
Challenges for the struggles of women rooted in their territories: A decolonial perspective

When corporations, government agencies and sometimes NGOs plan and implement projects for oil and gas extraction, hydroelectric power plants, highways, monoculture plantations, protected areas and forest reserves (as in REDD+ projects), industrial sawmills, and many others, who are the ones who must bear the unavoidable social and environmental impacts of these projects? At whose expense are these projects created in order to – according to their promoters – generate “development”? Whose “national interest” is so heavily promoted by governments to justify the expansion of projects that are destructive to forest-dependent communities and their territories? The hegemonic economic model, with its inherent discrimination and racism, views the communities of indigenous peoples, traditional peoples, peasant farmers, fisherfolk, etc. as “subaltern” communities that can be exploited, obliterated, reconfigured, to serve the needs of capitalist accumulation. This coloniality, rooted in power, is even more evident when viewed through a feminist lens – but from the viewpoint of a feminism that addresses the oppression of the bodies and lives of these black women, indigenous women, peasant women, fisherwomen. They are not just women. Their position within the “world system” is determined by the intersection of oppressions based on gender, race and class.

In this context, and through the constant exchange between the historical struggles of the peoples for their autonomy and the critical theorists of the academic world, the idea of feminism as it relates to decoloniality has begun to emerge. Decoloniality refers to the dissolution of the structures of domination and exploitation created by the coloniality of power (1). It is a concept still in dispute, which continues to change and be enriched through the struggles aimed at breaking with this colonial power system, and the exchange of experiences and dialogue with critical theorists. Perhaps the broadest consensus among those debating the concept of decolonial feminism is the need for a revision of classical, hegemonic feminism and the importance of including the perspectives and voices of many more traditions and oppressions that have been forgotten in telling the (her)stories of women.

At the same time, black and women of colour feminism in the United States affirmed the need to understand that the oppression of the vast majority of women cannot be explained from a perspective that considers gender alone, but also race, class and heterosexism. Women’s groups in the South have taken this perspective and made it more complex with the analysis of their own colonial experience imposed on their territories and their bodies. This decolonial shift enables a breakaway from an understanding of the world based on Western modern sciences and Eurocentrism. At the same time, it enables the inclusion of community-based, indigenous or urban popular knowledge that has been systematically ignored through the imposition of a dominant Western perspective.

The autonomous feminism of the 1990s produced fierce criticism of the attempts to impose neoliberal agendas through cooperation for development and the “institutionalization” of feminism, viewed as

percentages of women's "participation" in government spaces, and also many NGOs. This criticism then gave way to the historical analysis of colonialism. This implied reflection on the definition of the past and the roots of traditional peoples as well as the relationship between these peoples and a nation-state that organized or attempted to organize life on the basis of this vision.

A history with a single voice?

The decolonial feminist perspective also recognizes the educational system as a system in the service of the expansion of the Western model. A system which has accompanied the processes of the expansion of the nation state and of the implementation of liberal and neoliberal models; one which has shaped our image of the world, which has told us what is barbaric, what is outdated, what is truly human, what type of relationship we should have with nature. It has assimilated us to the majority of people on this Earth, and injected us with this perspective created by the colonial model and imperial reasoning.

We need to turn the contents upside down. We need to revise what we think about knowledge, how we think about history, histories or her-stories. We need to recover models of knowledge, of the production of knowledge and the passing down of experiences from one generation to another. We must include other voices in order to write other stories.

Seeking new paths

"Hegemonic" feminism ended up defending a series of political strategies that actually perpetuated the model imposed by the colonial state and the bourgeois white subject. For example, some radical feminist meetings in the 1970s proposed that women's liberation would result from the fact that technology would replace the capacity for reproduction. Through this kind of thinking, feminism was reproducing the modern ideal of control over nature, of human supremacy over all life on the planet, which is precisely what ends up oppressing the vast majority of women, especially those who are indigenous, peasant, black, or fisherwomen. Obviously, that technological system would be a product of capitalist production. The first to openly challenge it were black feminists and feminists of colour, when they asked, who will be the women expected to pay the price of the liberation of a few women? And thus began the analysis of who really benefits from this type of modern and Western feminist perspective, that is, those who are in a position of privilege.

The search for new paths has given rise to a type of feminism which recognizes the reality of the majority of the world's women who face multiple oppressions and which, at the same time, can overcome the fragmentation of analysis and fragmentation of struggles. The decolonial perspective implies taking on not only feminist struggles but also anti-racism struggles, struggles in support of indigenous and peasant movements. What it fundamentally questions is the very interpretation of fragmented oppression.

The oppressions of women rooted in their territories were not limited to the "private" sphere of the home. "Outside", on the plantation, in the factory, in the assembly plant, in their daily work, the

abuses came from the bosses, the corporations, those who controlled the means of production. A study based on the testimonies of women workers on oil palm plantations in Indonesia demonstrated the enormous effort that women must make to shoulder the double burden of working on the plantations and dealing with domestic chores (2). As one woman plantation worker explained, “Working in the [company] fields is very hard, essentially it’s just so hard being a labourer. You have to accept the heat and being rained on. Apart from the responsibility in the house, there’s also the work outside of the house, from morning until the afternoon and once home there are still more house chores that must be done.”

Women rooted in their territories work from sunrise to sunset alongside their partners, and are exploited in the same way. They are on the front lines of struggles, they take care of their children, and they are responsible for the protection of health and seeds, as well as the defence of their territories. They have also had to confront the violence of the capitalist liberal state – and often with much worse repercussions. This is where we begin to reflect on how the dominant system in which we live today creates oppressions that operate correlatively, oppressions that cannot be separated. Gender has to do with a position of race and class, and the place of humans as well. This leads to the building of struggles that lead towards possible paths to radical change rooted in solidarity and justice. As the women of the Mam People of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala declared at their second meeting in October 2014: “Women have sustained life, and today more than ever, we pledge to rise up together with men to give our sons and daughters, our grandsons and granddaughters, a more dignified life; and we will do this by joining together as women and as the Mam People.” (3)

Many of the ideas around decolonial feminism are taken from the article: *Barroso, J. M. (2014). Feminismo decolonial: una ruptura con la visión hegemónica eurocéntrica, racista y burguesa. Entrevista con Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso. Iberoamérica Social: revista-red de estudios sociales (III), pp. 22-33*

<http://iberoamericasocial.com/feminismo-decolonial-una-ruptura-con-la-vision-hegemonica-eurocentrica-racista-yburguesa>

(1) Peruvian academic Aníbal Quijano defines the “Coloniality of Power” as one of the specific elements of the capitalist model of global power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world’s population as the cornerstone of this model of power and operates on every material and subjective level, sphere and dimension and daily social existence. The concept of coloniality is different from, although linked to, colonialism. The latter refers strictly to a structure of domination/exploitation where the control of the political authority, productive resources and labour of a certain population is exercised by a population with a different identity whose central seats of power are also in another territorial jurisdiction. But it does not always, or necessarily, imply racist power relations. See: <http://www.jwsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/jwsr-v6n2-quijano.pdf>

(2) An overview of industrial tree plantations in the global South, <http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/EJOLTplantations.pdf>

(3) Guatemala: *Declaración de las mujeres del Pueblo Mam de Quetzaltenango, en el marco del segundo encuentro,*

<https://generoymineriaperu.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/guatemala-declaracion-de-las-mujeres-del-pueblo-mam-de-quetzaltenango-en-el-marco-de-nuestro-ii-encuentro/>

