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Gender and Social Movements in Central America

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Introduction

This book examines how gender and sexuality movements have transformed political life, human rights frameworks, and everyday social norms across Central America. By Central America, we mean the isthmus spanning Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama—a region linked by geography and histories of colonialism, extractive economies, armed conflict, and uneven democratization. Within this context, women-led and LGBTIQ organizations have not only demanded protection and recognition but have also reimagined what democracy can look like from the street, the courtroom, the clinic, and the classroom. The pages that follow chart these efforts with care, asking how collective action emerges, adapts, and endures amid shifting opportunities and formidable backlash.

Our approach pairs historical context with contemporary case studies. We trace how colonial hierarchies and church–state alliances produced enduring patriarchal orders, then follow the ways women’s groups, queer and trans organizers, and allied communities built power during and after civil wars, post-conflict transitions, and constitutional reforms. Rather than treating “the movement” as a single actor, we examine a mosaic of organizations—from neighborhood committees and student groups to national coalitions and regional networks—that negotiate different ideologies, resources, and risks. Throughout, we attend to the tensions among them: debates over strategy, representation, and accountability that are as generative as they are challenging.

The book is grounded in social movement theory while remaining empirical and practical. We draw on concepts of political opportunity, resource mobilization, framing, and intersectionality, as well as decolonial and queer theoretical insights that illuminate how race, class, ethnicity, language, and citizenship status shape participation and vulnerability. Intersectionality is not an abstract ideal here; it is visible in the alliances between Indigenous women defending territory, Afro-descendant communities confronting state violence, trans organizers demanding legal recognition, and labor activists contesting exploitation in export-processing zones.

Methodologically, this study synthesizes archival work, legal and policy analysis, media and cultural artifacts, and testimonies gathered through interviews and participatory observation with movement actors, lawyers, health workers, and educators. The aim is not to produce a definitive history but to map patterns and turning points: the moments when a court ruling opened a path, when a coalition fractured and later recomposed, when a public campaign reshaped national conversation, or when an international instrument was localized through creative advocacy. We also consider the ethical obligations of research in contexts where

visibility can be dangerous, emphasizing consent, data security, and the protection of activists at risk.

Because the isthmus is diverse, the chapters move between regional synthesis and country-specific analysis. We look at Indigenous feminisms in Guatemala, the legacies of wartime organizing in El Salvador, resistance and risk in Honduras, the complex relationship between revolutionary history and feminist dissent in Nicaragua, rights litigation and movement-building in Costa Rica, urban and migrant-centered activism in Panama, and coalition-building across Creole, Garifuna, and Maya communities in Belize. Each case study highlights strategies that travel across borders—legal clinics, hotline networks, shelter models, community media, and digital security practices—while attending to what must remain locally rooted.

Policy change is a central thread, but not the only measure of success. Laws on gender-based violence, reproductive health, anti-discrimination, identity recognition, and family rights matter profoundly; yet movements also labor to shift norms within households, schools, churches, and workplaces. Culture-making—through music, street theatre, film, and social media—operates alongside strategic litigation and legislative advocacy. Measuring impact therefore requires mixed metrics: not only statutes passed or budgets allocated, but also shifts in public discourse, safety practices, and the leadership pathways opened for young activists.

Finally, this book engages the realities of backlash and resilience. The same period that has seen expanded visibility for feminist and LGBTIQ actors has also witnessed the consolidation of conservative alliances, criminalization efforts, online harassment, and impunity for gendered violence. Rather than narrating a linear story of progress, we explore the cyclical nature of gains and pushback, identifying how movements anticipate, absorb, and outmaneuver countermobilization. The concluding chapters distill lessons for coalition-building—how to disagree productively, share resources equitably, and craft roadmaps that balance immediate protections with long-term transformative goals.

We write with the conviction that movements are laboratories of democracy. Across Central America, women-led and queer organizing has expanded the imaginable: from the language by which rights are claimed to the very spaces where politics takes place. By documenting strategies that have worked—and the missteps that have taught hard lessons—we hope to serve activists, scholars, policymakers, and readers who believe that another world is not only necessary but already being assembled, step by step, across the isthmus.

Chapter One: The Isthmus at a Glance: Geographies of Gendered Power

Central America, a sinuous land bridge connecting two vast continents, is more than just a strip of land; it is a tapestry woven with diverse topographies, climates, and cultures, all of which profoundly influence the dynamics of gender and power. From the volcanic highlands of Guatemala to the Caribbean coast of Belize, the physical landscape has shaped settlement patterns, economic activities, and, consequently, the social roles and opportunities available to different groups of people, particularly women and LGBTIQ individuals. The region, encompassing Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, presents a fascinating case study of how geography intertwines with human experience.

The dominant geographical feature is a central mountain chain that runs from Mexico to Panama, punctuated by numerous active volcanoes. These volcanoes, while a source of seismic activity and natural disasters, have also blessed the land with fertile volcanic soils. This rich soil has historically drawn people to agricultural livelihoods in the mountainous interior, contrasting with the tropical, humid coastal plains. Such variations in terrain and climate contribute to distinct regional economies and ways of life, shaping gendered divisions of labor and access to resources.

Pre-Columbian Central America was a mosaic of indigenous cultures, most notably the Maya in the north, who still constitute a significant portion of Guatemala's population. Other indigenous groups, speaking their own languages and maintaining traditional customs, populated areas further south. While the precise nature of pre-colonial gender roles varied across these diverse societies, evidence suggests a division of labor where women often engaged in domestic tasks, childcare, and food preparation, including the arduous grinding of maize. Men, on the other hand, typically took on roles involving hunting, warfare, and leadership. However, this was not a universal or rigidly hierarchical system; some societies exhibited gender fluidity, and women could hold positions of political or economic influence, or be recognized for their skills in crafts and ceremonial functions.

The arrival of European colonizers in the 16th century dramatically reshaped these existing gender dynamics. Spanish conquistadors, with the notable exception of the British presence in Belize, asserted control over much of the region. This colonial imposition introduced a patriarchal system rooted in European Catholic religious beliefs, which generally subordinated women to male authority and often excluded them from public and ceremonial life. The Spanish *Sistema de Castas*, a social hierarchy based on racial ancestry, further complicated gendered experiences.

Spanish women, at the apex of this system, generally had more autonomy and access to education than indigenous or enslaved Black women, who faced compounded discrimination and exploitation.

Indigenous women, in particular, bore the brunt of colonial disruptions to traditional gender roles, often facing increased labor demands, tributes, and sexual violence. Enslaved African women, brought to the Americas, endured the brutal dual oppression of racism and sexism, forced into grueling labor and subjected to sexual exploitation. Their reproductive capacity was also exploited, with children born into slavery. These enduring legacies of colonialism, including racialized and gendered power structures, continue to influence social norms and inequalities in Central America today.

The population of Central America is notably diverse, a result of centuries of intermixing between Amerindian, European, and African ancestries. Mestizos, individuals of mixed Amerindian and European descent, constitute the largest single group in countries like El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Guatemala, for instance, has the largest population in the region, with a significant indigenous population, including the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Mam, and Q'eqchi' Maya. This ethnic diversity often correlates with varying socioeconomic realities, with indigenous groups frequently occupying the lower rungs of the ladder.

Economically, Central America has traditionally been characterized by rural, agricultural economies. However, the region has also seen a significant rural-to-urban shift as it urbanizes and industrializes. Despite overall economic growth in recent decades, income concentration remains a persistent issue, perpetuating poverty for many. Women, in particular, often face disadvantages in economic life, with lower participation rates in formal employment compared to men and a disproportionate representation in low-productivity occupations. For example, women's income in rural areas in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico is almost half that of men.

The migration of men in search of employment opportunities, often to the United States, has further impacted gender roles, leaving many women as heads of households. While this can, in some instances, facilitate women's access to decision-making entities, it also increases their burden as they balance productive activities with unpaid domestic work and care. In fact, across Central America, women consistently work more hours than men, encompassing both paid and unpaid labor. These socioeconomic disparities highlight the deeply embedded nature of gender inequality, influencing everything from food security to political participation.

Beyond economic factors, Central America is highly susceptible to natural disasters such as hurricanes, tropical storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. These events disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including women, who may have fewer resources to prepare, respond, and recover. The impact of such disasters further exacerbates existing inequalities and can disrupt community structures, highlighting

the critical need for gender-sensitive disaster preparedness and relief efforts.

Religious landscapes also contribute to the geographies of gendered power. While Christianity, predominantly Catholicism and Protestantism, is the majority religion in Central America, folk religions also persist. Conservative religious views can often reinforce traditional gender norms and pose challenges to advancements in women's and LGBTIQ rights. Understanding the interplay between religious beliefs, social customs, and legal frameworks is crucial for comprehending the environment in which social movements operate.

Furthermore, the concept of "borders" in Central America extends beyond mere geopolitical lines. Borders are also social, economic, and cultural constructs that influence identities and experiences, particularly for women. These borderlands can be sites of heightened vulnerability, where structural violence, forced displacement, and precarious socioeconomic conditions converge. However, they can also become spaces where women develop unique strategies of resistance, community support networks, and collective agency.

The political geography of Central America, characterized by diverse histories ranging from civil wars to periods of relative stability, also shapes gendered power. The conflicts of the late 20th century, for example, deeply impacted the lives of women and girls, exacerbating existing structural gender inequalities. Even in the aftermath of peace accords, the path toward gender equality has been arduous, confronting deep-seated prejudices and systematic discrimination.

Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, women in Central America have been active agents of change, not merely passive recipients of their circumstances. They have historically participated in labor movements, and in some pre-Columbian societies, held leadership roles. Even during the independence movements, women acted as fundraisers, spies, and combatants, though their contributions were often downplayed in subsequent historical narratives. These historical precedents lay the groundwork for understanding contemporary feminist and queer organizing.

The present-day demographics of Central America reveal a young and growing population, with the median age around 28.5 years. Countries like Guatemala and Honduras have significant populations, with Honduras and Guatemala also having some of the highest population growth rates in the region. A young population can be a powerful force for social change, but also faces challenges related to education, employment, and opportunities for political participation, all of which are deeply gendered.

In conclusion, the physical, demographic, economic, political, and cultural geographies of Central America create a complex and often challenging environment for gender

and social movements. Understanding this intricate interplay of forces is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for appreciating the resilience, creativity, and strategic ingenuity of the feminist and LGBTIQ advocates who continue to push for a more just and equitable future across the isthmus. The following chapters will delve deeper into how these movements have navigated, resisted, and transformed these gendered geographies of power.

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