 5, then analyzes news coverage and artistic interventions about feminicide in Ciudad

Juárez, Mexico to explore how “*conocimiento*” (awareness) can be fostered. The concluding chapter is a discussion of transnational feminist organizing and how the news industry plays a crucial role in framing the coverage of women in the media.

*Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas* illustrates that intersectionality is not just a useful theoretical framework, but a necessary one. Throughout the book it is clear how certain women face extreme violent oppression because of their ethnicity, class, and gender. From poorly paid women in Mexican *maquiladoras*, who suffer from extraordinary levels of homicide, to Venezuelan women who choose sterilization, lacking any other way to control their reproductive lives, the structural, intersecting factors that lead to reproductive control and gendered violence are apparent. Intersectionality is central to reproductive justice, a framework that analyzes the inequalities that affect people’s ability to parent, to not parent, and to control their bodily autonomy. Reproductive justice is set out as a core framework for this book and is well explained in chapter 1; the authors briefly return to it in the conclusion. It is also fleetingly referenced in chapter 3, on the Zika virus, but the book would have been strengthened by using reproductive justice (and intersectionality) more explicitly as a tool of analysis in the main chapters as it is too often implicit. However, the book is important in that it encompasses reproductive justice beyond abortion. By including access to contraception, the factors that lead women to “choose” sterilization, and the extreme levels of violence pregnant women face, Hernández and Upton take a more holistic approach to reproduction than simply the right to access an abortion, thus their case studies are valuable concerning reproductive justice overall.

I drew up a list of the theoretical frameworks and ideas the authors use and was struck by their geography. The main theories included, from reproductive justice to intersectionality to “double discourse,” are from United States-based activists and academics, with the first two specifically being coined by black feminists. These are vital and highly appropriate theories for the foci of this book, but I did feel the lack of theorizing from Latin America was a notable absence. English-language secondary sources are *applied to* Latin America without inclusion of scholarship and activism *from* Latin America. This is a shame when there is an abundance of contributions from Latin American feminist philosophy that could have enriched the book even further. Perhaps the closest the authors get to this is the use of “*conocimiento*” from Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana cultural theorist, writer, and activist who blends English and Spanish in her work. But Anzaldúa still writes from the US borderlands, and the concept is only lightly used in one chapter. The authors also propose their own theory as Chicana feminists writing from the borderlands: the idea of “reproductive feminicide.” They coin this term to focus on the gendered nature of reproductive violence, particularly through sterilization and the murders of pregnant women. They explain the concept as “a signification of the murdering of women as a result of their reproductive capacities and/or a structural limitation of their reproductive options during times of violence, poverty, and barriers to healthcare” (72). The theory of reproductive feminicide is perhaps the most salient and applicable concept I took from the book, and I could imagine myself and other scholars employing it in other contexts. But still, the lack of scholarship from Latin America was conspicuous.

To turn from theory to empirical work, the methodology used in this book is a little mysterious. I say this because it took me a couple of chapters to realize that the empirical work would be analysis of news media. This choice is perhaps unsurprising given that Hernández and Upton are both communications scholars, but the introduction mentions methodology only tangentially and it is not included in the cover blurb. I

do think the authors could have made more of the original contribution they make here with a more thorough explanation of the methodology in the introduction or first chapter. However, it must be noted that not all of the four case-study chapters employ analysis of news media; chapter 4 does not include any primary analysis as it focuses instead on the theoretical contribution of “reproductive femicide.” A thorough methodological explanation earlier in the book would have provided more context about why the news has such relevance to reproductive and gendered violence and why certain sources were chosen. Kimala Price, for example, stresses the importance of including diverse news sources such as “women’s magazines and ethnic media sources” when conducting intersectional analyses of reproductive health issues in order to “yield cultural, social, and political perspectives that might otherwise never surface” (Price 2011, S56). It would therefore have been valuable to hear from the authors about why they wanted to focus on mainstream media sources rather than including more diverse sources. This book makes important contributions through its analysis of news representation; this choice could have been explained more comprehensively and made more explicit in the framing of the volume.

The title, *Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas: Intersectionality, Power, and Struggles for Rights*, is emblematic of its ambition. Hernández and Upton are trying to do a lot: to include both reproductive control and gendered violence, to include all of the Américas, and to draw on a range of theoretical ideas. Such ambition is laudable but also impossible to achieve in 148 pages. I agree with the authors that femicides and reproductive justice “are strongly linked and thus merit a study that analyzes the broader cultural implications of violence against women in various reproductive and cultural spheres” (xvi), but a tighter edit would have given the book a clearer focus. The chapters feel somewhat separate, and some tend to stretch somewhat beyond the scope of their titles. Chapter 2, for example, is titled “A Right Doesn’t Mean Much If You Can’t Access It,” but the chapter deals only loosely with the tension between abortion rights and the realities of abortion access. The authors do acknowledge that by using relatively few case studies they can provide only a snapshot, which they hope will inspire future research; however, a more incisive and specific focus would have helped the authors to provide in-depth analysis without trying to cover everything promised by the title.

Perhaps I am biased as a geographer, but I was also left wondering about the “Américas” of the book’s title. The countries included are Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and the United States (including Puerto Rico). For a book of this length, there is therefore good coverage of Latin America, even if some inclusion of Central America, where reproductive control and violence against women are so severe, would have been a good addition. However, the inclusion of the US feels quite detached from the points regarding Latin America. Broad claims are made about Latin America and grouped in a way that gives the impression of the United States vs. Latin America. This is reinforced by the chapter structure whereby one of the four empirical chapters is about the US and the other three are about Latin America. The conclusion does go some way to draw out transnational connections in feminist activism but, in my view, the authors have so much to say about abortion discourses, fertility control, and femicide in Latin America that the inclusion of the US is not even necessary.

The book’s title takes a stance and asks us to do so as well: to “challenge” the violence and oppression of women in the Américas. The authors stress the need to “bear witness” and to consider the responsibilities of the news media. Near the end of the

book the authors address those at the heart of the control and violence covered in this work. We hear about Silvia Elena Morales, Monica Alanis, Claudia Ivette González, Esmerelda Herrera Monreal, and Laura Berenice Ramos. These women's stories exemplify the very real consequences of the structural factors that affect women's lives. Hernández and Upton conclude with a call for better journalism and support of feminist activism as a way to fully recognize reproductive justice and to eradicate violence against women. The stories of these women, situated in the structural contexts that resulted in their deaths, model such an approach and stand out as a strength of the book. One comment: given the extreme levels of violence against trans people across the Américas, especially against trans women of color, their stories would have been a welcome and vital addition.

To conclude, *Challenging Reproductive Control and Gendered Violence in the Américas* will be of most interest to those studying, researching, or who are interested in the specificities of this book's focus. It offers stimulating accounts of the response to the Zika virus in Latin America and the ongoing feminicide crisis, and it may also be useful to those wanting to understand more about the politics and responsibilities of media discourse. Important theoretical concerns, such as intersectionality and reproductive justice, are put to good use here even if they are not necessarily built upon. Hernández and Upton set themselves a big task with the breadth of this book, and I appreciated the sensitivity and care they have given to examining the violence women face across the Américas and how feminist activism is a tool of resistance. Although there is so much more that could have been included, this book provides valuable insights into the utility of an intersectional reproductive justice analysis.

## Reference

Price, Kimala. 2011. It's not just about abortion: Incorporating intersectionality in research about women of color and reproduction. *Women's Health Issues* 21 (3): S55–S57.

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