



COLECTIVA

Feminisms from the Margins
in Latin America

L A T I N O —
A M E R I C A N A

D I V E R S E

INTER —
SECTIONAL

Colectiva : feminisms from the margins in Latin America / Mara Viveros Vigoya, Estefanía Mendoza, Andrea Neira Cruz, [and ten others] ; edited by Adriana Serrano C. – First edition – Bogotá: Civil Rights Defenders, 2026.
316 pages: illustrations, 21 cm.

1. Feminism – Political aspects – Latin America. 2. Women – Social conditions – Latin America. 3. LGBT liberation movement – Latin America. I. Viveros Vigoya, Mara. II. Mendoza, Estefanía. III. Neira Cruz, Andrea. IV. Ixchiu, Andrea. V. Matienzo Puerto, María. VI. O'Hara, Grecia. VII. Rothe, Georgia. VIII. Alcaraz, María Florencia. IX. Salamanca, Rosa Emilia. X. Lombard Cabrera, Eylin. XI. Avalos, Betty. XII. Garduño, Norma. XIII. Maruci, Hannah. XIV. Mesa, Verónica. XV. Segura, J.M.

DDC: 305.42 / C691 23rd ed.

COLECTIVA

Feminisms from the Margins in Latin America

Civil Rights Defenders

Östgötagatan 90, SE-116 64
Stockholm, Sweden

COLECTIVA. Feminisms from the Margins in Latin America

© 2026 Civil Rights Defenders

Director of the Latin America Department

María Pía Alvira

Editorial Directors

Verónica Mesa
Mario Zamudio Palma

Authors

Mara Viveros Vigoya – Colombia
Estefanía Mendoza – Venezuela
Andrea Neira Cruz – Colombia
Andrea Ixchiu – Guatemala
María Matienzo Puerto – Cuba
Grecia O' Hara – Honduras
Georgia Rothe – Venezuela
María Florencia Alcaraz – Argentina
Rosa Emilia Salamanca – Colombia

Eylin Lombard Cabrera – Cuba
Betty Avalos (Pseudonym) and
Norma Garduño – México
Hannah Maruci – Brasil

Editor

Adriana Serrano C.

Design and Illustration

Ana Zelada and Natalia Epstein
www.zeladaepstein.com.ar

Printing

Opciones Gráficas Editores Ltda.

The opinions, comments, and
political positions expressed in this
publication are those of the authors
and do not bind or represent the
views of Civil Rights Defenders. All
rights reserved. Reproduction and
distribution are prohibited without prior
authorization from the rights holders.



CONTENIDO

Prologue: Opening the crack	13
-----------------------------	----

SOWING MEANING

When “us” is not enough	23
-------------------------	----

Feminist activism and migration: staying together	49
--	----

Masculinities and feminisms. A political coalition for social transformation	73
---	----

RAISING OUR VOICES

Manifesto from the body-territory. Indigenous feminisms and territorial struggles in Mesoamerica	103
--	-----

Abortion in cuba: A right or a discretionary privilege?	127
--	-----

The revolution of being and existing: The LGBTI+ community, beyond “privilege”	143
---	-----

An Alakuata among feminisms	167
-----------------------------	-----

Naming silence. Feminist strategies for transforming male-dominated sectors	183
--	-----

FIGHTING TOGETHER

Lessons from the south. Contributions to the global conversation on legal abortion	207
--	-----

Caring for life, weaving peace. Embracing a security that includes us	237
--	-----

Revolution and punishment. Practices of resistance in Cuban political prison	261
---	-----

Economic justice and decent work. The challenge faced by women maquila workers in Ciudad Juárez	277
---	-----

Taking power. Women’s collective action as a tool for the conquest of rights and the consolidation of political power	295
---	-----

Opening the Crack

This book, like the feminist struggles that shape it, begins with a crack. A narrow opening in the patriarchal and racist structure, through which we have allowed—or forced—the light of our ideas to pass by and shine. At first, the crack is tiny, but our collective power erodes the structure and widens the opening. Where one of us first managed to slip through, the rest of us follow, little by little, drop by drop, learning from one another's experiences. This is how we slowly prise the crack open.

The crack does not appear here for the first time. As a political commitment, it has also run through recent publications by Civil Rights Defenders. It is our way of recognizing that transformation rarely begins by bringing everything down at once and that, often, it starts with a fissure that others widen. *COLECTIVA* takes up this image and carries it into Latin American feminisms and the many ways in which they have opened up spaces to defend human rights across the region.

This book comes at a moment when speaking about feminisms in Latin America is more urgent than ever. As authoritarian projects advance, challenging rights and restricting spaces for participation, we reaffirm that the inequalities running through the region have deep historical, patriarchal, racist, colonial and class-based roots. We therefore propose

understanding and inhabiting Latin American feminisms from the margins and through diversity, recognising the knowledge, resistance and ways of imagining other worlds that have emerged from places historically pushed aside. We want to ask where we think from, which experiences we turn into knowledge and who has been left out of dominant narratives.

From the outset, we want this book to challenge even our own understandings of feminisms, Latin American identity, intersectionality, gender, race and class, through a critical, anticolonial and antiracist lens. We know that even within feminisms we can be blind to the forms of oppression we inhabit and to those experienced by other women and other bodies. Discomfort is not an effect we seek to avoid, but a place from which to examine ourselves and question our certainties.

COLECTIVA grew out of the desire of Cuban feminist activists and movements to enter into dialogue with the region, to inspire and be inspired. That origin matters. In these pages, Cuba appears neither as an isolated experience that must be explained to Latin America, nor Latin America as a model from which answers can simply be extracted. The aim is to bring resonances and differences to the surface. Because there is no single way of inhabiting feminisms. Feminisms in Latin America are as diverse as our histories, our bodies, our territories and our realities.

These texts are for people interested in defending human rights and in feminist struggles, whether or not they take part in organized activism; especially those who are open to questioning and delving more deeply into these debates. The texts part from their authors' situated experiences, expressed through academic reflections, embodied and everyday

practices, organized efforts to secure rights and manifestos for taking power. We do not seek to homogenize these voices; we want to open conversations, build bridges, inspire new questions and remind ourselves that the paths towards justice and transformation are varied, complex and often uncomfortable.

One possible route through *COLECTIVA*

The texts in here have been organized into three sections: Sowing Meaning, Raising Our Voices and Fighting Together. This structure suggests a route, not a hierarchy or a single way of reading the book.

SOWING MEANING brings together ideas, concepts and questions that help us understand the structures running through our lives and our struggles. These texts offer analytical frameworks and reflections that broaden how we look at gender, power and social transformation.

RAISING OUR VOICES brings together life stories, memories and profoundly human experiences. These accounts remind us that political struggles run through bodies, emotions and personal journeys: stories of violence and loss, but also of dignity, resistance, care and hope.

FIGHTING TOGETHER takes us into the realm of organizing, shared learning and collective action. Here we find tools, methodologies and experiences that show how ideas and individual experiences can be transformed into networks, alliances, mobilization and social change.

But we want to extend an important invitation to those holding this book: there is no need to read it from beginning

to end or to follow the order in which the chapters appear. We hope the reading experience can be as diverse and non-linear as the ways of inhabiting feminisms across the continent.

You might begin with *When “Us” Is Not Enough* and enter the book through its political invitation to rethink the places where consensus becomes comfortable. You might instead start with an experience from Argentina linked to struggles for access to abortion and move from there through other forms of mobilization. Or you could begin with a reflection on the relationships between nature, territory and gender, and allow that path to lead to new conversations.

Indeed, we hope that is what happens. That readers move in and out of these pages following their own questions. That some see themselves in a story. That others find tools for facilitating collective processes. That still others discover concepts that help them better understand what they have lived through. That some arrive looking for answers and end up finding new questions.

Because, ultimately, *COLECTIVA* is not only the name of this book. It is also a way of understanding feminisms. It is the conviction that no experience exists in isolation, that our stories matter, that our questions deserve to be heard, and that the deepest transformations occur when we are able to come together and learn from one another.

We hope these pages accompany, inspire, challenge and unsettle those who make their way through them. That they help readers take up strategies that have worked for others without turning them into formulas. And that, when the book is closed, a new crack remains open—one through which

other voices, forms of knowledge and ways of imagining new possible futures can continue to slip through.

LET US BUILD TOGETHER FROM THE MARGINS.

S O W I N G

M E A N I N G

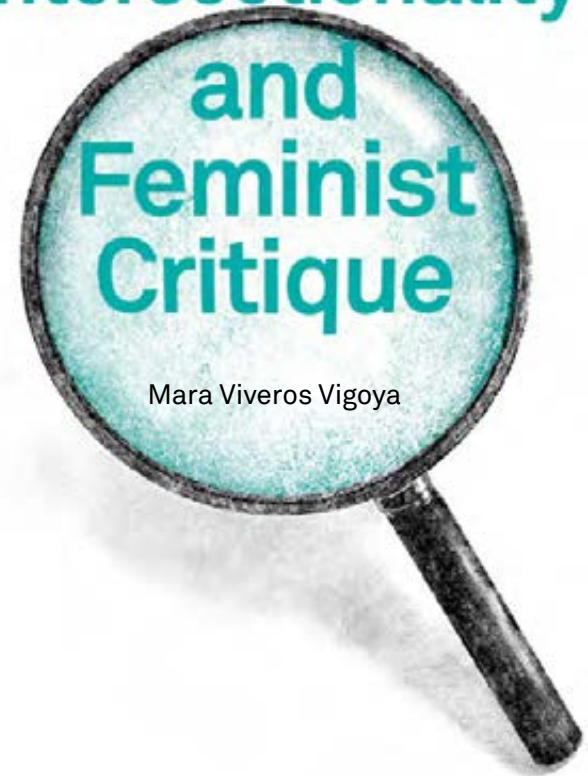
These pages offer ideas, concepts and questions for understanding the structures that run through our lives and our struggles. They invite us to question what we have learned, recognize the power relations that organize our experiences and broaden how we think about gender and social transformation. Because naming and understanding the world is also a first step toward changing it.

CONSENSUS BECOMES COMFORTABLE
WHEREVER WE ASK

When “Us”¹ Is Not Enough Mestizaje, Intersectionality

and Feminist Critique

Mara Viveros Vigoya



¹ Translator's note: In the Spanish version, the author states nosotras a feminine form of “us.” It is translated here as “us,” with quotation marks to preserve its meaning as a consciously constructed collective subject: diverse, internally complex, and grounded in women's shared but non-uniform experiences.

Mara Viveros Vigoya

PhD in Anthropology (EHESS, Paris), MA in Latin American Studies (IHEAL), and economist from the National University of Colombia. At the latter institution, she is a full professor and co-founder of the School of Gender Studies in the Faculty of Human Sciences.

Introduction

I am writing this chapter at a moment when feminisms in Latin America are once again being portrayed as a threat. Under the rhetoric of “gender ideology,” old anti-rights discourses are being revived in an effort to delegitimize struggles for equality, racial justice, and bodily autonomy. In the face of this offensive, the temptation to close ranks and minimize differences is understandable and, in many respects, commendable. I do not oppose it, especially in the times in which we live. However, I believe it is useful to point out that it is not without risks.

Not all of us experience the same oppressions or occupy the same positions within feminisms. Appealing to a common identity can conceal persistent inequalities among women and other feminized bodies. It is also worth recalling that, in Latin America, the idea of *mestizaje*¹ has for decades functioned as a reassuring narrative that promises unity while silencing structural racism, classism, and sexism. With this analogy in

¹ Translator’s note: *Mestizaje* in Latin America broadly refers to the racial and cultural mixing among people of Spanish or Portuguese, Indigenous, and African ancestry, beginning during the colonial period. After independence, many countries adopted a hybrid or *mestizo* national identity to differentiate themselves from the former colonial powers. However, this idea has also been criticized for concealing racial inequalities and promoting the assimilation of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

mind, this chapter proposes that we pause wherever consensus becomes comfortable, in order to reclaim the recognition of differences as an indispensable political tool.

Calling myself a feminist has been, for me, an experience as constitutive as it is demanding. It is a word I embrace for its critical power and transformative capacity, although I also recognize its limits. My discomfort does not arise from distance, but from commitment: from the sense that this word - as necessary as it is contested - is not always enough to account for the inequalities that run through our lives, our bodies, and our struggles. I have inhabited feminisms through academia, activism, and personal experience; in each of those spaces I have confirmed their emancipatory force, but I have also learned that the categories that allow us to politicize injustice can become opaque and even exclusionary if they are not subjected to constant review.

Perhaps for that reason, rather than seeking new certainties, I am interested in revisiting some of the words that structure our political and intellectual conversations. Feminism(s), intersectionality, and Latin Americanness are now terms widely mobilized in regional debates, but they are also laden with ambiguities and tensions. Examining how they are used, what they allow us to think, and what they leave out is the starting point for the reflections that follow.

Feminism(s), Intersectionality, and Latin Americanness: Uses, Limits, and Tensions

Feminism is neither a closed doctrine nor a homogeneous body of principles, but a critical way of reading the world that

enables us to denaturalize historical and everyday inequalities, as well as a collective practice aimed at transforming them (hooks, 2017). Reading and acting from a feminist perspective means questioning what appears obvious, inevitable, or transhistorical: gender hierarchies, the sexual division of labor, and the unequal allocation of authority, voice, and care. It also entails recognizing that these inequalities are sustained not only through explicit discourse, but also through ordinary practices, seemingly neutral routines, and social arrangements that determine who occupies the center and who remains at the margins (Scott, 1986/2002).

One of feminism's most decisive contributions to understanding power has been to place the notions of gender and patriarchy at the center. For a long time, the domination of women remained outside sociological, historical, and political analysis; even today, many accounts continue to ignore the structuring role of patriarchy and sexual violence in social organization. Incorporating these categories makes it possible to show that sexual violence is not a collateral effect of conflict, but a central component of processes of war, conquest, and domination. In this sense, feminist critique is not limited to questioning symbolic representations; it seeks to dismantle the concrete ways in which power, time, and recognition are distributed in social life (Fraser, 1997; Tronto, 2013).

Questions such as who can speak and be heard, who decides and who provides care, or who is recognized as a full rights-bearing subject and who appears responsible for the well-being of others cut across the family, school, work, politics, and community. Through this approach, gender inequalities cease to appear as individual failings and are revealed

instead as effects of a deeply hierarchical and enduring social organization (Bourdieu, 2000).

Although Western feminism had the merit of formulating and disseminating the concepts of gender and patriarchy, its early formulations tended to treat them abstractly, with little attention to historicity or differences between social contexts. Feminisms that emerged from historical experiences of racialization, exploitation, and exclusion challenged this one-dimensional view. In particular, African American feminist authors - such as Michele Wallace (1982), Audre Lorde (1984/2003), bell hooks (1984/2015), and Angela Davis (1981/2024) - as well as Black Brazilian feminist thinkers such as Maria Beatriz do Nascimento (1974/2006), Lélia Gonzalez (1984), and Sueli Carneiro (1985/2005), made decisive contributions by thinking about gender in articulation with race, class, and sexuality. Their work gave rise to formulations later recognized as the race-class-gender triad, interlocking oppressions, and, subsequently, the intersectional approach.

The awareness that Black women's experience - in which oppression combines racism, sexism, and economic exploitation - required a comprehensive and structural approach was already present in Black feminisms that, beginning in the 1970s, challenged the idea of a universal female experience. In this sense, intersectionality can first be understood as a political and analytical practice arising from these struggles. This critical insight later crystallized around the concept of intersectionality, whose formulation was systematized by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. The concept helped systematize and broaden recognition that gender relations and violence against "women of color" are always shaped in

articulation with other axes of inequality, such as race, social class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, or disability (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 2000).

This analytical shift opened the way for deeper questioning of the historicity of gender and patriarchy. It is here that decolonial feminisms and various Indigenous feminisms introduce decisive turns by situating gender within conquest and colonization. Concepts such as the coloniality of gender, proposed by María Lugones (2008), or the pornotrope, developed by Hortense Spillers (1987/2009) to analyze the dehumanization and animalization of enslaved bodies, make it possible to understand how gender hierarchies were constituted from their origins in close relation to racialized notions of humanity. These perspectives historically radicalize, without replacing, the intersectional approach by showing that gender was not a later addition to the colonial order, but a constitutive element of its architecture (Lugones, 2007; Espinosa-Miñoso, 2020; Viveros Vigoya, 2023). Understood in this way, feminist analysis cannot be limited to describing inequalities; it necessarily raises questions about the conditions that make social justice possible.

From this perspective, the type of feminism discussed in this text is fundamentally defined by an ethical and political commitment to social justice. The issue is not merely to demand formal equality before the law, but to transform the material conditions that make a dignified life possible - or impossible. Equality only becomes meaningful when it translates into effective changes in access to resources, time, recognition, and participation (Fraser, 1997; Tronto, 2013). Asking, for example, who can truly participate in political life reveals

how the unequal distribution of care work structurally limits the presence of many women in decision-making spaces. Feminism allows us to name this situation not as an individual shortcoming, but as a social injustice, and opens political imagination toward collective solutions (Tronto, 2013).

Situating feminism in these terms does not mean assuming that it is a homogeneous tradition. Speaking of feminisms in the plural makes it possible to recognize the variety of diagnoses, strategies, and horizons that run through it. The narrative of “waves,” while useful in certain pedagogical contexts, tends to simplify this plurality and reproduce an account centered on North Atlantic experiences (Curiel, 2007). It is more productive to think of feminisms as an archipelago: multiple islands with histories of their own, connected by affinities, dialogues, and tensions. The contrast between a liberal feminism centered on institutional parity and community feminisms that struggle for territory, autonomy, and the reproduction of life expresses not only different priorities, but political projects anchored in specific historical contexts.

Within this framework, it is useful to distinguish between a gender perspective and a feminist perspective. The former has become institutionalized as a technical tool useful for identifying inequalities, especially in public policy design. A feminist perspective, by contrast, interrogates the roots of those inequalities, the power relations that sustain them, and the assumptions that organize the proposed solutions.

It does not merely ask how many women are present in particular spaces, but which leadership models, hierarchical structures, and forms of exclusion remain intact even when women’s presence increases (Moore, 1991).

In Latin America, these discussions have acquired particular density. Debates advanced by Black, decolonial, and community feminisms have been fundamental in challenging the idea of a universal woman and politicizing historical experiences marked by racism, dispossession, and coloniality (Lugones, 2008; Collins, 2019; hooks, 2015). In this context, intersectionality has become closely linked to territorial, environmental, and anti-racist struggles; it has sought dialogue with Indigenous and Afro-descendant knowledge; and it has emerged in political settings marked by extreme inequalities. The leadership of Black and Indigenous women in defending life, water, and land shows how gender, anti-racism, and territory are inseparably intertwined (Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

From my situated experience as a Colombian woman and Afro-Latin American feminist, referring to intersectionality means attending not only to gender issues, but also to the specific forms racism takes in this *América Ladina*² - in Lélia Gonzalez’s terms (2020) - as well as to the recent anti-racist turn in the regional public sphere and its political effects. Naming these categories is not a neutral gesture: it is a political practice

² Translator’s note: *América Ladina* is a critical decolonial concept developed by Brazilian Black feminist thinker Lélia Gonzalez. In contrast to traditional Eurocentric notions of “Latin America,” the term highlights how the region’s identity has been deeply shaped by its African and Indigenous roots, challenging Europe’s place as its main cultural and historical reference.

that opens and closes possibilities, and contestation over them is central to contemporary feminisms.

These tensions cannot be understood apart from the historical narratives that have organized the very idea of equality in Latin America. Among them, mestizaje occupies a central place. More than a description of cultural mixing, mestizaje has operated as a powerful ideology of integration that, while celebrating diversity, neutralizes criticism of the racial, class, and gender hierarchies structuring the region. Questioning the limits of contemporary feminisms therefore requires pausing over this foundational narrative and examining how its promise of harmony has contributed to rendering persistent inequalities invisible, even in progressive and feminist discourses that understand themselves as anti-racist and inclusive.

Mestizaje: Diversity Celebrated, Inequality Denied

Mestizaje has been one of Latin America's most powerful foundational narratives. More than a demographic fact, it has functioned as a national ideology articulating identity, citizenship, and belonging. For a long period, the claim that "we are all mestizos" operated as a promise of equality: if no one is racially pure, no one should be hierarchically superior.

However, as Peter Wade (2003) has shown, Latin American mestizaje contains a structural paradox: racial inclusion and exclusion operate simultaneously. The promise of racial democracy coexists with persistent hierarchies of color, class, and gender. This simultaneity - rather than an accidental contradiction - lies at the heart of its political and cultural effectiveness.

In Latin America, mestizaje has not only been a word; it has also been a sentimental pedagogy. We were taught that we are peoples born of encounter, that our identity is a mixture, and that, unlike other contexts marked by racial segregation, coexistence here had neutralized racism. Yet we need only look at our societies to see that skin color continues to shape opportunities, that whiteness still functions as symbolic capital, and that Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations remain overrepresented among the most precarious sectors. Mixing did not eliminate inequality; it reconfigured it.

There is also a less visible aspect: mestizaje is not only a racial narrative, but also one constructed in terms of gender and sexuality (Mendoza, 2001). The foundational scene of many national histories is familiar: the union of the white European man with the Indigenous or African woman produces the "mestizo." That image condenses colonialism, patriarchy, and racialization. The mestizo nation arises from a profoundly unequal sexual relationship. This is not merely a demographic fact, but a symbolic device that naturalizes the appropriation of the racialized female body as the matrix of the nation.

From this perspective, race and gender are not separate dimensions that later intersect; they mutually constitute one another within a specific regime. In Latin America, that regime has been mestizaje.

My research on masculinities in Colombia led me to examine how the ideal national man has historically been constructed around whiteness, property, and respectability (Viveros

Vigoya, 2002; 2018). Masculinities do not constitute a homogeneous universe: they are organized into deeply racialized hierarchies. While white men were associated with honor, rationality, and full citizenship, Black and Indigenous men have frequently been eroticized, feared, or criminalized in social imaginaries. The hypersexualization of Black men and the persistent suspicion of their dangerousness form part of a long colonial genealogy articulating desire, fear, and domination, as Frantz Fanon (1952/2009) observed early on. These representations have not only shaped interracial relations; they have also helped legitimize differentiated forms of social control and exclusion (Viveros Vigoya, 2016).

For centuries, honor linked purity of blood to control over women's sexuality. Under this moral and racial regime, white women were invested as guardians of family respectability and legitimate reproduction; Black and Indigenous women, by contrast, were more readily represented as "available" or morally inferior. Racial hierarchy was thus also reproduced in the realm of intimacy and sexual relations. Mestizaje allowed mixing to be socially possible without requiring equality, thereby naturalizing a social order in which bodily proximity coexisted with profound racial and gender inequalities (Viveros Vigoya, 2020).

One reason mestizaje is so difficult to question is that it is not pure fiction. Mixing is a demographic and affective reality across much of Latin America. Many families are interracial and numerous life trajectories overflow rigid classifications. Yet the experience of coexistence does not eliminate structural inequality. Whiteness continues to operate as a normative horizon of social recognition (Wade, 1997; Viveros Vigoya,

2015). Skin color still influences opportunities for social mobility, and racialized femininities and masculinities remain more exposed to violence and precarity. The promise of equality therefore functions simultaneously as a moral horizon and a silencing mechanism: if we are all mixed, denouncing racism can appear to be an improper division of the social body.

In this sense, the transition from mestizaje to multiculturalism did not necessarily constitute a break with that imaginary, but rather its reconfiguration in a new political language of recognition. Constitutional reforms in the 1990s and the multicultural turn helped make the region's ethnic diversity visible. However, the ideology of mestizaje did not disappear; it changed and found new forms of expression. Today it can coexist with celebratory discourses of diversity that do not necessarily alter the deep hierarchies organizing our societies. Cultural difference can be recognized without dismantling racial privilege; it can even be celebrated while inequality persists (Hale, 2005; Hooker, 2009).

The struggles of Latin American feminism have been fundamental to challenging patriarchy and broadening the region's democratic horizons. Precisely because of this transformative power, they now face a decisive challenge: not to reproduce, in the name of unity, the mestizo narrative of abstract equality. When we speak of "Latin American women," what body do we imagine? What color, what class, what territory? These questions are not rhetorical: they point to the limits of a category that, when presented as universal, can render persistent inequalities invisible.

In *Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira* (1984), Lélia Gonzalez showed early on how the myth of racial democracy conceals

the structural subordination of Black women in Brazil. The ideal of mixing operated not only as an integrating national narrative; it also permeated the feminist field, obscuring the centrality of Black and Indigenous women and naturalizing an implicitly white, middle-class female subject.

In *Enegrecer el feminismo* (1985/2005), Sueli Carneiro deepened this critique by showing that hegemonic Brazilian feminism was constituted from the historical experience of white middle-class women, universalizing that position and relegating racial oppression to a secondary place. It is therefore not enough to “include” Black women in a previously defined agenda; the very category of “woman” that organizes the feminist field must be transformed, and the standards of respectability and whiteness that have historically structured it must be questioned.

Responding to these challenges requires revisiting the national narrative that organizes our political categories and acknowledging that Latin American citizenship has never been racially or sexually neutral. Denaturalizing mestizaje as an ideology - including when it operates within progressive feminism - entails transforming the structures that continue to produce hierarchies of color, gender, and class in our own spaces. If mestizaje, and later multiculturalism, promised to overcome constitutive inequalities, feminism now has the task of critically examining that promise. Not to fracture alliances, but to make them more consistent with their emancipatory vocation.

Feminisms as Embodied Practices in Reactionary Times

We are living through a moment of historical inflection. The expansion of rights that marked much of Latin America’s political cycle at the beginning of the twenty-first century now coexists with a conservative offensive that seeks to dismantle feminist and sexual advances, erode democratic consensus, and reinstate hierarchies we believed had at least been delegitimized. The so-called “gender ideology” has become a signifier capable of articulating moral fears, class resentments, and racial anxieties in a right-wing mobilizing rhetoric (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Corrêa, Paternotte, and Kuhar, 2018).

In this setting, feminisms do not act solely as movements oriented toward expanding formal rights; above all, they constitute embodied political practices. They are ways of producing subjectivity, transforming the everyday experience of power, and contesting the meanings that organize social life. The offensive against so-called “gender ideology” responds to a transnational strategy linking churches, right-wing parties, think tanks, and digital platforms. Around it, a narrative is constructed that presents feminist and LGBTIQ+ advances as threats to the family, childhood, and the nation. It operates through three central moves: depoliticizing inequality, moralizing public debate, and casting dominant sectors as victims (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022).

Feminist demands thus cease to appear as responses to historical structures of oppression and are reinterpreted as ideological impositions. The language of rights gives way to a rhetoric of defending values, while conservative sectors

position themselves as victims of an alleged progressive hegemony. These operations reorder the political field by installing feminism as an internal enemy and attributing to it symbolic responsibility for broader economic and social crises.

The rightward shift in public debate is not limited to the electoral arena; it entails a transformation of the frameworks through which collective problems are defined. Issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive autonomy, and comprehensive sexuality education cease to be framed within the horizon of social justice and instead become moral controversies. In that displacement, long-standing hierarchies are reactivated through renewed language. Invocations of the "natural family" reaffirm the heterosexual and patriarchal order; challenges to diversity policies revive racial imaginaries that present collective rights as undue privileges; and controversy over inclusive language condenses resistance to broader transformations of the symbolic order.

This is not simply a return to the past, but a contemporary reorganization of power. The anti-rights offensive brings together economic neoliberalism and moral conservatism, combining the increasing precarity of material living conditions with reinforced control over bodies, sexualities, and forms of kinship.

Faced with this landscape, feminisms have shown a remarkable capacity for reinvention. Mobilizations against gender-based violence, feminist strikes, struggles for legal abortion, and community care networks do more than formulate specific demands: they configure a different way of doing politics (Gago, 2019). They are practices that intervene in the everyday experience of power, transform how violence is named,

question naturalized norms, reorder the division of domestic labor, and weave intergenerational and territorial solidarities.

In reactionary contexts, this embodied dimension acquires particular strategic value. When public debate narrows and institutional frameworks become hostile, feminism is sustained by shared experience and the collective production of meaning. Yet that experience also reveals that forms of domination do not operate in isolation. Gender, race, class, and sexuality intertwine in complex ways in everyday life. It is precisely at this juncture that intersectionality becomes an indispensable political tool.

Persisting in Democratic Discomfort: Repoliticizing Intersectionality

In the current context of a conservative offensive against sexual and feminist political advances - which rearticulates old hierarchies of gender, race, and sexuality through renewed language -

Latin American feminisms face a crucial challenge: to repoliticize intersectionality as a critical tool for understanding the relationships among racism, social inequality, and democracy.

If mestizaje functioned for decades as a narrative of racial harmony that displaced conflict into silence, the multiculturalism of the 1990s promised to settle that debt through legal recognition of diversity. Yet, as Charles Hale (2005) has shown, this neoliberal multiculturalism expanded cultural rights without

altering the structures that reproduce deep inequalities. Racism thus came increasingly to be understood as a structuring principle of social hierarchies in the region (Moreno Figueroa and Wade, 2022), a shift that prompted Latin American feminisms to deepen their dialogue with critiques of racism, coloniality, and territorial dispossession.

The intersectional approach made it possible to name what had long been an open secret: that race operates as a marker of class; that racism produces specific gender hierarchies; and that violence is not limited to its physical or economic dimensions, but includes cultural and epistemic forms of dispossession.

Rather than adding variables to a prior analysis, intersectionality transformed the way social power is understood by showing that these relations of domination mutually constitute and reinforce one another in concrete historical contexts. From this perspective, gender, race, class, and sexuality do not function as separate spheres of inequality, but as interwoven dimensions of a single field of power relations.

In Latin America, intersectionality has followed a particular trajectory. It has moved beyond circulating solely as an analytical category to become a language of collective action as well. As Rios, Perez, and Ricoldi (2018) note in their study of Brazil, a new generation of feminist activism adopts it not only as an interpretive tool, but also as a form of political and ethical positioning. It therefore ceases to function exclusively as an academic concept and comes to name

an activist identity: a feminism that explicitly defines itself as intersectional.

Social media has played a crucial role in this shift. Through them, new generations become familiar at an early stage with notions such as privilege, structural racism, and heteronormativity and translate them into practices of denunciation, public debate, critique of representations, and challenges to language. This digital activism has broadened feminism's interlocutors and transformed its political grammar (Di Napoli, 2021).

At the same time, intersectionality has driven a critical review of the movement's own traditions. The 2018 renaming of Argentina's historic “National Women's Gathering” as the “Plurinational Gathering of Women, Lesbians, Trans People, Travestis, and Non-Binary People” symbolizes this reconfiguration. The notion of plurinationality challenges the homogenizing fiction of the nation-state and recognizes the plurality of subjects and territories traversing the feminist field (Parra, 2021).

At various recent moments of social mobilization in the region - from Chile's 2019 uprising to Colombia's 2021 National Strike - these articulations became visible. The convergence of feminist collectives, LGBTIQ+ organizations, and Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant movements showed that intersectionality could operate as an articulating principle for heterogeneous struggles, linking demands against racism, patriarchal violence, economic precarity, historical reparation, and territorial dispossession. In this sense, it approaches what Angela Davis (2012) has called an intersectionality of struggles: a political horizon that seeks to articulate diverse struggles against the multiple forms of domination structuring contemporary capitalism. The March 8 feminist strikes - launched

from Argentina in 2017 and extended throughout the region - clearly illustrate this broadening by simultaneously making visible paid work, domestic work, and care economies (Viveros Vigoya, 2023).

A central dimension of this repoliticization appears in dialogue with socio-environmental struggles. Indigenous and community feminists have proposed the notion of body-territory to indicate that extractivist violence and patriarchal violence respond to the same logic of appropriation. In dialogue with proposals such as *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Sabroso*³, these perspectives question not only social inequalities, but also the ontologies that sustain the dominant development model (Gago, 2018 and 2019; Gómez Correal, 2018).

At this point, intersectionality faces an additional challenge: incorporating the epistemic and ontological dimension of domination. As Arturo Escobar (2022) warns, we are confronting not only distributive conflicts, but disputes among ways of inhabiting and understanding the world. Recognizing this dimension requires admitting that no emancipatory theory is self-sufficient.

In this sense, intersectionality can be understood as a “traveling theory,” in Edward Said’s formulation (1983/2004): a concept transformed as it circulates among different contexts.

³ Translator’s note: *Buen Vivir* and *Vivir Sabroso* are Latin American political and philosophical concepts that resist dominant development models centered on economic growth and accumulation. *Buen Vivir*, rooted in Indigenous Andean worldviews, emphasizes collective well-being, reciprocity, and harmonious relationships among people, communities, and nature. *Vivir Sabroso*, grounded in Afro-Colombian experiences and struggles, refers to living with dignity, joy, autonomy, and collective care in one’s territory. The original terms are retained because their meanings exceed their literal translations.

In Latin America, its journey has expanded its concrete political uses. More than a doctrinal formula, it functions as an invitation to build situated solidarities and transversal alliances, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests (2020). Its power lies precisely in keeping open the tension between analysis and action, theory and experience.

In times of a rightward shift and an anti-rights offensive, this repoliticization is crucial. Marginality - in the sense proposed by bell hooks (1989), who distinguishes between imposed exclusion and a chosen position of resistance - can become a space of radical openness from which intersectional feminisms reimagine power and the horizons of democracy.

Persisting in that discomfort, the discomfort that names what the order seeks to silence, is today an unavoidable political task.

Feminisms expand the field of the visible: they name domestic violence, the exploitation of care work, and the racialization of inequality. In reactionary times, such discomfort is often presented as a threat; yet its democratic power lies precisely there.

Throughout this discussion I have maintained that Latin American feminisms have contributed decisively to denaturalizing the narratives of equality that organized the region’s political imaginary for decades. The critique of mestizaje as an integrating ideology, the exposure of the limits of neoliberal multiculturalism, and the incorporation of perspectives drawn from Black, Indigenous, and decolonial feminisms have broadened

the horizon from which democracy can be imagined. In that process, intersectionality has functioned not only as an analytical tool, but also as a political practice that makes it possible to understand how inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality intertwine in the everyday production of social life.

In a context of conservative offensive and narrowing public debate, persisting in this critical discomfort becomes a fundamental democratic task. Repoliticizing intersectionality means recognizing that equality cannot be conceived apart from the historical hierarchies that organize our societies, but also that struggles to transform them require alliances capable of sustaining difference without erasing it. More than a closed theoretical formula, intersectionality thus appears as an invitation to imagine forms of political coexistence that broaden the margins of democracy and make truly plural justice possible in América Ladina.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *La dominación masculina*. Anagrama.
- Carneiro, S. (2005). Ennegrecer el feminismo. La situación de la mujer negra. In S. Carneiro, A. Costa, T. Santos (Eds.), *América Latina desde una perspectiva de género*, (pp. 21-26). (Originally published in 1985).
- Collins, P. (2019). *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Duke University Press.
- (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Corrêa, S., Paternotte, D. and Kuhar, R. (Eds). (2018). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe and Latin America: Mobilizing against Equality*. Rowman & Littlefield.

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989(1), 139–167.
- (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6), 1241–1299.
- Curiel, O. (2007). Crítica poscolonial desde las prácticas políticas del feminismo antirracista. *Nómadas*, 26(1), 92-101.
- Davis, A. (2012). *The Meaning of Freedom. And Other Difficult Dialogues*. City Lights Publishers.
- (2024). *Mujeres, raza y clase*. Ediciones Akal. (Originally published in 1981).
- Di Napoli, P. (2021). Jóvenes, activismos feministas y violencia de género en la UNAM: genealogía de un conflicto. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud* 19(2), 1-27.
- Escobar, A. (2022). Diseñando transiciones regionales sistémicas en tiempos de emergencia social y climática. Research-action project with a pluriversal territorial peace perspective for the geographical Cauca River Valley. Proposal to the Ford Foundation by Tejido de Transicionantes del valle geográfico del río Cauca y la Asociación Casa Cultural del Chontaduro. See: Escobar, A., Bernal, D., Campo, M., Eusse, O., Rodríguez, C. (2024). Un río Cauca, muchos mundos: Transitando la paz territorial pluriversal. *Revista Zabelé*, 5(2), Dossier. <https://www.periodicos.ufpi.br/index.php/revzab/article/view/6390/5133>
- Espinosa-Miñoso, Y. (December 16, 2020). Interseccionalidad y feminismo descolonial: Volviendo sobre el tema. *Pikara Magazine*. www.pikaramagazine.com/2020/12/interseccionalidad-y-feminismo-descolonial-volviendo-sobre-el-tema
- Fanon, F. (2009). *Piel negra, máscaras blancas*. Ediciones Akal. (Originally published in 1952).
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Iustitia interrupta: Reflexiones críticas desde la posición “post-socialista”*. Siglo del Hombre Editores; Universidad de los Andes.
- Gago, V. (December 29, 2018). Se va a caer. Interview with Rita Segato by Verónica Gago. *Página 12*. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/164761-se-va-a-caer>

- . (2019). *La potencia feminista: o el deseo de cambiarlo todo*. Traficantes de Sueños/Tinta Limón.
- Gómez Correal, ____ (2018).
- Gonzalez, L. (1984). Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira. *Revista Ciências Sociais Hoje*, 223-244.
- . (2020). *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano*. Editora Schwarcz-Companhia das Letras.
- Graff, A. and Korolczuk, E. (2022). *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hale, Ch. (2005). Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Dominance in Central America. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28(1), 10–28.
- Hooker, J. (2009). *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*. Oxford University Press.
- hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, 15-23.
- . 2015 *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge.
- . (2017). *El feminismo es para todo el mundo*. Madrid. Traficantes de Sueños.
- Kuhar, R. and Paternotte, D. (Eds). (2017). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against equality*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Lorde, A. (2003). *La hermana, la extranjera: artículos y conferencias*. Horas y horas. (Originally published in 1984).
- Lugones, M. (2007). Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System, *Hypathia* 22(1), 186-209.
- . (2008). Colonialidad y Género. *Tabula Rasa*, 9, 73-101.
- Mendoza, B. (2001). La desmitologización del mestizaje en Honduras: Evaluando nuevos aportes. *Mesoamérica* 22(42), 256-278.
- Mohanty, Ch. (2020). *Feminismo sin fronteras: descolonizar la teoría, practicar la solidaridad*. Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de Género (CIEG, UNAM).
- Moore, H. (1991). *Antropología y feminismo*. Ediciones Cátedra.
- Moreno-Figueroa, M. and Wade, P. (Eds). (2022). *Against racism: Organizing for social change in Latin America*. University of Pittsburgh Press
- Nascimento, B. (2007). Por uma história do homem negro. In A. Ratts, *Eu sou atlântica: sobre a trajetória de vida de Beatriz Nascimento*. Instituto Kuanza (pp. 93-98). (Originally published in 1974).

- Parra, F. (2021). El feminismo será antirracista o no será. *Joselito Bembé. Revista Político Cultural* (2), 37-43. https://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/art_revistas/pr.12875/pr.12875.pdf
- Rios, F., Perez, O. and Ricoldi, A. (2018). Interseccionalidade nas mobilizações do Brasil contemporâneo. *Lutas Sociais*, 22(40), 36-51.
- Said, E. (2004). Teorías viajeras. *El mundo, el texto y el crítico*. (pp. 303-330). (Originally published in 1983).
- Scott, J. (2002). El género: Una categoría útil para el análisis histórico. *Op. Cit. Revista Del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas*, (14), 9-45. (Originally published in 1986). <https://revistas.upr.edu/index.php/opcit/article/view/16994>
- Spillers, H. (2009). Mama's baby, papa's maybe. In R. Warhol-Down and D. Price *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (pp. 443-464). (Originally published in 1987).
- Tronto, J. (2013). *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. NYU Press.
- Viveros Vigoya, M. (2002). De quebradores y cumplidores: sobre hombres, masculinidades y relaciones de género en Colombia. CES, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- . (2015). Social mobility, whiteness, and whitening in Colombia. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 20(3), 496-512.
- . (2016). La interseccionalidad: una aproximación situada a la dominación. *Debate feminista*, (52), 1-17.
- . (2018). *As cores da masculinidade: experiências interseccionais e práticas de poder na Nossa América*. Papéis Selvagens Edições.
- . (2020). Los colores del antirracismo (en América Latina). *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad*, (36), 19-34.
- . (2023). *Interseccionalidad. Giro decolonial y comunitario*. CLACSO; TransNational Institute.
- Wade, P. (1997). *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. Pluto Press.
- . (2003). Repensando el mestizaje. *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 39, 273-296.
- Wallace, M. 1982. A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood. En G. T. Hull, P. Bel-Scott, B. Smith (Eds.), *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (pp. 5-12). The Feminist Press at CUNY.

Feminist Activism and Migration: Staying Together

Estefanía Mendoza Tarache



DISTANCE AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Despite everything, life goes on, and we,
the departed, the sunken, the wanderers,
place our faith in a hallucinatory, far-
fetched hope. *The homeland lies behind us.*
Arianna de Sousa-García

Acknowledging Where We Speak From

Not all of us have migrated, but today all of us are shaped by migration. Experiences of displacement are neither binary nor homogeneous: there are gradual ways of leaving, such as internal migration, and there are also ways of resisting departure, as when we preserve our emotional connection to a place despite everything that entails. I acknowledge my own standpoint: staying has enabled me to accompany others, weave networks, and serve as a link that helps maintain connection with those who have migrated and continue their struggle from elsewhere. From the privilege of rootedness, this essay seeks to recognize the strength of all those remarkable women who, amid the challenges of migration, choose to sustain their feminist activism as a form of resistance. I want to thank them because they have become stars that help us keep our bearings and guide us along the road still ahead.

Estefanía Mendoza Tarache

Venezuelan lawyer, feminist activist, and holder of a Master's degree in Political Science. She specializes in gender-based violence and the prevention of trafficking of women and girls. She is the co-founder and Executive Director of Mulier, a civil society organization dedicated to documenting and preventing gender-based violence and the trafficking of women through initiatives such as the #LibresYSeguras program.

Thinking About Migration Through a Feminist Lens

There is a rich body of feminist scholarship that examines borders as geopolitical and symbolic constructs that impose arbitrary limits on spaces and bodies, generating dynamics of exclusion. These borders stand in contrast, for instance, to Indigenous peoples' struggle to maintain their ties and relationships, rejecting the colonial divisions that emerged from the predatory appropriation of their territories.

From the perspective of border feminism, with its outlook deeply grounded in intersectionality as a necessary framework for understanding the migratory experience, it is recognized that migrant women face multiple systems of oppression. These are intensified in contexts where human mobility is portrayed as a threat and increasingly instrumentalized in the service of the politics of the "enemy" (Gaborit, 2020).

In this regard, Contreras Hernández (2018) highlights the strategy of disregarding capitalism, colonialism, and extractivism as the structural causes of migration in the Global South. Ignoring the fact that these displacements respond to urgent needs, or constitute the only alternative for survival, makes it easier for receiving countries to promote policies rooted in punitivism, border securitization, and xenophobia. It also exposes the hypocrisy of a world in which capital circulates with ever greater freedom, while barriers to the movement of people seeking better living conditions continue to increase.

Border feminism, as a political and epistemological proposal, emerged in the 1970s through the voices of racialized women whose realities were excluded both by white feminism and by liberation movements led by men. In its theoretical

development, it recognizes the border as a social laboratory and argues that concepts such as citizenship and democracy, understood as universal, were constructed within a logic of domination that excludes those who inhabit the margins. This approach validates as a transformative tool the knowledge that emerges from the experience of diaspora and constant movement, knowledge capable of dismantling structures of oppression. Its multicultural character and its use of different languages challenge the rigidity of discriminatory beliefs and imposed binaries, creating fluid ways of life that resist exclusionary classification.

Among its most influential exponents is Gloria Anzaldúa (2016), who defines the border as an "open wound" where cultures collide and proposes the figure of the "new mestizx" as a hybrid identity that transforms ambivalence into a form of resistance.

Anzaldúa argues that the new mestiza experiences the diversity of cultures, races, and languages, along with everything this entails for the construction of identity. Aware that she belongs neither fully to one side nor the other, she allows herself to become a synthesis that incorporates even contradictions and embraces the political task of dismantling structures of domination from within. Not belonging completely to any one culture enables her to perceive the biases of all of them, challenge binary thinking, national/foreign, man/woman, white/Black, and work to heal the "wounds" that borders have created.

Chela Sandoval's (2000) contributions complement these ideas, particularly her concept of the "methodology of the oppressed," a strategy for navigating systems of power in which mestizaje also becomes a tool of resistance. Sandoval further

identifies a “differential consciousness,” one that enables individuals to sharpen their reading of a given context and determine which system of thought or political terrain must be strategically navigated in a particular moment in order to survive.

This theoretical development is part of the historical reality of migration in Latin America and remains highly relevant today. We have second-generation migrants who do not speak their families’ language because abandoning it became a strategy to protect them, just as there are people who hold citizenship by birth yet continue to be subjected to racial profiling by racist authorities. We have simply moved from “Pinche migra” to “Fuck ICE”.

Fifty years later, border feminism remains a relevant political proposal, as migration, far from being an isolated phenomenon, constitutes one of the fundamental fault lines of the contemporary global order.

Human mobility creates tension within the rigid structures of the nation-state and its borders; moreover, it acts as a transformative force in the spaces it reaches. A country that welcomes newcomers not only becomes more diverse, but also reaffirms its commitment to the defense of human rights and the common good: integration and regularization are understood not as a cost, but as a strategic social investment with positive impacts on gross domestic product (GDP) and, above all, and more importantly, on the social fabric.

However, the conservative and anti-rights narratives advanced by some countries instrumentalize migration through

the “politics of the enemy” to fuel nationalism, racism, and aporophobia, while obscuring their own responsibility for the extractivist policies of the Global North, which deprive nations in the Global South of the possibility of sustaining dignified living conditions within their own territories. Under the banner of eliminating support programs for foreign nationals, they conceal the fact that cuts to social spending are systemic policy choices. By portraying the crisis as a consequence of the presence of the migrant “other,” these agendas achieve their true objective: shielding an insatiable capitalism that absolves itself of responsibility for structural poverty and for its historical debts to its own population.

It is not the intention of this text to delve more deeply into these ideas about migration, as this has already been done, more extensively, by women who, drawing on their situated experiences, have critically reflected on concepts linked to their lived realities, such as borders, citizenship, and the exercise of power over migrant populations. Rather, we seek to uphold this body of theoretical work as the necessary framework of reference for understanding the different dimensions of impact that women face in the context of human mobility.

What Migration Reveals: Identity, the Body, and Political Consciousness

These revelations that emerge from migratory processes have been expressed by women through paintings, books, academic research, songs, and other ways of documenting that process of mobility that takes place outwardly but also unleashes

transformations within. These women have shown that crossing a border can reveal much about what others think of you: that you are “Black,” “Caribbean,” “vain,” or even a “whore.” They have also shown how these external labels construct oppressive imaginaries that not only limit our possibilities of being beyond the stereotypes with which we are associated, but also threaten the prospects for adaptation, coexistence, integration, and existence itself.

Within, movement also takes place: you discover aspects of yourself that you did not know before, such as your strength, your resourcefulness, how deeply you miss and need your family and friends, the importance of having a community, and the realization that those worries and wounds you carried as your own are also borne by the women of the country that receives you, simply because they, too, are women.

Adding new layers to your identity and understanding how this new information alters your position, value, or perceived importance in the eyes of others becomes an intensive course in intersectionality. Suddenly finding yourself as part of a specific identity group, becoming a minority, becoming the other, can unsettle the ideas you once held about who you are and about what others see first when they look at you.

When you are a migrant, countless small details constantly reveal who you are in relation to Chileans. In my case, I have brown skin, and the way I walk, the way I dress, the way I interact with people is, all of a sudden, warm, Caribbean, you know? I didn’t know I was Caribbean until I arrived in Chile, but now I have learned that being Caribbean has a particular look, and that, on the street, it marks me as an “other.” It is very painful to realize that you are constantly being revealed as an

other and that this gives rise to all these prejudices. (Observatorio de Género y Equidad, 2022) (Translator’s translation)

In a deeply moving work, Venezuelan political scientist Yiniba Castillo argues that “migrant women carry the border on our bodies” (Castillo, 2021), and develops the idea of the constant reaffirmation of difference under the gaze of the other. The attribution of certain characteristics to your nationality can work either in your favor or against you, depending on the political context of the moment and on the narrative about migration that the media choose to promote in service of particular interests.

Whenever an enemy is needed, migrants can always fill that role: the media will publish stories about rising crime rates since their arrival, and social media comments will claim that they come to steal jobs and “husbands” (UNHCR and Amnesty International, 2023).

Although migrant women contribute through their labor, often under precarious conditions, to the development of the host country and, through their remittances, to the survival of their country of origin, this extraordinary effort that sustains both economies is often dismissed. Instead, they are contemptuously told in the media to “stop having children.” All of this occurs with impunity. In the face of such a hostile context, feminism has been, is, and will continue to be for many women a space of care, support, and belonging, because being women, in all our diversity, offers us far more points of connection than differences.

Migration also gives you a new perspective on your own country: what we have and what is missing, what is possible, and what we did not know we were allowed to dream of. Those who migrate in search of refuge from authoritarian contexts discover that it is possible to have massive demonstrations, freedom of expression and association, political mobilization, spaces for gathering, and diversity. Yet they also discover that these new territories have problems of their own. Perhaps rights that are denied in our country of origin are taken for granted there, or perhaps those same rights are still being demanded. The political outlook shaped by your experience in the country you left behind can become complex in the host country, turning into a factor that either facilitates or hinders your integration and remaining a constant presence in your life. Are you on the political left or the right? Which group expects that to mean your automatic solidarity? Do you contribute to polarization? Is your nationality being used as a scapegoat? What has political ideology meant to you?

Migration also compels you to reassess the safety of this new environment. The full guarantee of rights will always remain necessary: every country in the world continues to need feminism. Yet migrating means recalibrating the safety of the place where you now live. This requires making a conscious assessment of our own risks and asking ourselves: is this a country that is hostile toward women? How strong is its feminist movement? Are there massive demonstrations? Protests against femicide? Public demands for sexual and reproductive rights, such as legal abortion? We must also determine whether our nationality alters that risk in any way and ask: what is the media and political narrative surrounding my nationality?

Migration also exposes us to difference and gives us the opportunity to reflect on our own positions, exclusions, limiting beliefs, and those personal spaces where perhaps we have not yet begun the necessary process of unlearning and deconstruction, and are already running late.

Migration exposes us to difference and offers us the opportunity to reflect on our own positions, exclusions, limiting beliefs, and those personal spaces where perhaps we have not yet begun the necessary work of deconstruction and are already falling behind. This opportunity to compare our feminism with other perspectives and, ideally, to question ourselves, offers in Latin America the possibility of uncovering the roots of our beliefs and making use of migration as a means of recognizing other key factors among the reasons the system has for oppressing us. In doing so, it brings us closer to other feminist traditions, especially decolonial feminism, which, as Curiel states, “is committed to a struggle against all systems of domination: racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, capitalist logics, and the dispossession of the commons from communities and peoples. It struggles to ensure that the epistemologies and ‘other’ worlds that sustain life become important points of reference in our thinking and our actions. And it does not struggle only alongside women, but alongside multiple subjects who seek to build a life project” (Rodríguez, 2025).

This reflection therefore invites us to ask ourselves: what prejudices do I bring from my own country that prevent me from connecting with local struggles? By doing so, we may uncover whether our opinions about a protest or a new law stem, for example, from racist ideas that we have normalized, or

whether religion shapes our stance on issues such as abortion or marriage equality.

Feminism, across its different core concerns, has one issue that is undeniably connected to migration: care. Migrant women lose their care networks and are exposed to particular risks, such as gender-based violence, trafficking, sexual or labor exploitation, precarious employment, and scams, among other hardships that tend to fall most heavily on those who are most in need of relief. In many cases, they find themselves without anyone to welcome them, guide them, accompany them, or care for them during illness, pregnancy, or the difficult postpartum period. This is especially significant for feminists who understand how challenging it can be to go through these experiences without a community.

To manage care responsibilities, it is imperative to create spaces for expression. The current tendency to promote individualism as a virtue is, in reality, a trap that profoundly affects women, especially migrant women. Treating care as an individual burden, when it should be a shared social responsibility, generates an overwhelming sense of isolation. For this reason, inhabiting spaces where we can speak openly and find emotional release allows us to build community, share strategies, and exchange material, emotional, legal, and community-based support. Above all, it enables us to mobilize. Only through collective action can we demand a more just society in which care is understood as a shared commitment.

The solidarity rooted in a shared nationality often emerges as a first response; the solidarity born from the life-changing experience of migration itself, regardless of nationality, as a

second; and feminisms as a third space, one that fosters connection and resilience.

In this context, feminisms ideally recognize our particularities and stand in solidarity with the challenges that stem from our migratory status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and our physical, ethnic, economic, and educational circumstances. They understand our loneliness and the fact that the cross we carry is shaped by these layers of identity; that cultural differences can serve as a mask for racism, xenophobia, and violence; and that feminist comrades will be the first, ideally, to rally around and support those whom the media portray as the others, as a threat, or as the enemy.

Solidarity is not an absolute guaranteed by gender. Differences carry real weight in the way our feminisms are practiced and negotiated; this is why Black, lesbian, and Indigenous women were compelled to carve out spaces of their own.

Building community is not an idealized process free of bias; on the contrary, it is a complex and uncomfortable exercise in self-criticism and deconstruction.

Anyhow, only the genuine support of others, support that allows you the time and space to reflect on that pain, will help you endure it and ultimately overcome it.

Reiterating the issue of loneliness is important because it is no minor matter: it is decisive. Living life as a migrant means not only losing your support structure, but also facing life's most significant moments alone; experiencing the milestones of your existence without companionship; mourning the death

of a mother or the dementia of a father; enduring the lack of money and opportunities needed to build a life, but also to return and remember; confronting the contempt and cruelty of exile. That is why it is so meaningful that many migrant women identify women's groups and feminist organizations as vital sources of support, essential for surviving and overcoming these hardships. We must continue to foster and safeguard these spaces.

Inspiration and Collective Action: Transnational Organizing

Migration can be a common thread connecting migrant women to the life we dream of, whether in this country or another. Those who have migrated inspire us with new forms of resistance. From their new territories, they choose to keep fighting, creating, denouncing, and proposing alternatives. In response to that commitment, we, the ones who remain, learn from their struggles, build role models, educate ourselves through their experiences, and even receive feminist books that would never reach us here. Their activism does not stop; it transforms. These migrant women contribute within their host communities by giving voice to difference and demanding the right to occupy a place with dignity, simply because they are human. They do so through a profound empathy, expressed in art, research, communication, and political action, reflecting on this new way of being beyond our natural ground. At the same time, despite the difficulties they face, they lovingly sustain their connection to the

struggle of those of us who remain behind: they show us how our homeland could be better, how diversity enriches us, and how one can extend a helping hand from afar without letting go of one's roots. Their resistance strengthens us, and their broadened perspective helps us imagine what for so long we believed was impossible.

The various experiences of migration and the different feminisms converge in one common space: activism. Circular migration carries resources back and forth; internal migration brings us closer to others who share our reality; and permanent migration builds bridges for fellow nationals, creates pathways to opportunity, and makes visible what might otherwise remain unseen.

There are, for example, women who move across different destinations as part of their humanitarian work and, as feminists, connect with the struggles of the women in the countries that need them. They do so with honesty and without condescension, asking questions and learning from local realities, free from any white savior complex. Beyond protocols and intervention frameworks, they respect the weight of reality over formalities and seek to address what is most urgent while contributing to broader transformation.

Likewise, there are women who draw on their feminism to support other migrant women, without dwelling on differences or adopting the discourses that promote segregation and antagonism, and who put their own well-being on the line for what is just for all. I have seen this, for example, among collectives of sex workers in Peru who courageously denounce the abuses and violations suffered by Venezuelan women, because solidarity has no nationality.

Strategic recognition is also due to the women who succeed in reaching key spaces of influence and decision-making and devote a significant share of their efforts, privileges, and opportunities to creating programs that include other women, channeling funding, formulating recommendations, adding them to lists, mentoring them, and sharing knowledge. They do all of this with the generosity of creating opportunities that make the path easier for others.

The Pursuit of Dignity Is a Shared Debt

The 2018 protests in Chile are a recent example of how feminism can lead the struggle for social demands. Demanding dignity, quality of life, and rights for those most in need will always mean working for the well-being of women, who remain the poorest among the poor in Latin America.

Feminism is a political tool for denouncing the feminization of poverty, demanding the necessary social and economic rights, and fostering in our societies not only gender equality but also a critical examination of the entire oppressive system sustained by the unpaid labor and exploitation of the most vulnerable women. In this way, it places their needs at the center of the debate on social justice.

One of the fundamental forms of work that feminism and migrant women have articulated is the amplification of what is being lived and fought for in the country left behind. In authoritarian contexts that place dissident voices at risk, migrant women become witnesses who persist in denouncing human rights violations, making visible the absence of fundamental

guarantees. They also engage in grassroots diplomacy by creating spaces and conversations that allow others to learn first-hand about what is happening in their country of origin and to challenge the singular narrative imposed by those in power, who rely on ideology and prejudice to conceal our realities.

In this regard, Suárez-Navaz (2006) offers a valuable concept for broadening our understanding of resilience through a rights-based approach. Faced with a convoluted legal system that hinders, or even denies, regularization, efforts are made to reinforce the premise that citizenship is a condition for accessing rights reserved exclusively for nationals; by criminalizing migrants, the system also discourages their engagement with the state. Yet migrant women contribute to their host countries through care networks, community initiatives, mutual support strategies, and many other forms of sustaining society. These everyday practices constitute an exercise of belonging that does not wait for the state's permission through the formal granting of citizenship. Rather, they embody a "substantive" or "lived citizenship" that claims the right to dignity and well-being without waiting for official recognition. In this way, human dignity is asserted as the sole requirement for the enjoyment of fundamental rights, and vulnerability is transformed into a space for political action.

Transforming the migratory experience into a tool for advocacy requires moving beyond silence and turning one's own experience into political and narrative production. This process involves an exercise in documentation, research, and denunciation, in which personal testimony ceases to be an isolated account and becomes a collective resource for making structural forms of violence visible.

The transnational organizing of those who stay and those who leave constitutes an infrastructure of resistance and entails the politicization of affective and community ties in order to generate changes that formal diplomacy cannot, or will not, achieve.

Thus, the diaspora uses its connections and access to dismantle criminalization and, from abroad, protect those who continue to resist on the ground. One example is that of a journalist friend of mine who was forced into exile after receiving threats against herself and her family. Despite her vulnerability, her new position abroad became not only a refuge, but also an opportunity to assume greater visibility and, through her voice, protect those who continue to practice journalism in Venezuela.

Everything discussed so far demonstrates that the activism of migrant women is invaluable across all the spaces that make up their journeys and experiences of mobility, and that a political commitment grounded in feminism creates connections and forms of struggle centered on issues that transcend borders and seek to advance rights and justice for all women, without exclusion.

Ways to Stay Connected

In the challenging context of transnational life, digital activism gives us the opportunity to remain involved and present in the feminist struggles that move us. It allows us to continue

making meaningful contributions and maintaining essential connections by amplifying the messages we need to bring into our homes, onto the streets, and into those spaces of dissemination that social media enables. The power of these forms of participation and connection should neither be underestimated nor dismissed. Every arena matters today, as regressive, fundamentalist, and anti-rights movements seek to gain ground under the age-old premise that women's bodies and rights are assets that can be appropriated.

In a time when false, irrelevant, or despair-inducing information is used as a strategy to overwhelm, confuse, or demobilize us, digital activism offers an opportunity to contribute our own narratives, dismantle falsehoods, and defend the humanity of women when others seek to diminish, objectify, and dismiss them. Migration makes it possible to contrast political perspectives and learn communication strategies capable of confronting the machinery of disinformation and the dark interests of technocracy. It is vital to raise our voices, record that video, explain the issue to an aunt, and share the political meme. Let us firmly and sisterly occupy the virtual spaces from which they seek to expel us.

Migration also confronts us with the complexity of a process that challenges our beliefs and our identity. The criminalization that migrants currently face in different parts of the world will go down in history as a shameful escalation of racist and xenophobic violence. We must ensure that those responsible are held accountable. It will also be necessary to provide adequate redress for the terror and anguish caused by persecution based on who you are and how you look; for the constant fear of family separation, deportation, the loss of

one's life project, imprisonment, assault, or death at the hands of authorities who administer deportation through a logic that amounts to a legally sanctioned form of ethnic cleansing of their territories.

Faced with such a complex reality, it is important to call for generosity towards ourselves and to recognize that we may need a pause, a break, and even forgetting in order to survive. If we need to stop and do not do so because we consider ourselves indispensable to activism, we fall into the trap of living feminism according to exploitative capitalist dynamics that drain us and leave us exhausted. We cannot carry our paradigms and egos into the development of a collective movement committed to freeing itself from structures of domination. We must learn to identify within our own ways of thinking those remnants of the system that raises us to place value on doing rather than on being.

That is the beauty of feminism as a collective movement: it is sustained through succession, not through the individual sacrifice of the tireless activist. Others will become the driving force; their enthusiasm and commitment will fill the space of our absence; they will welcome us back with open arms if we later choose to return and, if we do not, they will continue fighting for our right to a better life.

Conclusions

After witnessing the migration of loved ones as family members and friends became part of the Venezuelan diaspora, and after experiencing internal migration as a form of resistance

in order not to relinquish my rootedness, my years of work in the prevention of and response to the trafficking of women and girls have allowed me to see firsthand the cruelest edges of mobility: those where vulnerability becomes extreme risk. Yet it is precisely because I am so familiar with these dangers that I celebrate the power of feminist activism, which enables us to transform distance into an opportunity for political reconnection in the struggle for dignity.

The Network Does Not Break, It Transforms

Migration does not fragment feminist activism; it expands it. Even as territories change, networks adapt and, in many cases, grow stronger. Those who are abroad and those of us who remain continue to stay connected: we share resources, strategies, care, and responses. Feminist comrades in different countries have consistently answered the calls of women who need support in situations of gender-based violence, but also in other circumstances that place them at risk.

These menstrual cups traveled from different parts of the world in 2018 in response to a call from Proyecto Mujeres, an organization dedicated to promoting menstrual dignity for Venezuelan girls in a context of severe shortages of these basic products. And this is only one example. Surely every activist who reads this text can think of one of those transnational acts of solidarity that she has witnessed or received. Thus, what may initially be understood as distance or separation is, in reality, a space that we fill through constant collaboration. From different places, we sustain projects together, support urgent cases, create opportunities, and weave forms of resistance that cross borders without losing the political and emotional bonds that unite us.

Staying Connected

Migrant and non-migrant feminist activism intertwine in a shared practice that transcends both physical and symbolic borders. Making this connection visible strengthens it from both a practical and political perspective, as it acknowledges that collaboration between those who have migrated and those who remain creates tangible opportunities for exchanging knowledge, contacts, and strategies. It amplifies denunciations, mobilizes resources, raises funds, and creates safe spaces for discussing issues that often fall outside the scope of our everyday lives. It also activates protection and safety networks that make it possible to respond to urgent situations, accompany legal and emotional processes, and sustain transnational campaigns. This form of organizing is not only possible: it is already happening, and it deserves to be nurtured, strengthened, and documented as a fundamental part of our feminist resistance. We must recognize the strength we can cultivate by understanding migration not as a loss, but as a valuable opportunity to reorganize the political fabric.

Migrant women who manage to persist in their feminist activism are living proof that it is possible to rebuild our strength, whether in this country or in a new destination, and that the immense difficulties determined to silence and deactivate us will not prevail. We remain together.

REFERENCES

ACNUR y Amnistía Internacional. (2023). *Diagnóstico situacional de la representación de las mujeres refugiadas y migrantes en medios de comunicación*

y redes sociales en el Perú. Agencia de la ONU para los Refugiados. https://www.acnur.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/Diagnostico%81stico%20-%20Mujeres%20RM%20en%20medios%20y%20RSS_%20Investigacio%CC%81n%20base%20IDEHPUCP.pdf

Anzaldúa, G. (2016). *Borderlands/La Frontera: La nueva mestiza* (C. Valle, Trad.). Capitán Swing. (Obra original publicada en 1987)

Castillo, Y. C. (2021). *Migrar para conservar la agencia: Narrativas identitarias de mujeres migrantes venezolanas en Chile* [Tesis de maestría, Universidad de Chile]. Repositorio Académico de la Universidad de Chile. <https://repositorio.uchile.cl/handle/2250/199662>

Contreras, P. (2018). *Fronteras, migración y género: reflexiones desde el feminismo fronterizo*. Desde el Margen. <https://desde-elmargen.net/fronteras-migracion-y-genero-reflexiones-desde-el-feminismo-fronterizo/>

Gaborit, M. (2020). La construcción social de la persona migrante como enemigo. En C. Sandoval García (Ed.), *Puentes, no muros: contribuciones para una política progresista en migraciones* (pp. 1–24). CLACSO. <https://biblioteca-repositorio.clacso.edu.ar/server/api/core/bitstreams/6913582e-7eb3-4e46-b5d3-ac6a253d1d7c/content>

Observatorio de Género y Equidad. (2022). *Yiniba Castillo, feminista y migrante venezolana: “El dolor de la frontera se lleva en el cuerpo todo el tiempo”*. <https://oge.cl/yiniba-castillo-feminista-y-migrante-venezolana-el-dolor-de-la-frontera-se-lleva-en-el-cuerpo-todo-el-tiempo/>

Rodríguez, M. (2025). *La historia migrante y político-intelectual de Ochy Curiel, feminista descolonial y cofundadora del Grupo GLEFAS*. Refugio Latinoamericano. <https://refugiolatinoamericano.com/la-historia-migrante-y-activista-de-ochy-curiel-una-de-las-fundadoras-del-grupo-glefas/>

Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the oppressed*. University of Minnesota Press.

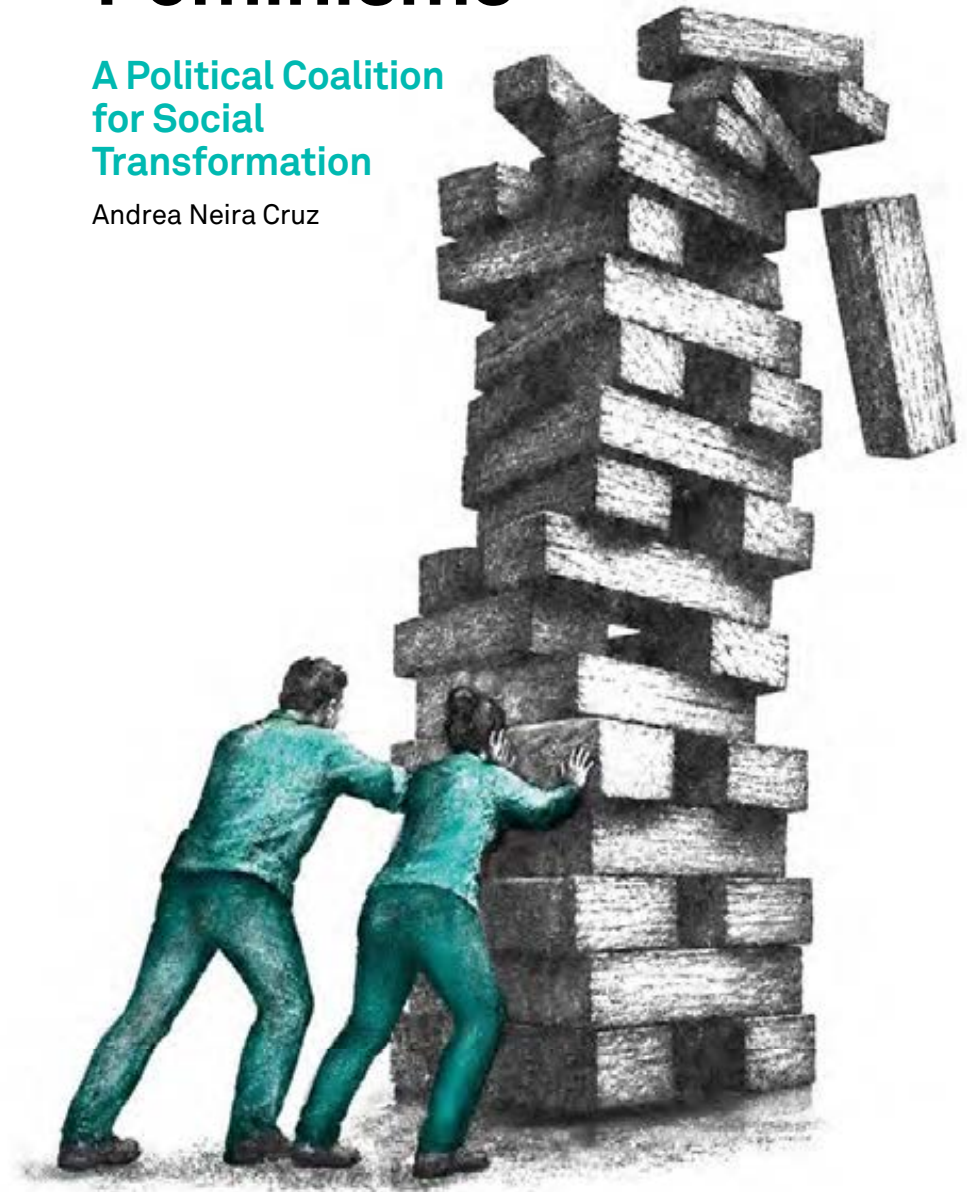
Suárez-Navaz, L. (2006). Ciudadanía y migración: ¿un oxímoron? *Puntos de Vista*, (4), 29–49. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Liliana-Suarez-5/publication/260188384_Ciudadania_y_Migracion_un_oximoron_en_Revista_de_Migracion_Puntos_de_Vista_N4_Madrid_enero_2006_ISSN_1699-6119_29-48/links/56c61ff808ae0d3b1b60329b/Ciudadania-y-Migracion-un-oximoron-en-Revista-de-Migracion-Puntos-de-Vista-N4-Madrid-enero-2006-ISSN-1699-6119-29-48.pdf

TRANSFORM STRUCTURES
OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE

Masculinities and Feminisms

A Political Coalition
for Social
Transformation

Andrea Neira Cruz



Andrea Neira Cruz

Doctoral candidate in Social Sciences (University of Giessen) and Anthropology (University of Cauca). Master's degree holder in Feminist Studies (National University of Colombia, UNAL), collaborator with the CAPAZ Institute, and researcher with the Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Group (GIEG-UNAL). Lecturer and researcher specializing in masculinities, armed conflict, reintegration processes, subjectivities, and feminist and alternative economies.

Introduction

What is a woman, and especially a feminist woman, doing studying masculinities? As a feminist who has spent more than fifteen years thinking about this field, with and without men, I have been confronted with this question on numerous occasions. I remember that, while pursuing a Master's degree in Gender Studies at the National University of Colombia, I experienced a certain level of questioning, and even disdain, from some classmates and professors regarding my research topic. Several of them believed that investigating the production of masculine subjectivities among cisgender men from working-class backgrounds who resisted war was pointless. There, they argued, one could find nothing but patriarchy and sexism; dedicating time and resources to such a purpose was, consequently, a waste. Yet I have also experienced the opposite. I have seen certain men react with particular empathy because they interpret my attempt to understand the production of masculinities as evidence that "I am on their side," which, in their eyes, makes me an understandable and supportive feminist ally.

Thus, I have automatically been cast in one role or the other: as an ally or as an adversary. These dichotomies, which organize the world into opposing camps, are of little use in understanding its complexity and even less its transformations. I must

admit, however, that I find it politically significant when men realize that not all feminists are their enemies.

I am frequently confronted with that initial question, one I have been answering over the past several years. At the same time, I have reaffirmed the need for certain feminisms to move beyond the idea that this is a project exclusively for women. Doing so also helps us avoid falling into the illusion that only we, as women, can drive and achieve the transformations that the world requires.

This chapter emerges from that concern. It is an invitation to think beyond established boundaries in pursuit of our emancipation and an opportunity to reflect on the questions that some of us feminists have asked about masculinities, with and without men. It arises from the frustrations that come from recognizing the limited understanding of the feminist project among many cisgender men and, at the same time, from the perplexity produced by seeing how cisgender men who are leftist activists or human rights defenders, despite their commitment to social justice, do not always recognize the articulations between patriarchy and the other systems of oppression they claim to oppose.

This also means questioning a nearly universal omission: certain masculinities, commonly referred to as hegemonic, are co-produced alongside particular femininities, also hegemonic, and not outside of or apart from them. It is, therefore, a profoundly relational matter. The questions must also be directed toward feminisms: how can we understand that not all men occupy the same position of privilege? How can we understand that the normative expectations of masculinity produce

subjects with characteristics that many men neither genuinely desire nor are able to embody?

The questions that guide this chapter are not merely theoretical, although it is clear to me that we cannot dispense with theory in addressing them, since it provides crucial tools for illuminating them. Above all, they are urgently political questions in an increasingly authoritarian and militarized global context, marked by neopatriarchal expressions that emerge in response to the advances made by feminisms.

Two central questions guide this chapter: what insights are important for certain feminists not to identify men and masculinities, strictly speaking, as a threat to their rights?

How do we ensure that men, especially cisgender men, feel called upon by a profoundly transformative political and ethical project of which they, too, can be a part?

These questions arise from fifteen years of work in the field of masculinities, informed by the reading of diverse non-separatist feminisms, and today they are reactivated by contemporary debates, including those advanced by non-punitive feminisms. I am aware that these issues may be uncomfortable for some feminists, but I long ago accepted that discomfort is a necessary part of any living and transformative mode of thought.

In this chapter, I aim to examine, in a concise manner, the relationship between various feminisms and the notion of gender, as well as the effects this has on the ways in which men and masculinities are understood. I will then focus on the notion

of gender as a *dispositif*¹ of power and of subject production in order to explore how this perspective makes it possible to formulate an alternative understanding of the production of masculinities and femininities. My aim is to show that conceptual clarity can open political horizons and non-separatist alliances for intersectional struggles.

Feminisms and Masculinities

Speaking of feminism in the singular is always insufficient. Rather than a homogeneous field, it is a constellation of political, theoretical, and lived commitments that have emerged in different contexts and from very specific experiences. This diversity has been crucial not only for broadening the struggles for gender equity, but also for opening up questions about men and masculinities, to the point of consolidating this topic as a field of study in its own right within gender studies (Brown & Ismail, 2022; Núñez, 2016; Viveros, 2011).

Equality feminisms, such as liberal feminism and certain socialist strands, have emphasized closing gaps in access to rights, political participation, and equality in the workplace. Within these approaches, gender is often understood as a set of roles that generate discrimination and that can therefore be transformed through institutional reforms and cultural change (Ciccia, 2022). However, this approach has been

criticized for often remaining at the level of inclusion: gaining entry into institutions without necessarily transforming them or fundamentally questioning the masculine norms that structure them (Brown & Ismail, 2022).

When men are considered from this perspective, strategies tend to focus on individual change: encouraging them to take on more caregiving responsibilities, question their privileges, and examine their everyday practices. All of this is undoubtedly important, but it sometimes ends up reducing the problem to a matter of roles and behaviors, leaving in the background the structures that produce and sustain those inequalities.

On the other hand, difference feminisms, and radical feminism in particular, introduced an important shift by pointing out that oppression is not confined to the public or institutional sphere. By asserting that “the personal is political,” they placed everyday life, sexuality, reproduction, and violence at the center of analysis, showing that fundamental power relations are also at work there (Ciccia, 2022). This shift was crucial for understanding patriarchy as a system that permeates the entirety of social life.

Within this framework, men are often positioned in opposition to women and, at times, portrayed as carriers of a naturalized form of violence. This perspective was powerful in making visible the centrality of male violence, but it has also been criticized for its tendency to essentialize men and treat them as a homogeneous bloc, devoid of nuance and difference (Viveros, 2007). The risk is that it closes off the possibility of imagining more complex transformations and, above all, of building alliances.

¹ Translator’s note: *Dispositif*, often translated as “apparatus,” refers to the interconnected discourses, institutions, norms, practices, and forms of knowledge through which power operates and produces social realities. The French term is retained to preserve this broader theoretical meaning.

Despite their differences, these feminisms share a key idea: gender is a social construction. However, they have often maintained a rigid separation between sex (biological) and gender (cultural), a distinction that has been widely challenged by more recent approaches because of its binary and cisnormative character (Brown & Ismail, 2022; Ciccio, 2022). It is precisely at this point that intersectional, Black, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms have made fundamental contributions. These perspectives begin from a premise that, in my view, completely transforms the analysis and challenges binary thinking: gender cannot be understood without race, class, sexuality, age, or nationality.

This shift has been particularly relevant for rethinking masculinities. By recognizing that men access privileges and resources in unequal ways, it becomes possible to understand them not only as subjects of power, but also as subjects shaped by multiple forms of subordination. Black feminists have been central to this process by pointing out that the experiences of racialized men differ profoundly from those of white men, both in terms of privilege and vulnerability (hooks, 2022). This does not mean exempting them from responsibility; rather, it means complicating the way we understand power.

From these feminisms, I have come to identify at least three key elements for thinking about masculinities: not essentializing men, not embracing separatism as the only way forward, and understanding power as something relational, situated, and constantly changing (Neira, 2023).

These principles have opened up the possibility for me to think about men not only as a problem, but also as part of the solution and of broader processes of transformation, without losing sight of the structures that sustain inequality.

However, this approach also has its tensions. Recognizing that men can be, at the same time, subjects of privilege and subjects of oppression may lead the analysis to shift toward the individual level, thereby diluting structural critique (Brown & Ismail, 2022).

In this sense, thinking about the relationship between feminisms and masculinities means moving through uncomfortable, yet necessary terrain. It is not a matter of denying conflicts or forcing consensus, but rather of recognizing that tensions can also be productive.

Intersectional feminisms, in particular, have shown that it is possible to build situated alliances that do not begin from homogeneity, but from the recognition of differences and inequalities.

Perhaps this is where one of the most compelling possibilities lies: moving from thinking of men solely as targets of change to thinking of them also as interlocutors and allies in broader processes of social transformation. This, of course, is neither automatic nor free of risks. It requires contesting meanings, assuming responsibilities, and, above all, never losing sight of the fact that gender inequalities are profoundly intertwined with other systems of power.

Following this conversation about tensions within feminisms, I have increasingly identified with the contributions of

transfeminism and queer theory, both of which introduce key conceptual shifts. It is no longer simply a matter of analyzing inequalities between men and women, but of interrogating the very categories that make that distinction possible. This entails critically revisiting the sex/gender system and, in particular, the role of gender in the production of subjects.

As I have been arguing, gender has been understood in multiple ways: as identity, as a role, or as a symbolic system. However, one of the most compelling contributions of these currents is the idea of gender as a dispositif of power. In other words, not as something that merely describes differences, but as something that actively produces them. From this perspective, gender organizes social life by defining which bodies are legible, which life trajectories are possible, and which ones fall outside the bounds of what is considered acceptable.

In my experience, this has allowed me to see how gender operates in everyday life, not only through explicit norms, but also through repeated practices that become inscribed on bodies: the way one moves, speaks, dresses, or desires. In that sense, it does not operate solely at the level of identity, but within the very materiality of embodied experience, producing differences that later come to appear as natural (Butler, 2001; 2015).

From this follows a particularly provocative idea: it is not sex that determines gender; rather, gender norms produce the very idea of a “natural” sex (Butler, 2015). This challenges the notion of a fixed biological foundation upon which identities are built. Instead, what we understand as sex is mediated by cultural frameworks that interpret and hierarchize bodies. In this way, sex appears self-evident when, in reality, it is the result of a process of cultural regulation.

None of this implies denying the materiality of bodies. On the contrary, it means recognizing that they exist, while also acknowledging that their meaning is neither fixed nor universal.

Bodies acquire meaning within contexts that determine which lives are recognized and which are pushed to the margins.

In other words, materiality is traversed by power relations that determine its intelligibility. From this perspective, gender ceases to be merely an analytical category and becomes a site of contestation. To interrogate it means asking under what conditions certain bodies matter more than others, and how those hierarchies are sustained or transformed.

Along these lines, transfeminist and queer perspectives shift the focus of attention regarding masculinities: rather than concentrating solely on men as subjects of critique, they propose dismantling gender as a technology that classifies and orders the world (De Lauretis, 2004). This is why I have insisted that subjects, including those assigned male at birth, are produced within networks of power and discourse (Neira-Cruz, 2021).

Trans feminisms have also expanded our understanding of masculinity by showing that it is not exclusive to men, that it is not always associated with virility, and that it can be embodied in different kinds of bodies (Halberstam, 2008). This destabilizes rigid associations between body, identity, and expression. Although these perspectives have been criticized for supposedly diluting the category of “woman” or for focusing too heavily on discourse, their aim is not to deny lived experiences but to question the structures that produce them. In that

sense, rather than closing the debate, they expand it and invite us to rethink how subjects are constituted and under what conditions they can be recognized within the social order.

The Production of Bodies: Gender, War, and Social Reproduction

Throughout my work as a researcher, I have learned that thinking of gender as a *dispositif* makes it possible to analyze more precisely its role in the production of bodies oriented toward specific ends. Gender does not merely classify or name differences; it also organizes bodily, affective, and moral dispositions that render certain bodies more suited to particular tasks and sacrifices. Of course, there are always ruptures, failures, and experiences that escape this ideal. In this sense, gender operates as a technology for the production of subjects (De Lauretis, 2004), one that articulates social expectations with concrete ideological, political, and economic needs. It is not limited to regulating individual identities; it also contributes to the material organization of social life.

A particularly illustrative example of this logic is the construction of masculinities associated with war, violence, and physical resilience. In contexts of armed conflict, such as Colombia and many others, bodies assigned as masculine are symbolically and materially produced as bodies available for combat, risk, and exposure to death. From an early age, these bodies, especially those of impoverished young men, are interpellated and seduced by narratives that exalt strength, endurance, courage, and a willingness to sacrifice. War requires not only weapons

and strategies, but also subjects capable of inhabiting violence as a duty or even as a form of personal fulfillment. Gender plays a central role here by naturalizing the idea that certain bodies are made to endure pain, exercise force, and accept death as a possible horizon. Although, as I will attempt to show, gender alone is not sufficient to explain this process.

This is why I have become interested in the production of militarized masculinities (Neira-Cruz, 2021; Theidon, 2009), which, contrary to common assumptions, are not confined to regular armies or illegal armed groups. What is at work here is a broader social imaginary that legitimizes the association between masculinity and violence (Neira-Cruz, 2023) and turns a readiness for combat into a criterion of value and recognition. In this way, gender contributes to the reproduction of cycles of violence by inscribing in masculine bodies, especially those that are impoverished and racialized, a particular relationship to risk, power, aggression, and weapons.

In parallel, the production of femininities linked to care, reproduction, and domesticity plays an equally central role in social and economic organization. These bodies are configured as responsible for sustaining everyday life, ensuring family continuity, and absorbing the material and emotional costs of social reproduction. Care work, historically feminized, has been presented as the natural expression of a supposedly feminine disposition when, in reality, it responds to an unequal division of labor that benefits specific economic and political orders while leaving working-class women overexploited. By assigning these functions to certain bodies, gender contributes to obscuring the productive character of care work and to socially devaluing it.

These gendered configurations do not emerge spontaneously, nor do they respond to immutable biological differences. They are functional to specific forms of organizing power, labor, the economy, and violence.

The production of masculine bodies available for war and of feminine bodies destined for care sustains both capitalist economies and military and state projects.

In this sense, gender acts as a principle of the differential distribution of risks, burdens, and responsibilities, but it does not act alone.

War and care are marked by gender; however, not all men go to war, nor do all women work without pay in their own households or for precarious wages in the households of others. The men who are considered disposable and who face the greatest risk of filling the ranks of armies tend to be impoverished and racialized. Likewise, the women who perform care work, generally under extremely poor pay conditions, also tend to be impoverished and racialized. Therefore, gender analyses cannot be universalized and must always take into account specific people, moments, and places.

Beyond Gender: Inequalities Entangled with Structural Racism, Capitalism, and Imperialism

Gender does not operate in isolation, nor can it be adequately understood if it is separated from other axes of social differentiation.

Gender, race, and class function as dispositifs that produce bodily hierarchies and unevenly distribute vulnerability and social recognition. These categories do not simply add up mechanically; rather, they become intertwined in the production of situated subjects and shape differential positions within the social order. Gender, in articulation with class, race, nationality, or place, not only differentiates but also hierarchizes, assigning values, capacities, and limits to bodies.

Just as racialization produces bodies read as white and bodies read as non-white, gender produces masculinities and femininities organized within asymmetrical power relations. These positions are neither equivalent nor interchangeable; rather, they are structured by historical relations of domination and exclusion.

This has helped me understand why certain subjects feel interpellated by these categories while others do not. In general, those who occupy privileged positions within a system tend not to recognize themselves as subjects produced by that very system. Heterosexual men, for example, often perceive themselves as neutral individuals, unmarked by gender, just as white people tend not to see themselves as racialized. From these positions, gender and race appear as attributes of others, as problems that affect those who deviate from the norm, but not those who embody it.

This form of invisibility is not accidental; rather, it is constitutive of the way privilege operates. By failing to perceive itself as a particular position, the hegemonic position presents itself as universal and escapes critical scrutiny. Yet oppression, too, is often universalized. Gender then appears as an issue concerning women or people with non-normative gender identities and

sexual orientations, while race is reduced to a matter that concerns only racialized populations. This unequal distribution of interpellation contributes to reproducing existing hierarchies by exempting privileged subjects from the need to question their own position.

This form of invisibility is not accidental; rather, it is constitutive of the way privilege operates. By failing to perceive itself as a particular position, the hegemonic position presents itself as universal and escapes critical scrutiny. Yet oppression, too, is often universalized. Gender then appears as an issue concerning women or people with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations, while race is reduced to a matter that concerns only racialized populations. This unequal distribution of interpellation contributes to reproducing existing hierarchies by exempting privileged subjects from the need to question their own position.

An Interested Cartography of Work on Men and Masculinities

As I have shown, feminisms have had diverse relationships with men and masculinities. Indeed, these relationships have had an impact not only on the creation of a subfield within gender studies, but also on political interventions and forms of activism. Intervention processes involving men, especially cisgender men, whether or not they are explicitly described as such, are inspired by some of the feminist perspectives I have presented so far, as well as by others that I have not been able to discuss here. For this reason, I am interested in reflecting

on these processes, although what I can offer is far from an exhaustive overview. Rather, it is a reflection grounded in my own experience and in my close engagement, over the course of some fifteen years, with certain collectives focused on men and masculinities.

It is important to note that, in Latin America and elsewhere, these interventions have gained relevance and a more prominent place in the public sphere in recent years. Even some feminist organizations that once actively rejected working with men are now asking questions about masculinities. I do not believe it is a coincidence that this is happening in the context of the so-called rightward turn: the ultraconservative expressions of masculinist groups (Alabao, 2025; Roth, 2025) and the emergence of new neopatriarchal collectives renew the urgency and relevance of thinking about and intervening in masculinities.

Most interventions involving heterosexual cisgender men focus on addressing violence, that is, they take place once men have already perpetrated violence. Others are aimed at preventing it. These interventions are strongly shaped by perspectives aligned with radical feminisms, for which, as we have seen, the eradication of violence is central. They generally draw on punitive approaches that seek to transform a “patriarchal culture” and focus on processes of individual punishment, most often associated with traditional judicial proceedings and, less frequently, with restorative processes.

Other interventions, such as programs similar to Línea Calma (Bogotá) or Línea Hablemos (Buenos Aires), provide crisis response services: they are designed for men to seek emotional or psychological support in complex and emotionally

extreme situations, such as suicidal ideation. The intervention is centered on a personal and psychological perspective aimed at providing immediate assistance and only occasionally leads to ongoing processes. These forms of support are grounded in more liberal, psychoanalytic, or psychological approaches, which do not seek to transform social structures.

In collectives that work with men, we can also observe similar perspectives. At times, it is difficult to distinguish between the collectives and their activities, on the one hand, and government programs, on the other. At least in the Colombian case, in most of the collectives I am familiar with, their members are not only activists on these issues, but also work professionally in the field and have been affiliated with NGOs or government institutions. As a result, there is an ongoing transfer of experiences and knowledge, and consequently, a significant portion of what now exists in public policy is also the outcome of the collective and individual work carried out by these men.

What is particularly striking is the consolidation, over the past several years, of experiential training processes in which the body serves as a central site of engagement. Single-gender listening and reflection groups, where participants can share processes of self-reflection and introspection regarding the ways they have been taught to be men, represent an effort to “deconstruct” that masculinity and achieve what has been termed a “new masculinity.” In many cases, these initiatives rely on narratives about the effects of patriarchy on men, for example, the social denial of the expression of certain emotions. In my view, there is a tendency here to seek a narrative of male victimhood in relation to patriarchy and, as I have already noted,

this is limited, if not problematic. The paradigm of victimization, even in relation to women, has been heavily critiqued by postcolonial and non-punitive feminisms, for example.

In recent years, I have also noticed the emergence of work with men around domestic and care work. Care and self-care are almost always approached from personal perspectives. Here, liberal approaches that prioritize individual change, with a strong emphasis on roles, are combined. These workshops commonly speak of “masculinity mandates” and reproduce prescriptive perspectives on what masculinity is: universalizing ideas that become recipes for working with men. Rarely is careful attention paid to how men construct themselves as concrete subjects.

Finally, I have observed how other collectives, at least at the discursive level, seek more structural forms of transformation, such as the Varones Antipatriarcales collective in Argentina. These groups, very much in tune with radical feminisms, put forward serious critiques of projects centered on “new masculinities,” of discourses of “deconstruction,” and of processes that seek only changes in gender roles. They even argue that these “new men” and “deconstructed men” merely renew their privileges and reap the benefits of this discourse; in this regard, they coincide with several feminists. In general, they are people with academic training and, in many cases, feminist training as well. This type of collective is also connected to intersectional feminisms, as it sometimes works from the premise that there are different experiences of masculinity and qualifies them in diverse ways (Fabbri, 2021).

A distinctive feature of this latter movement, and one that I believe brings it closer to radical feminism than to liberal

feminism, is its conviction that masculinity itself must be abolished, since it understands masculinity to be the problem: the very “dispositif of power” (Fabbri, 2021). What appears here is a version of radical feminism that regards masculinity as inherently bad and therefore something that must be eradicated. It constructs masculinity as the negative side and, by contrast, suggests that femininity would be inherently good. I believe this once again falls into a binary perspective and reproduces precisely what it seeks to transform. In any case, these practices are never “pure,” in the sense that they do not respond to a single perspective. Increasingly, they are the result of a combination of multiple feminisms, usually with particular emphases and, at times, with complementarities and even contradictions.

How Can We Build Alliances?

To conclude this chapter, I would like to return to the arguments of bell hooks, who insisted that the separatism promoted by radical feminism problematically excludes men from the movement, and that treating male supremacy as an absolute feature of society creates “subcultures” that pose no threat to the status quo (hooks, 2022). I share this view with hooks:

Separatism does not lead to the transformations we seek; on the contrary, it may generate unintended consequences and limit the scope of emancipatory processes.

I hope I have offered here some useful insights for developing an intersectional perspective on masculinities and for considering other ways of understanding how they are socially constructed.

However, I do not advocate a complacent perspective, nor do I seek to promote a narrative of male victimhood. For men to see themselves as part of the feminist transformation requires adopting clear ethical and political commitments, capable of recognizing the injustice of their historical privileges, as well as the ideologies and economic, political, and social structures that sustain them (Ruether, 1992, as cited in Brown & Ismail, 2022), and acknowledging the role that many of them play in the reproduction of male domination (Viveros, 2007).

It is not simply a matter of bringing men into feminist struggles, nor of thinking about men and masculinities as an individual problem. The challenge is deeper: to collectively rethink the practices of power and the regimes of privilege that organize the patriarchal order.

Masculinity is not the problem in and of itself. To inhabit masculinity or femininity, as cultural constructions, is not the same as inhabiting violence or subordination, neither as a matter of nature nor as destiny.

For this perspective to be politically productive, men must commit themselves to studying and understanding feminisms in all their diversity, tensions, and internal debates. Rather than concentrating their energy exclusively on processes of personal transformation, it is necessary to direct it toward transforming

structures of power and privilege, normative frameworks, and the ways resources are distributed. To achieve this, coalitions built around shared political commitments are essential. In a context marked by the advance of authoritarian and far-right projects, we need to articulate the struggle against capitalism, racism, and colonialism with the struggle against patriarchy as a strategic necessity in which women, men, and non-binary people all participate.

The question of men and masculinities must be approached as a transformative political field, in dialogue with feminisms, one that can help us transform gendered, racialized, and class-based relations.

This also requires opening up concrete agendas for institutional transformation, at both the macro and micro levels: critically reexamining security doctrines, militarized logics, extractive economic models, and hierarchical forms of authority. Understanding how structures of domination operate in an intertwined manner may open pathways to recognizing that the responses must also be articulated and collective. At the same time, we must act within the everyday life of our collectives and ask ourselves, for example: who does what work, and why? Do we distribute the labor of activism equitably between emotional and material work? Who leads, and under what material and emotional conditions? It is not enough simply to place women in leadership positions; we must ask under what conditions we are expected to occupy those spaces and, if necessary, work to improve them. In conclusion, structural

change will not occur without personal change, but promoting only the latter may prove limiting. It is important to think across the micro, meso, and macro scales of the transformation of power relations.

The application of complex theoretical frameworks, the questioning of the gender binary, the analysis of power in its individual, institutional, and systemic dimensions, and the recognition of the interconnectedness of oppressions through multidimensional approaches open up transformative horizons for work on masculinities. These horizons cannot be reached through reductionist, selective, or uninformed approaches (Brown & Ismail, 2022). Alliances are built through shared responsibility. It is not a matter of men merely “supporting” feminist processes, but of assuming their place in the transformation of the orders that also produce and benefit them. Alliance is commitment, not discursive adherence. At the same time, we as feminists can support and believe in the possibility of transformation and in the existence of diverse masculinities.

REFERENCES

- Alabao, N. (2025). *Las guerras de género: La política sexual de las derechas radicales*. Katakarak Liburuak.
https://katakarak.net/sites/default/files/las_guerras_de_generoweb.pdf
 Brown, A. M., e Ismail, K. J. (2022). Teorización feminista sobre varones y masculinidad: aplicación de perspectivas feministas para mejorar la praxis de los varones y las masculinidades en la universidad. En C. Gruenberg & L. Saldivia (Eds.), *Masculinidades por devenir: Teorías, prácticas y alianzas antipatriarcales post*

- #MeToo (pp. 37–66). Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
<https://archivos.juridicas.unam.mx/www/bjv/libros/14/6975/1.pdf>
- Butler, J. (2001a). Actos performativos y constitución del género: Un ensayo sobre fenomenología y teoría feminista. *Debate Feminista*, 18, 296–314. https://debatefeminista.cieg.unam.mx/index.php/debate_feminista/article/view/526/446
- Butler, J. (2015). Cuerpos que importan: Sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del sexo. Paidós.
- Ciccia, L. (2022). *La invención de los sexos. Cómo la ciencia puso el binarismo en nuestros cerebros y cómo los feminismos pueden ayudarnos a salir de ahí*. Siglo XXI Editores.
- De Lauretis, T. (2004). La tecnología del género. En C. Millán de Benavides y Á. M. Estrada (Eds.), *Pensar (en) género: Teoría y práctica para nuevas cartografías del cuerpo* (pp. 202–236). Instituto Pensar, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. <https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/items/5e17b932-6988-4201-af0f-83db4cbfa486>
- Fabbri, L. (Comp.). (2021). *La masculinidad incomodada*. UNR Editora; Homo Sapiens Ediciones.
- Halberstam, J. (2008). *Masculinidad femenina*. Egales.
- hooks, b. (2022). Hombres: Camaradas en la lucha. En *Teoría feminista: De los márgenes al centro*. Traficantes de Sueños.
- Neira-Cruz, A. (2021). Masculinidades insurgentes: El grupo armado como tecnología de género. *HYBRIS. Revista de Filosofía*, 12(Especial), 11–44. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8348029>
- Neira-Cruz, A. (2023). *Ni héroes ni delincuentes: Una etnografía sobre las masculinidades hiphoppers en la Comuna 13, Medellín*. Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Núñez, G. (2016). Los estudios de género de los hombres y las masculinidades: ¿qué son y qué estudian? *Culturales*, 4(1), 9–31. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-11912016000100009
- Roth, J. (2025). *Derechización en América Latina, ofensiva antigénero y contraofensiva feminista* (Policy Brief 21-2025). Instituto Colombo-Alemán para la Paz – CAPAZ. https://www.instituto-capaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/PB21-2025.-Roth_Derechizacion.pdf

- org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/PB21-2025.-Roth_Derechizacion.pdf
- Theidon, K. (2009). Reconstrucción de la masculinidad y reintegración de excombatientes en Colombia (Working Paper FIP No. 5). Fundación Ideas para la Paz.
- Viveros Vigoya, M. (2007). Teorías feministas y estudios sobre varones y masculinidades: Dilemas y desafíos recientes. *La Manzana de la Discordia*, 2(4), 25–36.
- Viveros, M. (2002). *De quebradores y cumplidores: sobre hombres, masculinidades y relaciones de género en Colombia*. Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

RAISING
OUR VOICES

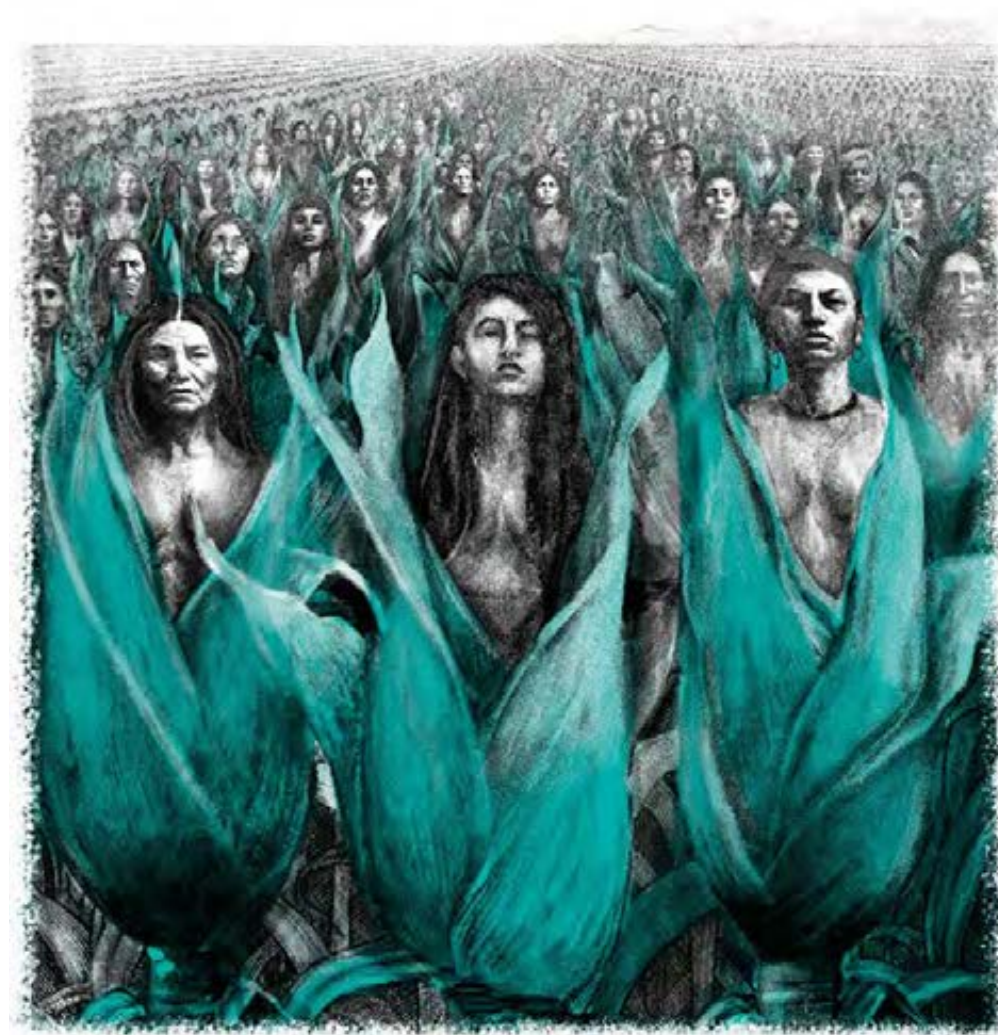
Politics takes on bodily form and becomes memory, affect and lived experience. These stories trace lives marked by violence and loss, but also by dignity, resistance, care and hope. Listening to them allows us to recognize what has so often been silenced and to understand that each voice can open a path for others.

SOWING
RESISTANCE
HARVESTING FUTURES

Manifesto from the Body-Territory

Indigenous Feminisms and Territorial Struggles in Mesoamerica¹

Andrea Ixchíu Hernández



¹ This document was prepared as a contribution to a compilation of tools for social movements and feminist collectives, and was inspired by the work of women land defenders in Mesoamerica.

The struggle for Mother Earth is the mother of all struggles.
ANMIGA, Articulation of Indigenous
Women of Brazil

Andrea Ixchíu Hernández

Maya K'iche' Indigenous leader from Totonicapán, Guatemala. She is a land defender, community communicator, and audiovisual producer. The first woman to chair the Natural Resources Board of the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán, she has been recognised by the Nobel Women's Initiative, the Sakharov Fellowship, and the Bertha Fellowship. She is a co-founder of the Hackeo Cultural collective (hackeocultural.org).

1. We Speak from the Body-Territory

I do not want to begin with definitions, but with what I have learned through my body.

Let me introduce myself: I am Andrea Ixchíu Hernández, a Maya K'iche' woman from Totonicapán, Guatemala. At the age of 25, I travelled across 311,000 hectares of forest during 2013, when I held the communal responsibility of sowing water¹ and caring for the territory for those yet to be born. I have documented illegal logging and nearly died at the hands of those who plunder what is not theirs.

¹ Translator's note: *Sowing water* is retained as a literal translation of *sembrar agua*. The expression reflects an Indigenous understanding of forest protection and restoration as a form of planting water for the future: by caring for trees, soil, and watersheds, communities help rainfall filter into the ground and replenish the water that future generations will drink. It also conveys a relationship with water grounded in reciprocity, collective responsibility, and long-term care for the territory.

Today I write from exile, in a metropolis built over lakes that are now dry, while my people face criminalization for defending the popular vote, justice, and the water their ancestors sowed two hundred years ago.

I begin by naming what colonialism taught us to separate: there is no body without territory. There is no territory without a body. War against the land is war against our bodies. Territorial dispossession is sexual violence. Contaminating the river is poisoning the blood. Cutting down the forest is an amputation of our lungs and our heart.

I speak in the first person from this experience, but I do not speak alone. I recognize myself within a diverse, contradictory, and living “we”².

Indigenous feminisms do not need to be translated into Western academic language. They already exist. They already resist. They already transform.

These words do not seek to explain them from the outside, but to join the voices that have been speaking for centuries, even when the noise of extractivism, patriarchy, and colonialism has tried to drown them out.

² Translator’s note: The Spanish *nosotras* is a feminine form of “we.” It is translated here as “we,” with quotation marks to preserve its meaning as a consciously constructed collective subject: diverse, internally complex, and grounded in women’s shared but non-uniform experiences.

Who We Are

We are those who were born in times of war and continue to be born in times of war, because the war never ended. We are those who take on unpaid communal responsibilities to defend what we hold in common while being criminalized for organizing. We are those who cultivate the milpa³, heal with plants, and speak languages the West calls “Indigenous,” but which are the languages of the earth.

We are those who sing and dance to hip-hop, reggaeton, cumbia, and salsa in the great cities, and those who hold ceremonies in the mountains. We are those who rock hard and those who safeguard our grandmothers’ science. We are those who face exile and those who resist in our territories. We are those who are called “invaders” in Mexico, although we have been Mesoamerican since before borders existed.

We are diverse. We are contradictory. We are living complexity. We are tired of being romanticized, exoticized, and measured against purist standards. We do not want to be the gender quota or the Indigenous quota. We are the ones who always drop the mic and say: “If you already know who we are, you already know why you invited us.”

³ Translator’s Note: The term *milpa* is intentionally left untranslated because it refers to a specific Mesoamerican Indigenous agricultural concept that has no exact equivalent in English. While it is sometimes glossed as “corn field,” “maize field,” “cultivated plot,” or “traditional farming system,” these translations fail to capture its full ecological, cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions. In Indigenous Mesoamerican traditions, a milpa is not merely a field but a complex system of intercropping, land stewardship, and community knowledge.

2. We Name the War That Never Ended

Climate Fever Is Not a Metaphor

The Maya K'iche' Ajq'ijab' of my people give us a diagnosis the West does not want to hear: an illness that has afflicted our territories for five hundred years cannot be cured with carbon credits, hydroelectric plants that dry up rivers, or electric cars that require mining.

The climate crisis is a consequence, not a cause. The cause is the colonial war that never ended. Let us call it by its name:

- Ecocide: the systematic destruction of ecosystems.
- Genocide: the annihilation of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.
- Epistemicide: the erasure of ancestral knowledge.
- Territorial femicide: the killing of women land defenders.

These are not separate problems. They are manifestations of the same structural violence.

Rich countries bear 92% of the responsibility. While our peoples face the consequences of a crisis they did not cause, the consumption-based lifestyles of the richest 1% generate twice the emissions of the poorest 50% of the planet. The concentration of wealth and power in a few hands is proportional to greenhouse-gas emissions.

When fire caused by drought consumes the mountain our great-grandparents planted; when water runs out in a metropolis of twenty million inhabitants built over a system of lakes; when climate-related deaths occur in impoverished regions whose vulnerability is intensified by the plundering of their territories, this is not the consequence of our actions. It is the

result of an economic model imposed on us, one that places money above life.

Green Wars: When Environmentalism Reproduces Colonialism

The counterinsurgent war and the Cold War in Central America have now been joined by green wars: environmental and conservation projects that displace us from our territories in the name of “conservation.” Militarization and criminalisation seek to exercise control over our lives and our lands.

On October 4, 2012, the Guatemalan Army killed seven brothers during a peaceful demonstration against reforms that eliminated Indigenous rights. A judge released the direct perpetrators. Crimes committed by the State remain unpunished and foster a culture of violence.

State violence against Indigenous peoples did not end with the signing of the peace accords. The war continues in new forms.

Violence against Our Bodies

You can be killed during a robbery, for failing to pay extortion, for being caught in a shootout, for arguing with someone in traffic, for making a land claim, for a labor dispute on a plantation or in a company; for investigating corruption, reporting forest destruction, practicing Maya spirituality, organizing and defending water and land, participating in a peaceful demonstration, belonging to an Indigenous or peasant organization, or being a working woman.

You can be killed by the Army, the police, the landowner, the paramilitary, the private security guard, the loggers, the

drug trafficker, the gang member, the hired killer, or a fanatical Christian religious group.

Twenty-six years after the peace accords were signed in Guatemala, official records show that at least eight people are violently killed every day. Widespread violence and systemic inequalities cause the forced displacement of thousands of people.

Criminalization as a Weapon of War

The Attorney General's Office fabricates criminal cases against groups of people for organizing and taking to the streets to denounce the plundering of public resources. Prosecutors, investigators, judges, and journalists who exposed State involvement in producing violence are now imprisoned or in exile.

We are exiled. We had to leave our communities, our peoples, and our countries and seek refuge because we refused to be imprisoned or killed. In exile, we face the racism and xenophobia of those who see us as “invaders, illegals, criminals.”

Violence against Our Communities

The extractive legacy of colonial violence persists, renews itself, and continues to produce inequality, genocide, ecocide, and forced displacement.

With the signing of the peace accords in 1996, the end of the armed conflict gave way to economic neoliberalization, which deepened the political, social, economic, and spiritual crisis of Indigenous peoples. Through the State, the oligarchy formed alliances with global investors to consolidate an economic model based on the exploitation of minerals, oil, and

biofuels, and on the construction of hydroelectric projects: a long tradition of accumulation and dispossession that disregards local societies.

Displacement and Diaspora

Nationalisms, borders, and racism cause death, sever our bonds, and homogenize our region. When we are called “Central American,” the enormous diversity within our territories is forgotten.

There are more than four thousand languages called Indigenous in the world and barely two hundred nation-states. Central America has 61 million people, seven countries, 45 languages belonging to Indigenous nations, and seven million speakers. Indigenous Central Americans living in the diaspora are still not adequately counted.

Homogenizing the great variety of peoples and ways of living in the world limits our imagination and our ability to organize life beyond the Western notion of democracy.

3. We Affirm Our Principles

Indigenous feminisms are not derivatives or “culturally adapted” versions of Western feminism. They are epistemologies in their own right, systems of thought and action born from worldviews in which land is not a resource but a relative; the collective is not a strategy but a way of life; and time is cyclical, not linear.

When we speak of Indigenous feminisms, we affirm:

1. Body-territory-spirit as an indivisible unity. We cannot speak of women's rights without speaking of territorial rights. We cannot heal our bodies without healing the land. We cannot heal the spirit without defending the water.

Violence against Indigenous women and violence against the territory are the same violence.

2. Collective autonomy and self-determination. The right to decide over our bodies is inseparable from the right to decide over our territories. Two hundred years after the birth of the Republic of Guatemala, we continue to struggle so that no public policy, concession, or law is implemented in our territories without the consent of the communities.
3. Our own systems of justice and governance. The official judicial system imposes deception, delegitimizes justice, and criminalizes political action. Meanwhile, the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán maintain their community system of government and of water and land management. This people⁴ rose up two hundred years ago to defend its territory and today keep its Communal Forest standing.
4. Depatriarchalizing from within. As we address organization, food, water, language, clothing, and spirituality; as

⁴ Translator's note: refers to the Indigenous Maya K'iche' communities of the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán, a historic system of communal self-government in Guatemala. The expression emphasizes a collective political subject united through shared territory, community governance, and the defense of land, water, and natural resources, rather than a population defined solely by administrative or national boundaries.

we assume communal responsibilities, we ask: how can we transform patriarchal relations in our lives, communities, and movements until that transformation becomes common sense? How can we keep our grandmothers' science alive while rocking hard or *perreando hasta el suelo*⁵?

We Reject Colonial Sisterhood

We reject a "sisterhood" that silences abuse among women in the name of a feminist ideal. We reject the feminism that asks us to represent a certain kind of "Indigenous woman" in order to be considered legitimate.

We reject being your cover photo, your SDG 5, your exotic example of "intersectionality."

We prefer to be *comadres*⁶: chosen kinship, a political friendship born from accompanying one another in struggle rather than from an obligation imposed by shared identities.

⁵ Translator's note: a colloquial expression associated with reggaetón and other Latin American urban dance cultures, referring to a style of dance involving low, rhythmic movements close to the ground. Beyond its literal meaning, the phrase evokes joy, bodily autonomy, and collective celebration. In this context, it highlights the possibility of honoring ancestral knowledge and community traditions while also embracing contemporary forms of cultural expression, pleasure, and feminist self-determination.

⁶ Translator's note: *Comadres* is retained in Spanish because no single English term captures its meaning here. Traditionally referring to women connected through kinship or godparenthood, in this context it expresses a chosen political and affective bond built through mutual care, trust, and accompaniment in struggle, rather than assumed solidarity based solely on a shared identity.

4. We Defend Living Solutions

We do not merely resist what threatens life. We sustain ways of life that already work. Another world already exists: it is present in the practices we have inherited, transformed, and defended.

Milpamerica: Ancestral Technology, Radical Future

The Mesoamerican region has seen the flourishing of peoples who understood zero long before the West; who created extraordinarily accurate calendars by observing natural cycles; and who developed processes of interdependence and genetic selection that gave rise to the milpa system⁷.

Seventy-five percent of the food consumed daily around the world comes from the milpa system. We are part of the peoples who safeguard 80% of the planet's remaining biodiversity. We are living solutions to the climate crisis.

The milpa is our metaphor and our reality: an ecosystem of interconnected knowledge and practices that sustain the cycle of life. Maize, beans, squash, and sister plants, sown not only to feed bodies, but also to harvest stories, nourish spirits, and honor the sacred within every seed.

Community Management: Autonomies That Work

The Communal Forest of Totonicapán represents the possibility of common and collective spaces that are neither private nor public. Amid a climate catastrophe, this is no small matter.

⁷ Translator's Note: *Milpa system* is left untranslated because it refers to a historically recognized agricultural innovation developed in Mesoamerica. The expression denotes a sophisticated system of interdependence among crops, environmental management, and genetic selection, rather than simply a farming technique.

Shallow groundwater takes between one hundred and two hundred years to reach us after the rain falls, before we can drink it. This means that our ancestors, in addition to sowing rebellion and organizing, also sowed the water we drink today.

Our hope lies in planning the regeneration of forests that, two hundred years from now, will provide water for those not yet born.

Indigenous Government and Grassroots Democracy

Between October 2023 and January 2024, for 105 days, the Indigenous government of the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán, together with the Xinka Parliament and the Indigenous Municipality of Sololá, led a national strike to secure a transition of government and prevent a coup d'état.

We have insisted on coexisting with electoral democracy despite centuries of exclusion, because we want models in which our self-determination is respected.

We do not want democracy without decolonization. We do not want inclusion without structural transformation.

Networks of Narrative Resistance

In 2021, a group of *compañeras*⁸ from different Indigenous peoples organized ourselves into a network of narrative resistance

⁸ Translator's note: *Compañeras* is retained in Spanish because no single English term fully conveys its meaning here. In this context, it refers to women connected through shared struggle, mutual commitment, and collective political work. It expresses solidarity and closeness without the familial implications of "sisters" or the more ideologically specific connotations of "comrades."

to weave together our struggles for water, land, and climate justice in Mexico and Central America. We named it Indigenous Futures.

These networks practice Cultural Hacking: a methodology of narrative action that transforms hegemonic narrative monocultures through our own voices and knowledge. We understand narratives as living structures that influence how we understand and relate to the world.

Transforming narratives is not merely changing discourse. It means changing the cultural structures, metaphors, logics, ideologies, and values that sustain inequality.

5. We Commit and We Demand

Placing life at the center amid this polycrisis means healing our bodies, territories, and spirits. Faced with the total violence of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism against our lives, we choose to heal today and always. Because although pain sometimes drives struggle, when we heal, we do justice to ourselves.

Our Commitments

We commit to collective care as a political strategy:

- Create psychosocial support networks among women defenders.
- Ritualize mourning and celebrate victories.

- Recognize that resting is resisting.
- Share security strategies without falling into paralyzing paranoia.

We commit to documenting in order to defend:

- Record violations from within our own memory, not only through the Western legal framework.
- Use appropriate technologies: a mobile-phone video or a recorded oral testimony also protects memory.
- Create community archives that remain in the territory.
- Share stories that show resistance, not only victimization.

We commit to strengthening community structures:

- Recover practices of community justice.
- Take on responsibilities in our own systems of government.
- Pass knowledge on to new generations without romanticizing it.
- Create spaces where younger women can rock hard while also learning their grandmothers' science.

Our Demands

To human rights organizations, social movements, and those who fund our struggles:

- Do not “give us a voice.” Amplify the one we already have.
- Do not “empower” us. Recognize the power we already exercise.
- Do not “train” us. Learn from us.
- Do not “save” us. Accompany us in the struggles we are already waging.
- Fund organizations led by Indigenous women directly.
- Respect our timelines, not only the timelines of your project cycles.
- Pay for our knowledge, not only for our “activities.”
- Do not make support conditional on our speaking the language of the SDGs or mainstream gender discourse.
- Share the risk, not only the photograph.
- Use your privilege to open spaces and then step aside.
- If you speak of co-governance, genuinely share power: do not consult us after you have already decided.

To academia and research centers:

- Recognize that Maya calendars are science, not merely “worldview”; that the milpa is advanced agricultural technology, not merely “traditional agriculture”; and that our systems of government are democracy, not merely “customs and traditions.”
- Do not extract knowledge as you extract minerals.
- Co-design research with communities from the outset.
- Return the results in accessible formats and in our languages.
- Recognize collective authorship, not only individual authorship.
- Include Indigenous women thinkers in bibliographies: we are theory, not merely “case studies.”
- Question what is considered “academic rigor” and who defines it.
- Create spaces where Indigenous students do not have to constantly translate themselves into Western language.

To the media:

- Do not photograph us only in traditional dress.

- Do not quote us only when discussing “cultural issues”: we also speak about economics, technology, and international politics.
- Do not romanticize the poverty or structural inequality we experience; do not exoticize our difference.
- Understand that publishing names can put lives at risk.
- Do not disclose the location of threatened women defenders.
- Consult communities before publishing sensitive information.
- Focus on structures of power, not only on “conflicts.”
- Name extractivism, patriarchy, and colonialism.
- Show resistance and proposals, not only victimization.

To States and decision-makers:

- Comply with the right to free, prior, and informed consultation. ILO Convention 169 is not a suggestion. No government or its ideas of progress and development should override the lives of people and their territories.
- Consult before deciding, not afterward to legitimize a decision.

- Consult in our languages and respect our timelines.
- Accept that consultation may end in a NO, and respect that NO.
- Drop the charges against women human rights defenders.
- Investigate and punish those who criminalize us.
- Protect threatened women defenders with real measures, not merely “precautionary measures” on paper.
- Fund community management of forests and water.
- Support peasant and Indigenous agriculture, not monocultures.
- Recognize our own health systems.
- Invest in genuinely intercultural education.

6. We Refuse to Disappear

Hope Is Not Optimism

Hope is sown. It is not passively waiting for things to improve. It means assuming individual responsibilities, strengthening community organization, and undertaking collective action globally.

No person and no people can do everything alone. Competing among ourselves only feeds the colonial and extractive machinery.

We Make a Milpa of Our Futures

We need to make our futures into a milpa of knowledge, flavors, organization, healing, collective care, celebration, and mutual support.

Let us continue weaving collective history; sharing dialogues, alliances, and direct action to reclaim the land; sowing transterritorial narratives that expand the boundaries of what is possible, cut through barbed wire, and free Mother Earth so that we may free ourselves with her.

We Imagine in Order to Transform

- What would happen if, in the Mesoamerican region—Mesoamerica, as we named it in our narrative action—our peoples strengthened our health, education, justice, and political organization systems?
- What would happen if we recovered our autonomy and the land stolen from us?
- What would the future look like if we finally stopped ecocide, genocide, and the war against peoples?

There is so much to learn if we turn our gaze towards peoples who, even amid complexity, conflict, and contradiction, retain the ability to continue thinking of themselves as a community.

We are not building utopias. We are defending realities that already exist:

- Communal forests that have remained standing for centuries.
- Collectively managed water systems.
- Justice administered without prisons.
- Knowledge transmitted without schools.
- Art that transforms without museums.
- Resistance that does not need political parties.

ANOTHER WORLD ALREADY EXISTS.

WE ARE DEFENDING IT.

Our Proclamation

Refusing to accept the colonial gaze that romanticizes, exoticizes, and creates purist standards by which to measure our lives is one of the ways we resist.

When we are called upon to continue sowing the world in which we want to live in the future, we respond that this world already exists in our everyday practices of territorial defense, in our own systems of government, in our ceremonies, in our milpas, in our assemblies, and in our networks of mutual care.

We are not asking for permission to exist. We are not asking to be included in your systems. We are defending our own systems. We are sowing ancestral futures. We are healing the earth in order to heal our bodies.

We know what scientific studies are only beginning to recognize: Indigenous peoples, representing less than 5% of the world's population, protect 80% of the planet's biodiversity; our agroecological practices can feed the world; our systems

of government have lessons for democracy; and our relationship with the land can contribute decisively to stopping climate collapse.

AND WE ARE NOT GOING TO STOP.

GLOSSARY

- Ajq'ijab': Maya spiritual guides.
- Cantons: Administrative and political divisions of the K'iche' people of Totonicapán.
- Cultural Hacking: A narrative-action methodology for transforming hegemonic narratives.
- Milpa: A Mesoamerican agricultural system based on maize, beans, squash, and other companion plants.
- Milpamerica: A term that reclaims the Mesoamerican region through its own ways of thinking.
- Narrative monoculture: A hegemonic narrative that reproduces inequalities.

Abortion in Cuba: A Right or an Arbitrary Permission?

María Matienzo

A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY,
NORMALIZES VIOLENCE



María Matienzo

Writer, Afrofeminist journalist, and columnist for *Alas Tensas*.

Author of *Apocalipsis La Habana*, *Elizabeth aún juega a las muñecas*, and *Desmembrar el cuerpo frío*. She was nominated by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) as a Women's Journo Hero in recognition of her outstanding work.

The last thing I remember before falling asleep is the image of the doctor sitting there, waiting for the anesthesia to take effect. I remember it as if in a dream: a man with a look of contempt on his face. He was not sitting attentively, nor waiting for the anesthesiologist or the nurse to finish their part of the procedure. He sat there in irritation, both hands resting on the arms of the chair, wearing gloves that I do not know whether they had already been used, whether they were meant to protect him or to protect both of us. I closed my eyes with a sense of unease; I remember nothing else.

This could be the beginning of the story of any woman who has had an abortion in Cuba. My aunt exercised her right seventeen times; I accompanied her on almost every occasion. It never occurred to me to ask what happened behind the green curtains that separated the waiting room of *Hijas de Galicia*, a maternity hospital in Havana, from the abortion ward. I always saw her come out with her tongue thick and clumsy, walking like a drunk woman under the effects of anesthesia. I never wondered why she could not remain longer on a hospital bed while recovering. Twenty years later, it was my turn to discover the answer.

The Right to Access Abortion

Abortion in Cuba has been a common practice since the 1960s, although it remained unregulated until 2022, when the Draft

Public Health Law was made public. At the very least, the draft was expected to include several articles that, from a gender perspective, would comprehensively regulate all matters related to abortion, or to the “termination of pregnancy,” as it apparently sounds more palatable. The draft was approved in January 2023; however, it has not been published through official channels and, three years later, remains a dead letter.

In the 1960s, when much of the world believed that abortion was a right in Cuba, women were still being punished for acknowledging that they had chosen to terminate a pregnancy. In 1969, Emérida Guerra Perdomo was sentenced to one year in prison and María Alonso Almeida to three months’ detention, both convicted of the crime of abortion. In June 1970, the convictions were overturned on the grounds that it was unconstitutional to rely solely on the defendants’ own statements in the absence of forensic evidence and expert witnesses capable of substantiating the “alleged abortion” (*Gaceta Oficial*, 1970, p. 10).

The overturning of the convictions made no reference to the alleged legality of terminating a pregnancy. In other words, had forensic evidence and expert witnesses been available to testify before the court, both Emérida Guerra Perdomo and María Alonso Almeida would have served their sentences for the offense, just as prescribed in the 1939 *Social Defense Code*, where abortion was classified among the criminal offenses (Article 441-A, p. 361).

This demonstrates that a right that lacks a legal framework is merely an arbitrary permission. Yet the gap between what was expected in terms

of reproductive rights and what actually emerged in the 2022 Draft Public Health Law was enormous.

In Article 16.1, Section Two, Chapter III on the Rights and Duties of Users, the issue receives a single line in subsection (h): “[...] access methods of contraception and voluntary termination of pregnancy, subject to the exceptions that may be established” (*Gaceta Oficial*, 2022, p. 8). Yet those exceptions are never clarified, not even when Article 139, in Section Three of Chapter II of the title devoted to the activities of the system, is also dedicated to the voluntary termination of pregnancy:

Women, in the exercise of their sexual and reproductive rights, have the right to decide on the voluntary termination of pregnancy through a preventive and therapeutic medical procedure, performed in institutions certified to provide such care and by qualified personnel, in accordance with the technical, ethical, and legal regulations approved by the Ministry of Public Health (*Gaceta Oficial*, 2022, p. 42).

The text does not elaborate on the practice itself, nor on the exercise of the right and the ways in which it may be violated. It makes no mention of where individuals should turn in cases of medical malpractice, nor of the need to raise awareness among or provide specialized training for medical personnel. Nor does it address deteriorating infrastructure or the prioritization of medical supplies and equipment. There is no clear healthcare protocol, although vaginal swabs and blood tests are usually prescribed to assess hemoglobin levels, blood type, Rh factor, and coagulation status.

A government public health policy alone is not enough to declare that a right exists and is guaranteed.

The violence that often accompanies the decision to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy has no legal framework.

What the Criminal Code does address (Gaceta Oficial, 2022, p. 2624) are offenses related to illegal abortions, through a punitive approach that favors imprisonment over prevention and does not guarantee the right itself, but rather functions as a coercive mechanism against those who bypass official channels. Articles 355 through 359 establish penalties of deprivation of liberty for procedures carried out for profit, outside designated institutions, or by unqualified personnel, as well as for anyone who induces an abortion or provides abortifacient substances. Sentences range from six months to ten years in prison, depending on the severity of the offense.

The three legal avenues for obtaining an abortion are menstrual regulation (up to a maximum of 45 days after a missed period), surgical abortion, and medication abortion using misoprostol. The authorized institutions are maternity hospitals, general hospitals with obstetrics and gynecology services, and polyclinics for early pregnancy terminations. The only personnel authorized to perform these procedures are physicians and nurses working in the field of obstetrics and gynecology. Gone are the days of midwives and ancestral knowledge, criminalized and discarded as sources of support in the processes of both desired and undesired motherhood.

The most recent statistics published on access to abortion are from 2020 and 2021. It is estimated that 61,886 induced abortions were performed in Cuba in 2020 (36.7 percent per pregnant woman), with one in four women who chose to terminate a pregnancy being under the age of twenty (Aldana, 2023). In 2021, the number declined to 51,488 (Ministry of Public Health, 2022), a trend consistent with the levels of social precarity prevailing during those years. If deaths or other adverse consequences result from these figures, they are not made public. As if having the right were sufficient, the lack of transparency normalizes violence.

How Can This Right Be Accessed?

When my aunt went to Hijas de Galicia Hospital in the 1990s, there was no cost involved other than the risk of entering an operating room again and again. Healthcare professionals who accepted bribes were viewed very negatively, despite the precarious conditions that prevailed in Cuba during those years.

Twenty years later, I was only able to terminate my pregnancy because I had a personal connection who got me into a general hospital. Even then, that did not spare me from having to bring the 'gift' that every Cuban is expected to take to a specialist's appointment if they want to receive care.

The ‘gift’ could take the form of a sum of money, discreetly handed over, or of scarce commodities: coffee, expensive rum, meat, seafood, fruit, or snacks.

Today, amid the collapse of Cuba’s healthcare system, these “gifts” now come with fixed price tags. In 2024, journalist Annery Rivera Velasco reported that, in Santiago de Cuba, the cost could reach as much as 10,000 pesos, the equivalent of 50 U.S. dollars at the time (Rivera, 2024). Although the price remains roughly the same a year later, in Havana it varies according to the circumstances. If you are in a hurry, approaching the legal time limit for terminating a pregnancy, or facing any other situation that entails additional risks, the amount can range from 15,000 to 20,000 pesos. Physicians also charge for surgical supplies and for being among the first patients to undergo the procedure. These arrangements are not legal, yet they take place in plain sight and with the knowledge of hospital administrators.

A woman may end up paying 100 U.S. dollars in a country where the average monthly salary is 20 dollars. This reality determines who has access not only to abortion services but also to contraceptive methods. Yet these payments do not shield women from the violence shaped by racism and ageism that is directed at those who choose to make decisions about their own bodies.

I was thirty-two years old when I decided to have an abortion. To my family doctor, I was an ‘older woman’ who should have been more careful. The ultrasound technician, fully aware of my decision, turned up the volume on the machine so that I could hear the fetus’s heartbeat while saying “You will never have this opportunity again”.

Later, I discovered that “everything was supposed to hurt me less” because Black women were believed to be more resistant to pain (Malfrán, 2024), making me a victim of what has been described as ‘obstetric racism’ (Davis, 2022).

Because the limits are not defined by law, patients often encounter pamphlets, distributed by nurses or physicians, that seek to persuade those who come to what is supposedly a space free from moralizing or anti-abortion messages. In Cuba, unlike in other countries, these actions are not solely the result of religiously based campaigns. Although anti-abortion groups do operate on the island, Rivera Velasco (2023) identifies these practices as a form of “political manipulation that seeks to raise birth rates at the cost of exerting violence on pregnant bodies”.

Sometimes, this political manipulation becomes outright prohibition. Lucía (a pseudonym) reported in the magazine *Alma Mater* that, despite being over twenty-four years old, she was denied access to an abortion as part of a government effort to increase birth rates in Santiago de Cuba (Cabrera & Ortiz, 2023). She recounts: “When I insisted [...] they asked me for five authorizations: one from a psychologist, one from my family doctor, one from an internist, including a summary of my health status, one from a social worker, and one from a gynecologist. Once I had all the documents, I was required to take them to the Municipal Director of Health, who would decide whether to sign the authorization allowing the procedure to go forward” (Cabrera & Ortiz, 2023).

It is suspicious that certain anti-abortion organizations are gaining ground in a secular state where virtually everything operates under government control. In the absence of transparency regarding public policies, all that remains is to denounce the various forms of violence that converge around the right to terminate a pregnancy in Cuba.

Heartbeat International¹, which presents itself online using misleading language as a feminist resource, functions as an umbrella organization for groups opposed to reproductive rights. With a presence in more than sixty countries and direct ties to politicians from the U.S. Republican Party (Cota & Corpi, 2021), it has established more than ten footholds across the island.

Cuba appears in this organization's directory as though women's bodily autonomy were beginning to erode. The location of these enclaves coincides with the country's most impoverished areas, whose populations are predominantly Black. Once again, the bodies at risk are the same ones that have been subjected to processes of enslavement time and time again.

In Santiago de Cuba, there are five such offices, all affiliated with churches or religious centers located in neighborhoods along the city's eastern and western coasts, areas where Black communities have historically been relegated and where access to basic services remains a challenge. The locations listed in Havana follow the same strategic logic: Guanabacoa and Marianao, two of the areas most impoverished by government neglect.

¹ Global Directory of Pregnancy Help. https://www.heartbeatinternational.org/index.php?option=com_civicrm&task=civicrm/profile&reset=1&force=1&gid=11&country=9=1056

Faced with a system that approves but does not legislate; faced with a healthcare system marked by crumbling infrastructure; and faced with personnel who seem trained to revictimize others as a response to their own hardships, it is hardly surprising that coercion becomes an instrument of abuse used to persuade women or undermine their autonomy over their own bodies.

Under this cloak of impunity, cases emerge of opposition activists who have been forced to undergo abortions or for whom pregnancy itself has been used as a repressive tool. In 2017, Melkis Faure Hechavarría was administered pills without her consent and ultimately miscarried at three and a half months of pregnancy (Race and Equality, 2021). Political prisoner Lisdany Rodríguez was pressured by State Security agents and prison authorities to undergo a forced abortion (Keeley, 2024).

A Hell Called Abortion

The day finally arrived. I had to wait until the eleventh week before I could take the misoprostol at specific times throughout the day. That night, the process began, ending in the curretage room. But when told this way, in just three lines, it sounds as though it happened without suffering.

The following day, I went to the hospital, but the doctor to whom I had given the "gift," and who was supposedly responsible for my case, had not come to work. The nurse who had

assisted him every time I attended a consultation did not recognize me and refused to let me be seen. She wanted her own “gift” as well. While my mother, the only person accompanying me, pleaded with her to help me, I ultimately managed, through unofficial means, to get a gynecological ultrasound to confirm that not only did I still have retained tissue, but that I had not expelled the fetus. In the ultrasound room, there were at least six other people: four medical students, the ultrasound technician, and the contact who had arranged the scan for me.

For me, it became a race for my life because of the risk of infection. The nurse still would not tell me whether I would be treated, yet my story, without any intention of normalizing the violence I endured, pales in comparison to the pattern revealed by the testimonies of other women.

My story, too, is an example of the pattern of psychological mistreatment, revictimizing advice, and lack of privacy that surrounds each of the medical procedures women are required to undergo, as though our bodies did not deserve even the most basic measure of dignity and privacy.

Other women experienced staff shortages, which delayed their medical procedures for weeks; the bureaucracy intertwined with corruption; the payments they were forced to make, despite the fact that healthcare is supposedly free; and the moralizing and religious lectures imposed upon them. Some report that they were not given anesthesia during the procedure, leaving them to endure what amounted to genuine torture. Others recount being struck by doctors to force them to withstand the pain without moving or to make them spread their legs.

The worst could always happen when we were under anesthesia and wheeled out of the procedure room unconscious.

More often than not, we would wake up on beds that had not been cleaned, stained with the blood of other women who had passed through before us, with sheets as dirty and worn as the walls of the rooms where the curettage procedures were performed. Recovery had to take place elsewhere because the staff always seemed to have something more important to do. That is why my aunt would come out with her tongue thick and clumsy, stumbling under the effects of anesthesia. At times, leaving the curettage ward meant passing through the hallways of the maternity wards, where other women had decided to carry their pregnancies to term.

With any luck, you will never have to return. But if you do, it means that something has gone wrong. Although the most common complication is retained products of conception, cervical injuries, hemorrhages, and endometrial infections are also widespread. Yet there is no known case of a medical malpractice offender having been held accountable before the law. Many of these complaints have ended up on social media or in the independent press, without any consequences for those responsible.

The Ministry of Public Health tends to shield its personnel through the use of a consent form that, according to the women interviewed, none of them actually read. It is a document placed before them for signature just minutes before entering the procedure room, under considerable psychological pressure. Yet another form of violence.

The Cuban reality surrounding women’s right to decide over their own bodies and to access abortion contradicts the narrative that, for years, has been used to glorify Cuba’s medical achievements and the status of women in the country.

The bodily autonomy of Cuban women is left adrift amid legislation that focuses on authorizing or punishing; amid the indefinite postponement of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program (Diario de Cuba, 2021); amid the inability to access contraceptive methods, the corruption of the health-care system, precarity, the evangelization of Cuban society, government neglect, violence, and the fear that one day we may wake up to find that the right to abortion has been swept away with the stroke of a pen.

REFERENCES

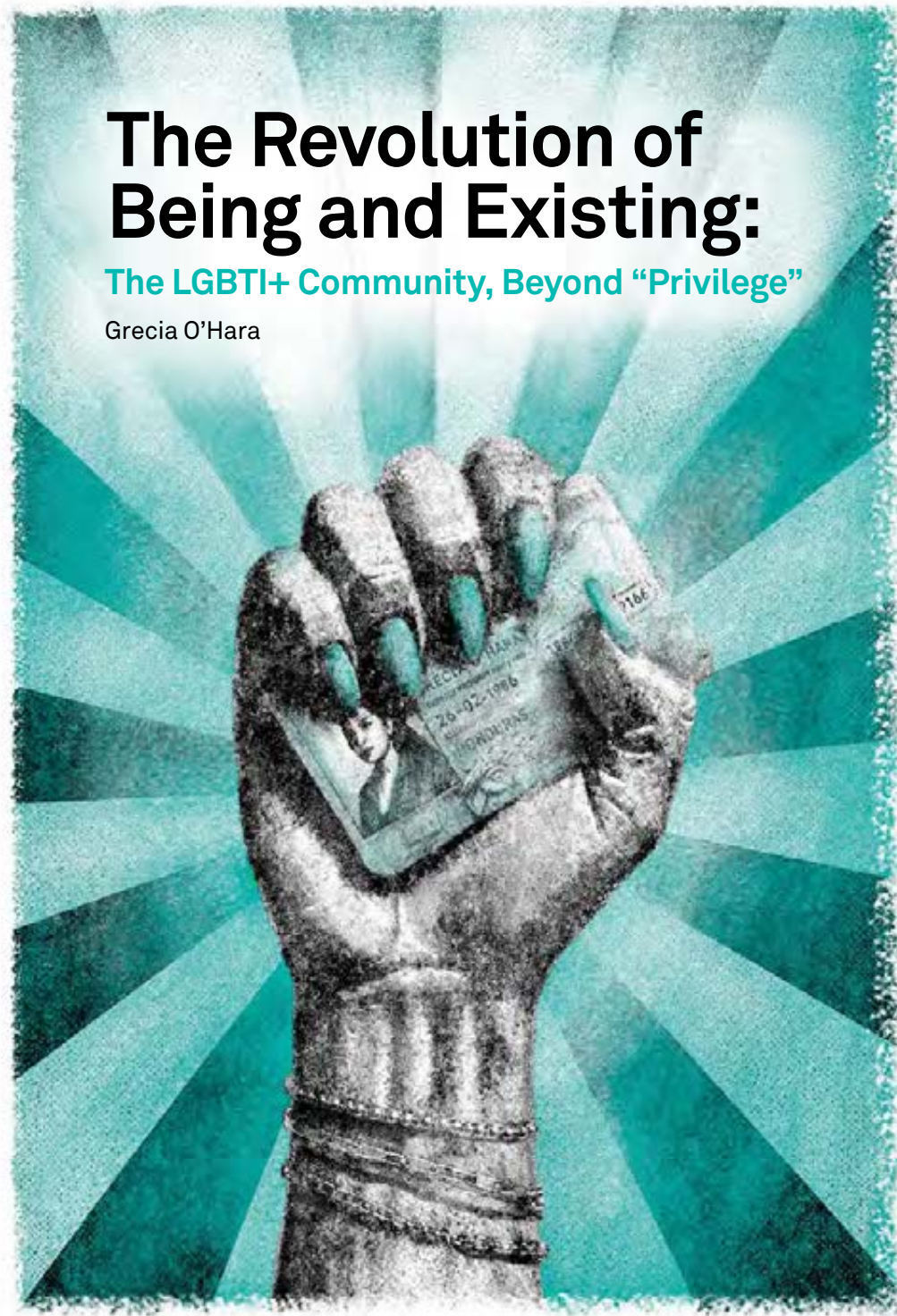
- Aldana, K. (2023). Factores sociodemográficos asociados a interrupciones de embarazo en el municipio Mayarí. Enero- junio del 2021. *Revista Correo Científico Médico*.
- Anteproyecto de Ley de Salud Pública (2022). Gaceta Oficial. https://www.parlamentocubano.gob.cu/sites/default/files/documento/2023-11/proyecto-de-ley-de-salud-publica_0.pdf
- Cabrera, R. y Ortiz, C. (2023). *Aborto en Cuba: un derecho en disputa*. Revista Alma Mater. <https://medium.com/revista-alma-mater/aborto-en-cuba-un-derecho-en-disputa-180e1959caeb>
- Código Penal de la República de Cuba. (2022). Gaceta Oficial. <http://media.cubadebate.cu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Ley-Código-Penal-comprimido.pdf>
- Código de Defensa Social (1939). Edición Biblioteca Jurídica de autores cubanos y extranjeros. Artículo 441-A.
- Keeley, G. (2024). *Manifestante encarcelada denuncia que Cuba intentó presionarla para que abortara*. Voz de América-VOA. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/manifestante-encarcelada-dice-que-cuba-intento-presionarla-abortar-/7526534.html>
- Cota, I. y Corpi, S. (2021). *Las nuevas tácticas antiaborto de la ultraderecha en América*. El País. <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2021-10-24/las-nuevas-tacticas-antiaborto-de-la-ultraderecha-en-america.html>
- Davis, Dána-Ain [Barnard Center for Research on Women] (2022). *Reproductive Injustice*. [Video]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E4CcLCo7co>
- Diario de Cuba. (2021). *El Ministerio de Educación cubano aplaza un programa con enfoque de género escudándose en el Covid-19 y la economía*. Diario de Cuba. https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1631709396_34111.html
- Gaceta Oficial No. 2 Ordinaria de 30 de junio de 1970, Cuba.
- Malfrán, Y. (2024). *Gestación, parto y racismo: más allá de la violencia obstétrica*. Revista Alas Tensas. <https://alastensas.com/opinion/gestacion-parto-y-racismo-mas-alla-de-la-violencia-obstetrica/>
- Ministerio de Salud Pública. (2022). Anuario Estadístico de Salud Pública, 2021. <https://instituciones.sld.cu/fatesa/files/2022/11/Anuario-Estad%C3%ADstico-de-Salud-2021.-Ed-2022.pdf>
- Rivera, A. (2023). *Violencia ginecobstétrica y derecho a decidir en Cuba: cuando el aborto no es seguro, ni legal, ni gratuito*. Periodismo de Barrio. <https://periodismodebarrio.org/2023/09/violencia-ginecobstetrica-y-derecho-a-decidir-en-cuba-cuando-el-aborto-no-es-seguro-ni-legal-ni-gratuito/>
- _____. (2024). *Siempre quedan restos: un infierno en el salón de legrados de Santiago de Cuba*. Cubanet News. <https://www.cubanet.org/siempre-quedan-restos-mala-praxis-en-el-salon-de-legrados-de-santiago-de-cuba/>
- Raza e Igualdad - Instituto Internacional sobre Raza, Igualdad y Derechos Humanos. (2021). *Voces en Resistencia: Mujeres presas políticas en Cuba*. https://raceandequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Mujeres-Presas-Pol%C3%ADticas_Cuba_FINAL.pdf

SEEING OUR CHOSEN NAMES
BECOME OUR LEGAL NAMES

The Revolution of Being and Existing:

The LGBTI+ Community, Beyond “Privilege”

Grecia O’Hara



Grecia O'Hara

Trans woman, tattoo artist, graphic designer, and content creator. She raises awareness about diversity through humor and sarcasm. She serves on the monitoring committee for the Vicky Hernández v. Honduras judgment, facilitates gender training workshops for public officials and security personnel, and works as an independent consultant.

Recognizing Myself to Exist

My journey began when I recognized myself as a trans woman and came to understand that this experience was shaped by gender, patriarchy, and the forms of violence that are also reproduced within sexually diverse communities. Being trans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or simply existing outside the gender binary in a country like Honduras is a daily struggle for survival. We face situations that place us at risk amid the indifference of a society marked by moral prejudices rooted in cultural, religious, and family traditions. From that foundation, violence, hatred, and discrimination become normalized as everyday practices.

Honduras is a country with a long history of violence, deeply shaped by machismo and the enormous influence of religious discourse. It often seems that there is always a moral authority ready to judge, exclude, and point fingers. When sexual diversity enters the conversation, the outrage multiplies: fear, anger, and prayers that God will not punish us as He did Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now, who am I to criticize my own flesh and blood, my own people? Perhaps someone would say that I am “too sensitive,” that I complain out of whim, that I demand privileges. But I am nothing more than a person who began her transition at seventeen and chose to give up the real great “privilege”

of being a man: becoming a father, getting married, building an “acceptable” family, contributing to society, and fitting into a structure where heterosexuality is the norm and where a family is considered successful when its lineage includes no LGBTIQ+ people.

I gave up being the “handsome boy,” the source of family pride, the ease of finding work, of defending myself without being questioned, of starting a family, and of reproducing machismo as destiny. That was the privilege, and I left it behind in order to be who I am.

Nothing about that made me happy. As happens to many trans people, something did not fit within the image that society celebrated. My transition began there, and with it came the real loss of privilege, no matter how much others insist otherwise. I lost things as simple as being able to change a tire without being questioned, because there is no “feminine” way to survive violence.

After going through that process, I came to understand everything I had rejected, everything I had sacrificed in my search to feel at peace with myself, to find peace with my body. It is a peace that I only began to feel a few years ago, when I looked at myself in the mirror.

Each transition is different. Although we may share dysphoria, euphoria, hormones, and quests for self-discovery, every journey is unique. First, we confront what lies within ourselves; then, our families, churches, and neighborhoods; and finally, the judgment of a society that does not know us, yet always has an opinion.

Sometimes we find support, peers, and sisterhood, although these often remain confined to words alone. After fighting,

crying, and enduring, many trans people come to feel that ceasing to exist would be easier than continuing to unsettle a society that does not know us and before which it often seems that our only duty is to comply and pay taxes.

Building this body, hormonizing it, modifying it, operating on it, is an attempt to make it a place I can live in, worthy of a mind that never fit in.

It is exhausting to live in a body that must hurt in order to be.

The trans experience in Honduras is a story of survival. There are no laws that protect us, nor an education system that understands us. Being trans means fighting every day against fear, rigid gender roles, and hatred toward those who are different.

Added to this are the violence within our own community, the demands to be considered “valid,” depression, anxiety, and the need to survive without a legal name that represents us before the State.

We are also turned into objects of media sensationalism and exposed to violence, the unsupervised use of hormones, and dangerous forms of work as our only means of survival. And if we manage to leave the country, we do so in search of a more dignified life, with legal recognition of our identity and the possibility of peace.

While we wait, we remain here. Because being trans, or simply being an LGBTIQ+ person in Honduras, continues to be an act of resistance.

The State That Denies Our Lives

The denial of our identity is not merely a symbolic act: it sustains the precariousness of our lives and shapes our access to education, employment, healthcare, and justice.

From various sectors of society, we constantly hear that, as LGBTIQ+ people, we are seeking to satisfy our whims, demanding “additional” privileges, and benefiting from a supposed special protection from national and international institutions. The idea is repeatedly promoted that we possess a shield that places us above everyone else, that we are indifferent to the country’s “real” problems, family, children, the economy, politics, healthcare, employment, and education, and that all we care about is our own individual well-being.

We have grown tired of explaining that we have no privileges and that we are citizens just like anyone else. We seek recognition of the same rights already afforded to the heterosexual and cisgender population. We do not want to confront any institution or indoctrinate anyone; all we ask for is equality and dignity.

But for years, the media and the Church have distorted the information that reaches the public. We have seen a Minister of Education tear up a gender guide during a live television broadcast and claim that it promotes “gender ideology.” We have also witnessed the unfounded panic surrounding the Comprehensive Education Law for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy. Added to this are organized groups such as “Por Nuestros Hijos,” which repeat fear-based narratives about hidden agendas and indoctrination, while some members of Congress invent stories about protocols that “allow children

to change their sex.” The media report on these statements without giving our spokespeople the opportunity to respond with accurate information.

The Right to Our Name

Our beloved State does not recognize, and systematically denies, our right to gender identity and other fundamental rights: a gender identity law, civil unions between same-sex couples, the right to adoption, and the implementation of anti-discrimination protocols in healthcare, employment, education, and access to justice.

There is a historic judgment from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights against our country, and another one is on the way, that of Leonela Zelaya, which could impose additional obligations. Yet the State has failed to comply even with the measures ordered more than three years ago in the Vicky Hernández case judgment (Hernández, 2025), which establishes reparations and guarantees of non-repetition. Among our most urgent demands, the right to change our names remains stalled within the National Registry of Persons (RNP), despite ongoing pressure from LGBTIQ+ organizations. At the same time, various international bodies have repeatedly called for the implementation of a differentiated investigative protocol.

There are very few allied media outlets that attempt to communicate truthfully. When we seek dialogue with State institutions, we almost always encounter empty promises. The National Registry of Persons (RNP) is a clear example: for years, it has postponed the approval of the name-change protocol for trans people, offering excuses and shifting responsibility to the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic.

The State and society oppose even the recognition of a simple name change as a first step toward the legal recognition of trans people. They deny us the right to exist with an identity document that includes not only our photograph, but also the name that corresponds to our gender identity. And on top of that, we are accused of promoting so-called “gender ideology,” indoctrination, or some conspiracy related to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

It May Seem Insignificant, but a Name Changes Lives.

When I present my identity document, I am treated according to the legal name that appears on it, even when my gender identity and expression are recognized, even when people see me as the woman I am. That name creates conflict and, out of ignorance or morbid curiosity, incorrect pronouns are used, resulting in mockery and discrimination. These are spaces that we often have to leave in order to protect our mental health. Because it hurts. It hurts deeply that a national document continues to deny our existence.

And it hurts even more because, although we are allowed to update our photograph to reflect our gender expression, we are still denied the right to change our names. That NO cannot be explained solely by social fear, but also by the lack of accountability of the institutions responsible for safeguarding our rights in the face of a hypocritical society: a society that consumes us as sexual objects, that seeks us out to resolve its doubts about its own orientation, to experiment with us, yet publicly rejects us.

Although empathetic individuals do exist, this legal limitation is destroying us. It is pushing many of our sisters and brothers to leave the country. It is robbing us of the hope of seeing our chosen names become legal names, of obtaining that official recognition in our own country, just as has already happened in other countries across the region, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, and Costa Rica.

We Are Not Asking for Privileges. We Are Asking for Recognition. We Are Asking for a Basic Right That Is Part of Our Dignity: OUR NAME.

The Triangle of Exclusion

Socioeconomic exclusion functions as a triangle that narrows our possibilities in life: it begins in education, through bullying, transphobia, and school dropout; it deepens through access to employment and extends into healthcare services.

To no one's surprise, trans women are the focal point of discrimination. We are the ones who draw the most attention from a cowardly, hypocritical society steeped in double standards, a society that rejects us, despises us, and excludes us in public, yet seeks us out in private and under the cover of night with desire, intensity, and a curiosity to experiment and discover itself. They use our bodies for their gratification, not only physically, but mentally as well.

Sex work, or putería as we affectionately call it here, out of earshot of radical feminists, ends up becoming an almost unavoidable condition for trans people in this country. How are we supposed to build identities, dreams, and life projects

if we do not have access to formal employment that allows us to support our families, pay for hormone treatments, often self-administered, or afford the body modifications that society calls “mutilations,” but that ultimately allow us to fit the beauty standards that our culture demands in order to grant us a minimum level of acceptance? If we do not meet the characteristics that allow us to “pass,” we are judged not only by society at large, but also by our own community.

There, money becomes indispensable, and it often comes from exposing our lives to dangerous environments marked by death and organized crime. Spaces where trans women lose their lives, where our existence seems to be worth nothing, yet from which the livelihoods of entire households are sustained. That is what there is. That is what exists. And we learn to survive.

Some choose, not always of their own free will, to migrate in search of better opportunities in places where they are recognized. They may not be fully respected, but they can live with greater dignity, grow personally and professionally, gain access to stable employment, hormone treatments supervised by medical professionals, surgeries, housing, and even stable relationships. Many of the girls who were unable to achieve anything here now have homes, vehicles, and stability there. They have the life they dreamed of and that they simply could not build here because the conditions do not exist.

It is difficult to find safe, comfortable, and healthy spaces in which to grow and thrive. This is true for lesbian women, for gay men, and, of course, for us, trans people. However, lesbian and gay communities sometimes have a slight advantage: their appearance does not always automatically expose

them to exclusion, especially when their gender expression is not immediately visible.

Society is not prepared to respect marginalized groups. In healthcare centers, our identity and gender expression are not respected; we are subjected to mockery and discrimination. Although empathetic individuals do exist, many act on the basis of prejudices and stigmas reinforced by the media and by the narratives that circulate about who we “are”.

From the moment they see us, they associate us with sexually transmitted infections, which forces us to seek private healthcare and pay for a minimum measure of dignity. Those who cannot afford to do so must endure humiliation. Many times, we are the ones who have to educate healthcare personnel, or even hide who we are, lie, and conceal ourselves in order to receive humane treatment.

Even so, there has been progress. Since November 2024, we have been allowed to donate blood (Orellana, 2024), after decades of prohibition. There is also a growing conversation about mental health for our community. However, the road ahead remains long in healthcare, justice, employment, education, and political participation. This should not be our struggle alone: it is the responsibility of the State. We have already done the work; now what remains is for these measures to be implemented and for our rights to be respected.

Violence and Impunity

For years, I have read and heard that reports and statistics place the life expectancy of trans people in our regions between 34 and 37 years of age (Sánchez-Garzoli, 2025). Sometimes, to break the ice when people are not paying attention

to me, I jokingly say that I have only one year left to live because I am 36. I say it with a smile, but deep down it terrifies me to think about dying before completing my journey, before closing my own circle. I also think about all the trans people who have dreams and aspirations and who may never get the chance to enjoy a full life. Many of us begin living our identities later in life and try to make up for lost time in ways that sometimes overwhelm us, especially within a violent and dangerous context that constantly threatens our lives.

We must protect ourselves from everything: from attacks motivated by prejudice, discrimination, and hatred; from a society that neither knows nor understands us and fears us without reason; from media narratives that criminalize our existence; from religious doctrines that deny us; from the social hypocrisy that refuses to accept that we exist, that we walk among everyone else, that we are courageous, that we break norms, and that we have rights too.

Another serious problem is self-medication, a common practice within our community. Using hormones and other substances without medical supervision means placing our lives in the hands of pharmaceutical companies that profit from our needs. It is a ticking time bomb: if violence does not kill us, hormones or improperly managed treatments do, as do the products we use because of a lack of resources or deteriorating mental health, further aggravated by the absence of professionals with the necessary training.

Everything would be different if the State assumed its responsibility, respected international agreements, and guaranteed access to dignified healthcare services that would allow us to live.

Death has become normalized in this country. Cases are handled without empathy and turned into spectacle. Impunity in the murders of people from sexually diverse communities is extremely high and reflects a widespread crisis. There is no genuine political will, nor are there approaches that recognize gender identity or sexual orientation in investigations.

Even so, we have engaged with institutions and worked alongside them in responding to violence. Achieving real change requires a profound restructuring, one that is difficult to attain.

Judgments such as the one in the Vicky Hernández case have provided us with a key legal tool. International oversight and the support of the international cooperation community have strengthened advocacy efforts and protection mechanisms. Although the road remains difficult, today we are no longer completely abandoned.

Organizing to Resist

When we do not find appreciation, understanding, affection, or sisterhood within the circles closest to us when we decide to begin a transition or embrace our sexual orientation, we seek refuge in sexual diversity organizations. For many years, these organizations have worked to provide us with safe spaces where we can find human warmth, empathy, and support grounded in experiences similar to our own. These emotional and psychological refuges are not always perfect, and they too can become fragmented, but knowing that we are not alone on this complex journey gives us hope.

Each organization has its own dynamics and ways of operating, but many provide essential services: the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, the promotion of human rights, the training of security and justice sector personnel, and capacity-building for public officials and decision-makers. They also offer support in filing complaints, psychological and mental health assistance, case referrals, economic empowerment, and access to justice. In emergency situations, they become gathering points, disseminate information, and provide protection to those who need to relocate.

The work they do is enormous and is often constrained by the lack of financial resources essential to sustaining their operations. Even so, volunteerism and a genuine desire to help remain fundamental driving forces that keep this work alive.

Social media and digital platforms have also become spaces for criticism, satire, exposure, and visibility. In a context like ours, where sensationalism sells and comedy at the expense of marginalized populations is commonplace, the unchecked circulation of violent discourse places us in a situation of considerable risk.

In those same spaces, I found an opportunity to challenge those narratives.

Through humor and sarcasm, I have managed to respond, raise awareness, and speak about our reality without resorting to direct confrontation.

This has allowed me to expose the ignorance that underlies many of these narratives, anticipate them, and craft responses that do not fuel violence.

Exposing myself, using everyday language, and addressing sensitive topics through ordinary, relatable experiences allowed me to connect with people and audiences I never imagined would be interested in these discussions.

Through audiovisual production and art, it is possible to communicate without confrontation, make our struggles visible, and break stereotypes. Art remains a key tool for bringing these conversations beyond technical and academic spaces.

Although there are content creators from diverse communities, it is also necessary to call out those who spread misinformation and reinforce stereotypes. Not all LGBTQI+ people have to be activists, but it is urgent that we find a balance and take responsibility for ensuring that the content we produce does not create further vulnerability.

Incorporating these conversations into projects and narratives with and from diverse communities is essential, especially in a country where the rights we demand remain a historical debt.

To this collective refuge, another form of resistance was added in my own experience. I owe art an escape and a way of bringing order to chaos. It has been my language: writing, designing, tattooing, producing, and creating in both digital and traditional spaces. In social media, I found a space where I could share my experience, connect with others, and support those who feel outside the norm.

I started out on YouTube talking about my life, and I discovered that many people identified with my stories, with the sarcasm and satire through which I tell my experiences. I received messages from people who, after a long time, found the courage to take another step forward in their lives. That was when I realized it was worth it.

Since then, creating has been my way of reaching other people, questioning established ideas, and rebuilding the way we live. It has also generated tensions within my own community, but I consider that necessary.

Diversity Is Not Consensus, and Talking, Debating, and Rethinking Ourselves Is Also Part of the Process.

Organizing has also meant building alliances and contesting those feminist spaces where our presence as trans women is still questioned. In Honduras, the feminist movement gained significant momentum in recent years, especially with the support of the left-wing government of Xiomara Castro, which shared several of its lines of action and policy priorities from a feminist perspective. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the existence of an exclusionary feminism, particularly toward trans people. In certain discourses and writings, we are portrayed as “infiltrators” in feminist spaces: we are not recognized as women and are reduced to a genital-based reading, common in some gender-critical currents (Resistencia Radical Ensenada, 2022). Referring to them by the name they are commonly known by is to give them power, which is why I always avoid using that famous term¹.

Yet even so, I want to acknowledge all the comrades and friends within the feminist movement and its organizations

¹ Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism. Commonly referred to by the acronym TERF, derived from the English term *Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist*. [Ed. note]

who have included trans people in their actions, proposals, and processes.

The gender perspective remains an area in which we must continue working, especially because, in our country, we consume and replicate imported discourses that promote exclusion, originating in places such as Mexico, the United States, and countries in South America. These discourses may be presented in the language of sisterhood, yet in practice they do not always translate into meaningful action. This also occurs within our own trans communities, where understanding and openness of both heart and mind are still needed in order to deconstruct and rebuild narratives that commit us to the defense of human rights beyond genitality and through the intersectionalities that shape our lives.

The Insurgency of Dignity

The path has not been easy, but neither has it been in vain. With every step forward, dignity becomes insurgent: it reveals the strength of what we have built and reminds us of everything we still have yet to conquer.

What Has Been Won and What Remains

Although it may sometimes seem that everything revolves around sad, discouraging, or negative narratives that project an uncertain future, it is important to recognize that, even though they are still modest compared to those in other countries, significant steps have been taken in the struggle for the recognition of our rights.

Organizations have carried out historic and far-reaching work, supported by alliances that have advanced draft public policies, legislative initiatives, and proposals for criminal law reform and the recognition of gender identity. Added to these efforts is the development of municipal anti-discrimination policies aimed at preventing, combating, and eliminating discrimination against historically marginalized populations in Honduras, children, youth, women, LGBTIQ+ people, Afro-Honduran and Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, older adults, migrants, returnees, displaced persons, and people deprived of liberty, through actions that contribute to the exercise of their human rights and their full development within society. Proposals for economic inclusion directed at both the private and public sectors have also been developed.

Municipal governments represent another challenge. Reaching them has required tremendous effort, yet one of them, the Municipality of Cortés, succeeded in becoming the first in the northern region to approve an anti-discrimination protocol. Despite the widespread lack of political will, we have found people within institutions who genuinely want to support us but fear being judged by society if they are seen as allies, or are constrained by the permissions and hierarchies that prevent them from acting in support of our initiatives.

Training has also advanced among judges, prosecutors, police officers, members of the military, healthcare personnel, businesses, and public officials involved in processes for the selection of authorities. Agreements have been signed with government institutions and, little by little, people from diverse communities who are committed to social change and

grassroots work are occupying key positions and building bridges between government and civil society.

The feminist movement has grown stronger and rallies around us with greater energy, creating more space for inclusion and developing proposals that embrace diverse communities in the spaces where advocacy efforts are needed to achieve social transformation through collective action, art, and a gender perspective.

Alongside these advances, we continue to uphold a trans political agenda that demands our legal recognition and effective access to equality and justice. We are very close to seeing the institutions responsible approve the protocol for the recognition of the gender identity of trans people in our country. At times, hope feels so tangible that it seems this change will happen soon and that we will not have to leave this struggle solely in the hands of the new generations, who are arriving with a mindset less bound to the traditional binary and with a different strength when it comes to asserting themselves.

Personally, I long for the day when I can celebrate my name change and see it reflected on my national identity card: a name that I already live by, but that I still cannot legally validate. That desire is shared by many others who are accompanying these processes. This is not only a struggle for trans people; it also encompasses the recognition of rights such as civil unions between same-sex couples and adoption, as well as public policies, laws, and reforms that will allow us to move toward a framework of equal rights for the entire population.

We aspire to genuine protection, with response protocols for human rights defenders that guarantee our presence in the spaces where decisions are made. We need safe spaces that

allow us to grow and thrive and to promote meaningful social change, especially for those who have never had the opportunity to be heard.

The shared experience of other countries in the region shows us that the most effective way to advance social, legislative, and public policy change is to ensure the active participation of LGBTIQ+ people in the spaces where decisions are made. To reach those spaces, we need training, a commitment to social responsibility rooted in the foundations of sexual diversity organizations, and the determination to fight for a place at the table without abandoning our causes or losing our resilience. This requires constant preparation, a strong and compelling message, and, of course, the support of the community and the strategic alliances needed to position our voices in key roles.

Our lived experiences possess a transformative power capable of challenging social paradigms from trans, dissident, and feminist perspectives. They bring urgent questions to the table, open necessary debates, and invite us to reflect on our individual and collective practices in order to build narratives that can withstand attacks from the media, religious sectors, and other groups that oppose advances in LGBTIQ+ rights.

Conflict is not necessarily negative: it can help us identify internal shortcomings and understand how external pressures affect our organizing.

We must not forget that, at the end of the day, we are people with lives of our own, diverse and complex, and recognizing that humanity also strengthens our struggles.

Perhaps this may sound traditional, but I firmly believe that we should not place the entire burden of the struggle on future generations when we still have the opportunity to fight for rights and fully exercise them ourselves today.

Years ago, those who are no longer with us, or those who were forced to leave, said the very same thing, and we continue to repeat that discourse. We have settled into a certain degree of complacency, but the time to act is now. We have the experience of other countries and valuable lessons in strategic litigation and political advocacy that have proven effective across different territories. We also know that unity among civil society groups creates greater pressure on the State, a tool that we can make use of.

But in order to do so, we must set aside personal and organizational differences and return to the conversations about the reasons that brought us here in the first place: the defense and full exercise of our rights.

The Future We Are Fighting For

Turning the discourse and theory of gender equality and inclusion into reality is a challenge for our communities and, at the same time, a tremendous responsibility for those of us who have become involved, whether directly or indirectly, in activism and in the struggle for the rights of people in situations of vulnerability. We cannot allow hate speech, symbolic violence, persecution, stigma, and discrimination, whether they come from society or from within our own spaces, to fragment the essence of a struggle for which many people have lost their lives or have been forced into exile.

We must continue to believe in the impact of organizational work, political advocacy, and the everyday actions we carry out through our skills, talents, professions, trades, territories, perspectives, intersectionalities, and lived experiences. All of this has the power to transform the negative perceptions that weigh upon our struggles and to pave the way for the creation of safe spaces for new generations, who are entering social reality through ways of being and living that challenge traditional norms.

Art, social media, and performance continue to be disruptive and powerful tools for amplifying our voices in every territory and strengthening collective support. An inclusive feminist perspective can guide us in building alliances, identifying key moments, and weaving strategic networks, even at the regional level, drawing on the experiences and achievements of other movements. Remaining attentive to what is happening in other countries is essential for standing alongside and strengthening our struggles.

This book is an invitation to reflect on the way we perceive the world around us and to make our realities visible. Let us always remember that human diversity is love, and that wherever we may be, we are connected by sisterhood, the warmth of community, and the empathy that unites us as LGBTQ+ people. Let us not allow the hope that propelled the movement in every country to fade away; our struggle for a world that embraces respect, inclusion, and peaceful coexistence continues.

I do not want to become just another statistic of death in this country. I want to believe that choosing to stay, rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere, will be worth it in the near future.

For those of us who are here, for those who came before us, and for those who will come after us: let us never stop dreaming of the day when we will no longer have to be afraid for loving or for being who we are.

REFERENCES

- Hernández, B. (2025). *Corte IDH: “Honduras deberá explicar en 2026 por qué no cumple la sentencia en el caso Vicky Hernández”*. Criterio.hn. <https://criterio.hn/corte-idh-honduras-debera-explicar-en-2026-por-que-no-cumple-sentencia-en-caso-vicky-hernandez/>
- Orellana, D. (2024). *Histórico: personas LGBTQ+ ya pueden donar sangre en Honduras*. Reportar sin Miedo. <https://reportarsinmiedo.org/2024/12/05/historico-personas-lgbtq-ya-pueden-donar-sangre/>
- Resistencia Radical Ensenada. [@resistencia.radical.ens_2]. (2022). *Contra el borrado de las mujeres. Emma Weyant, campeona de las 500 yardas libres. Campeonatos Femeninos de Natación de la NCAA* [Fotografía]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbdLBjIXcF/>
- Sánchez-Garzoli, G. (2025). *El estado de los derechos de las personas trans en las Américas: reconocimiento, contradicciones, violencia y retrocesos*. Oficina en Washington para Asuntos Latinoamericanos - WOLA. <https://www.wola.org/es/analysis/el-estado-de-los-derechos-de-las-personas-trans-en-las-americas-reconocimiento-contradicciones-violencia-y-retrocesos/>

An Alakuata¹ Among Feminisms

María Matienzo

A LAND OF OUR OWN



¹ Term used in the Rule of Osha to refer to lesbian women. The figure of the alakuata forms part of Yoruba cosmology and is neither excluded nor delegitimized by the orishas, nor within the ancestral liturgical practices of Santería or its initiation rituals. [Ed. note].

María Matienzo

Cuban writer, Afrofeminist journalist, and columnist for the magazine *Alas Tensas*. Author of *Apocalipsis La Habana*; *Elizabeth aún juega a las muñecas*; *Orquesta Hermanos Castro*. *La escuelita*; and *Desmembrar el cuerpo frío*. She was nominated by the IWMF as a Women Journo Hero in recognition of her outstanding journalistic work.

The orishas already knew, on the day of my initiation into Santería, that I was a lesbian, an Alakuata. In the guidance offered by the *iyalochas*¹ who participated in the ceremony, there was no message that undermined my identity as a Black lesbian woman, even with the awareness that the reading of the *oddúns*² passes through human interpretation. In Yoruba cosmology, the world was named in all its diversity, free from the Western and colonial corset that imposes the feminine and the masculine as the only possible inventions of sexuality.

When one walks through feminist spaces with those monstrosities in one's body (Piña Narváez, 2018), spaces that have their objectives clearly defined, one inevitably raises blisters caused by the toxicity of their heterosexual and racist pact. They are unable to accept you in all your complexity: either your spirituality is left out or your sexual orientation is; the two together cannot pass.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is likewise false" (Lorde, 2003, p. 41), as are other dichotomies

¹ Central figure in Santería ceremonies. This is a status attained by individuals initiated into African-derived religions that enables them to initiate other practitioners into the Rule of Osha.

² Sacred signs that embody the ancestral wisdom of the Yoruba tradition. Through the *oddúns*, communication is established between the orishas and initiated individuals, and they are used to interpret matters concerning the past, present, and future, as well as principles of Yoruba philosophy.

that have been imposed upon us, such as the erotic and the political, or the spiritual and the erotic. These impositions, which persist even within feminist spaces, are rooted in racist and sexist expressions.

But now, as freedoms related to our sexualities are once again beginning to be criminalized, reflecting on how, why, and by whom we have arrived at this point becomes an act of resistance. It is a historical turning point that finds lesbian women still facing battles yet to be fought, emancipations only halfway achieved, postponed struggles, and pacts of silence. For lesbians, and even more so for those of us who are Black lesbians with anti-racist convictions, who come from having been canceled, discarded, and accused of separatism, any setback places us at a clear disadvantage.

We have not advanced far enough for the representation of a depoliticized lesbian on social media to replace that of the activist lesbian, or that of the lesbian who unsettles the heterocis gaze because she transgresses contemporary standards of beauty: because she is too Black, too outspoken, too fat, too strong. And yet, in the face of the political shifts taking place around the world, no group is safe.

If the so-called “social cleansing” campaigns that have taken place, and continue to take place, in different parts of the world were ever to become official state policy, lesbians would be, as we already are, among the first to be stripped of our freedoms, without provoking much indignation.

This has happened before. The Cuban twentieth century is not so far behind us in time.³ The murders of Pamela Cobbas, Mercedes Roxana Figueroa, and Andrea Amarante, which took place in 2024,⁴ bear witness to this reality. Institutionalized lesbophobia in some African countries, as a consequence of colonialism, constitutes the everyday reality of many lesbian women.⁵

In the Cuban case, we were sacrificed or condemned to silence by feminist collectives in the name of a supposed greater good: that of the triumphant left alongside the Cuban Revolution.

The murders of Cobbas, Figueroa, and Amarante did not shake the foundations of the world: they became news, the LGBTIQ+ community mobilized, and then they were forgotten. Africa’s problems seem to belong only to Africa; although some voices are raised, white institutional feminism still refuses

³ Parallel to the creation of the Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP), spaces in which gay men were forced into labor considered a form of “conversion therapy,” many lesbian women in Cuba were deprived of their liberty and subjected to violent practices, including electroshock treatments, with the aim of “curing” them.

⁴ Pamela Cobbas, Mercedes Roxana Figueroa, and Andrea Amarante were three lesbian women murdered in Argentina in 2024 as a result of lesbophobic hate attacks.

⁵ In at least thirty-four African countries, same-sex relationships are criminalized by law. These include Mozambique, Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, Burundi, and Senegal, all inheritors of colonial legal frameworks that continue to criminalize sexual dissidence.

to assume its responsibility when racism and colonialism are brought into the conversation.

For those of us who skirt queerness without identifying as queer; for those of us who inherited the memory of other women who were punished for daring; for those of us who do not wish to transition and instead remain the “bomberas,” the “butch,” the unmistakably “dykes”; for those of us who may sometimes enjoy the privilege of cispassing, yet need only open our mouths for it to become evident that we inhabit a zone of constant conflict; for those lesbians, there are fewer and fewer spaces left every day.

That is why we must rethink, ourselves, who else if not us?, the “heterosexual contract” (Wittig, 2006); deconstruct “heterosexuality as a social institution” (Espinosa, 2007); decolonize gender, which has much in common with the decolonization of love. Or, simply, escape, as yos (erchxs) piña narváez proposes, and stop accepting the toxicity of the heterosexual contract, which depends on genital exclusivity; stop being part of the conceptualization of life through the lens of cisheterosexuality.

In the early 2000s, when I wanted to explore which group my rebellion belonged to, I attended a lecture by a woman who identified as a feminist. She, a non-white woman whose name I prefer not to disclose, was one of the leading voices of that moment, positioned within certain spaces of power because of her disruptive discourse toward the only government institution established for women, in a context in which women did not yet call themselves feminists: the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). What remains imprinted in my memory from that day, beyond an atmosphere that felt exclusively

white and in which I was an intruder, judging by the looks I received, was her statement: “I am a feminist, but that does not mean I am a lesbian.” I felt as though that clarification served as a shield, or as if it distinguished her from those of us who were listening, or as if she feared a stain on her skin from which there would be no escape. At that time, the doors had not yet opened for me to understand what had happened in Cuba a few decades earlier, and fear ricocheted from wall to wall whenever a woman dared to be too independent, to claim a right, or to admire a female friend.

Between the 1960s and 1970s, while other parts of the world were experiencing a kind of emancipation and lesbian women’s collectives were being formed, or the first steps were being taken toward what Yuderkis Espinosa would define as “lesbian desire as sexual politics and pleasure in resistance” (2007, p. 127), Cuba was undergoing a process of social cleansing whose roots dated back to the 1920s, but which would only attain the status of state policy after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959.

In 1928, a “hygienic campaign” against pepillismo and garzonismo (Sierra, 2022), euphemisms used to refer to male and female homosexuality, began in Cuba. What started in the weekly magazine *La Semana* through the journalist and politician Sergio Carbó (1892–1971) was later amplified in the magazine *Carteles* by three prominent figures of progressive Cuban thought: Massaguer (1889–1965), an influential cartoonist; Mariblanca Sabas Alomá (1901–1983), a pioneer of feminism in Cuba; and Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring (1889–1964), historian of the city of Havana. The ridicule directed at lesbians and gay men during that period, promoted by voices that would later contribute to the construction of the Cuban

cis-revolutionary order, laid the groundwork for the pathologization and criminalization of any form of sexual dissidence.

In the early years of the Revolution, these hateful discourses were transferred into the sphere of political power, and the country's most prominent leaders cited feminist intellectuals who, even today, continue to be regarded as influential figures within Cuban feminisms. "Lesbophobia," a term that had not yet been conceptualized globally, reached terrifying dimensions in Cuba.⁶

The Military Units to Aid Production (UMAP), to which many lesbian women were sent during those years, have never been mapped with precision; they remained forgotten until some testimonies began to be published. That of playwright, essayist, and novelist Ana María Simo is one of the most widely known cases: she is one of the few who has broken the pact of silence imposed by fear and by the Cuban authorities.

Simo was subjected to electroshock treatments and confined to a psychiatric hospital. But hers is not an isolated case. Other women have recounted how, for rejecting men's "compliments" on the street, they were taken to police stations and subjected to forced strip searches in order to inspect their underwear or any other items that could serve as incriminating evidence. Very few managed to escape punishment. Even

⁶ The reference to figures and currents regarded as progressive or feminist does not imply that they directly adhered to the repressive projects that were later consolidated in Cuba. Rather, the point is to highlight how certain discourses of their time, embedded within logics of moral and social normalization, were subsequently appropriated and instrumentalized by political power to legitimize policies of social cleansing and the criminalization of sexual dissidence. [Ed. note]

so, only a handful have spoken out, and those years have remained shrouded in a national rhetoric of supposed inclusion, accompanied by a Family Code⁷ (2022) which, although it recognizes marriage equality, perpetuates sexist language.

I remember that, while working on an anthology of plays by the El Puente generation,⁸ researcher Inés María Martiá-tu (1942–2013),⁹ while contextualizing what had happened to these playwrights, recounted how a neighbor's mother, accompanied by the police, summoned her to serve as a witness at the moment when the young woman was caught in flagrante having sexual relations with another woman.

Electroshock treatments used as conversion therapy were not the only methods. In Cuba, there were corrective rapes, forced marriages, attempted murders, diagnoses of mental disorder, and confinement in prisons and psychiatric hospitals, all scarcely documented. Yet to understand the magnitude of that violence, a single personal story is enough.

It is therefore not surprising that the "prominent" feminist I heard speak in the early 2000s placed particular emphasis on distancing herself from lesbianism. Later, through my investigation of those gray decades, I discovered that she herself had been one of the lesbian women forced into marriage.

⁷ Law 156, or the Family Code, approved in July 2022, was submitted to a plebiscite due to disagreements within sectors of civil society regarding the opening of marriage to same-sex couples.

⁸ A literary movement of young writers and artists which, during the 1960s and 1970s in Cuba, brought together creators who transgressed the social norms established by the triumphant socialist Revolution.

⁹ Theater researcher, fiction writer, essayist, and one of the leading voices of Afrofeminism in Cuba.

Later, I also discovered that her discourse aligned perfectly with state feminism, serving the criminalization of other feminisms that were not aligned with the Marxist ideology of the Cuban State and that, as a strategy of legitimation, sought to attract other voices from across the region in order to place Cuba at the center of the map of women's emancipation.

She was part of the pact of silence born of fear and sustained by sexist maxims according to which "we look better when we remain silent," especially when it comes to sexuality, and even more so when it involves naming ancestral and Black inheritances.

Espinosa argues that "a path to freedom for women is inseparable from a reexamination of our relationship with men at every level" (2007, p. 133).

I would venture to suggest that another possible path lies in examining the forms of discrimination that other women still reproduce against lesbians.

It is not merely a matter of stereotypes: looking lesbian, being queer, seems to have become fashionable among people who repeat stigmatizing and reductionist clichés about romantic relationships between lesbians. It is no coincidence that so little is still said about intergender violence.

The situation becomes even more acute when skin color intersects with these experiences. These are issues that have been frozen in time, pushed into the background, postponed in the face of other urgencies. Audre Lorde already said it: "The fear of lesbians, or of being labeled a lesbian, has led

many Black women to bear witness against themselves" (2003, p. 131). Being Black also means arriving in these spaces carrying the orishas with us, opening pathways and making them part of our discourses; it means reaffirming them as a history that has been denied to us, and whose reclamation disrupts the binary to which we have been confined whenever love and sexuality are discussed.

It is a matter of representation and of rights.

The collective memory of feminisms should also be inhabited by the memory of lesbian feminism.

We, who have contributed to the systematic denunciation of the oppression of all women and to the deconstruction of the heterosexual norm, see how the silence surrounding our needs as lesbian women turns us into instruments rather than subjects of rights.

We, who have been at the forefront of the struggles against the precarization of women, inequality in the workplace, the trafficking of women, and the ideas promoted by extremist ideologies, whether from the right or the left, it makes little difference, have been left in a land of our own, with scarcely any allies, where models of lesbian identity continue to be defined through patriarchal frameworks and where even the intragender violence suffered by lesbian partners is not recognized.

Talking with some friends about the issue, they suggested to me that feminist spaces prefer not to talk about it because, in some way, we dismantle the myth that women cannot be violent. This limits our ability to examine ourselves and recognize how much violence we are capable of reproducing, but

it also restricts the possibility of growth and of deconstructing the patriarchy that we carry within us.

Lesbian relationships are filtered through the prism of romanticization and are permeated by a more subtle form of lesbophobia than the one experienced by our predecessors. Recurring phrases such as “I wish I were a lesbian, because men...” or “The thing is, I like men; otherwise...,” strip any analysis of its depth, trivialize romantic relationships between women, diminish their significance, and render invisible issues that should be part of feminist agendas, because many of those who perpetrate these forms of violence stand alongside us in our collectives and in demonstrations for other causes.

There are no legal structures, nor is there a lobby exerting pressure on states. There is also no protocol for responding to intragender violence, which certainly cannot consist of simply believing the first person who comes forward to tell her version of the story, or the one who has cispassing and therefore, according to the cis gaze, is more likely to be regarded as the victim. That cis gaze, which associates Blackness with violence, places Black lesbian women at a disadvantage when situations of intragender violence occur.

That generic cis gaze, that racist cis gaze, does not interpret our anger (Lorde, 2003) as a response to exclusion, silence, mistreatment, or stereotypes; instead, it burdens it with questions and prejudices encompassing our places of origin, our language, our way of dressing, laughing, speaking, or gesturing.

That is only one piece of the labyrinth, or of the game of appearances, that constitutes lesbian invisibility or the fracture between feminisms and lesbians; between white feminisms and non-white or Black identities. Through that same

prism pass lesbicides, lesbian motherhoods, the political representation of openly lesbian white women, because the political representation of openly lesbian Black women is virtually nonexistent, bodily autonomy for lesbians, and the dispossession of our identities as Black and lesbian women.

Being an Alakuata places me in that land of our own, not no one’s land but ours, where Black lesbian women have been left. A land that, even while still being defined, is already being dispossessed. And I think of “the monstrous and the monstifiable, of that becoming-cool-monsters, carefully monstrous, carefully strange” (piña narváez, 2018), identities in which some non-lesbian women have taken refuge in order to perform a diversity that silences us.

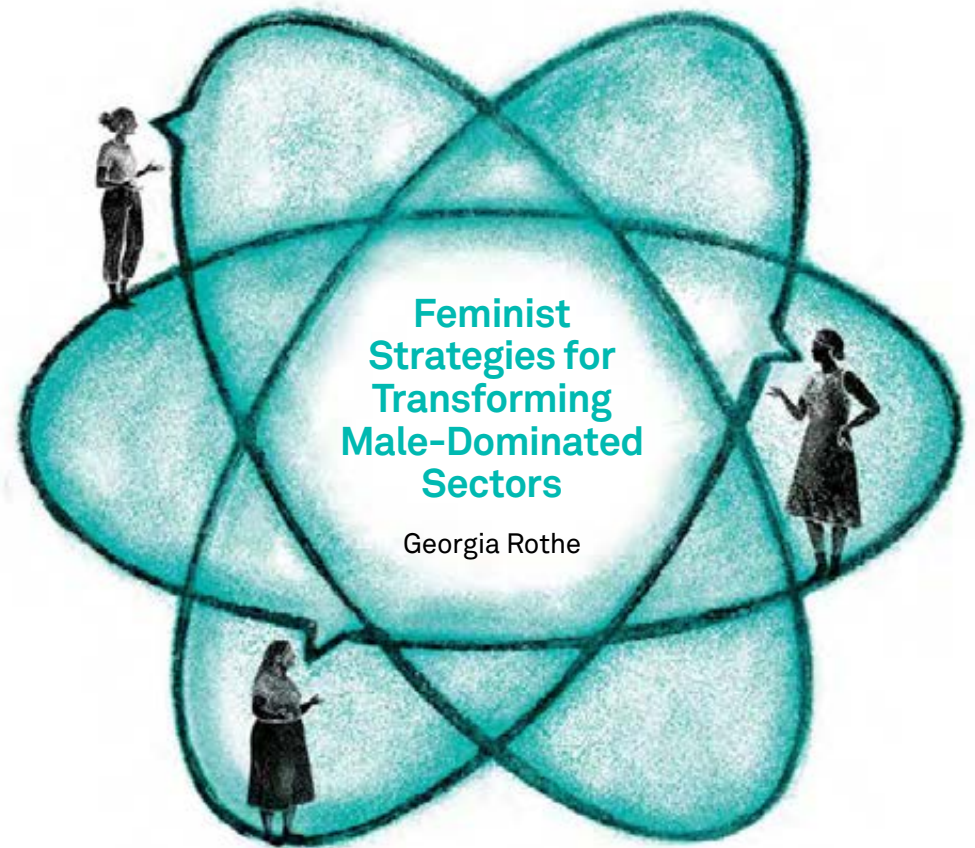
REFERENCES

- Afrofeminas. (2024). *Descolonizar el feminismo para cambiarlo todo*. <https://afrofeminas.com/2019/03/14/descolonizar-el-feminismo-para-cambiarlo-todo/>
- Andrades, Amanda. (2020). El ideal de mujer del feminismo implica la explotación de la mayoría de mujeres y varones extraeuropeos. *Contexto y Acción*. <https://ctxt.es/es/20200801/Politica/33177/yuderkys-espinosa-feminismo-colonialismo-amanda-andrades.htm>
- Curiel, Ochy. (2009). *Descolonizando el feminismo: una perspectiva desde América Latina y el Caribe* [Conferencia]. Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano sobre Praxis y Pensamiento Feminista, Buenos Aires. <https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/handle/unal/75231>
- Deviller, M., Fildar, J., Morin, C. (2020). El rol de las lesbianas en los combates feministas. *Ritimo.org*. <https://www.ritimo.org/El-rol-de-las-lesbianas-en-los-combates-feministas>
- Escobedo, D. (2024). Violencia intragénero, una realidad invisible: “Pensaba que en las relaciones cuir todo era equitativo”.

- Periódico El Salto*. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/lgtbiq/violencia-intragero-realidad-invisible-segundo-motivo-028>
- Espinosa, Y. (2007). *Escritos de una lesbiana oscura: reflexiones críticas sobre feminismo y política de identidad en América Latina*. Editorial En la Frontera.
- Law No. 156 of 2022. Family Code. July 22, 2022. National Assembly of People's Power. Official Gazette No. 99 (Ordinary Edition), September 27, 2022 (Cuba).
- Lorde, A. (2003). Usos de lo erótico: lo erótico como poder. En A. Lorde, *La hermana, la extranjera. Artículos y conferencias* (pp. 37-46). Horas y Horas.
- Lorde, A. (2003). Edad, raza, clase y sexo: las mujeres redefinen la diferencia. En A. Lorde, *La hermana, la extranjera. Artículos y conferencias* (pp. 121-135). Horas y Horas.
- Malfrán, Y. (2023). Monique Wittig y su crítica a la heterosexualidad como régimen político. *Alas Tensas*. <https://alastensas.com/diversas/monique-wittig-y-su-critica-a-la-heterosexualidad-como-regimen-politico/>
- Marbà, A. (s.f.). Intragénero: la violencia que no ha salido del armario. *Kazetariak*. <https://kazetariak.eus/intragero-la-violencia-que-no-ha-salido-del-armario/>
- Pikara Magazine. (2011). Encuentros y encontronazos: Feminismo, lesbianismo y otros -ismos. *Pikara Magazine*. <https://www.pikara-magazine.com/2011/05/encuentros-y-encontronazos-feminismo-lesbianismo-y-otros-ismos/>
- piña narváez, yos (erchxs). (2018). *No soy queer, soy negrx, mis orishas no leyeron a J. Butler*. Zineditorial. <https://zineditorial.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/no-soy-queer-soy-negrx-lectura.pdf>
- Sierra, A. (2022). *El cuerpo nunca olvida: trabajo forzado, hombre nuevo y memoria en Cuba (1959-1980)*. Rialta Ediciones.
- Wittig, M. (2006). A propósito del contrato social. En M. Wittig, *El pensamiento heterosexual y otros ensayos* (pp. 59-71). Editorial Egales.

QUESTIONING THE NEW
REALITY OF SCIENCE

Naming Silence



Georgia Rothe

Venezuelan, migrant. Lawyer, Master's degree holder in Education, social scientist, and feminist activist. She specializes in mainstreaming a gender perspective through a diversity, equity, and inclusion approach. She serves as Gender Lead at *Women in Nuclear* and as Global Coordinator for Gender, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at *Pro Mujer*.

The Problem: The Absence of Spaces to Name What Happens to Us¹

This chapter begins with an uncomfortable observation: in male-dominated sectors, there are still no legitimate and safe spaces for women to name the inequalities they experience or even to recognize them. Not because those inequalities do not exist, but because speaking about them entails professional, symbolic, and workplace risks that operate as mechanisms of silencing and discipline.

The absence of formal spaces in which to express concerns, report violence, or problematize gender inequalities is not an accidental void, but rather a structural and convenient feature of institutions and spaces that have historically been built upon logics centered on men's well-being.

What goes unnamed still exists, but it cannot be transformed. For that reason, beginning by speaking about the lack of spaces prepared for women to inhabit is not a minor introductory gesture, but rather a political and methodological decision. Before analyzing strategies and offering

¹ In the phrase "*what happens to us*," *us* refers to women working in male-dominated sectors who share experiences of gendered inequality, exclusion, and workplace silencing. The expression emphasizes a collective condition rather than a set of isolated individual experiences, underscoring the need for common spaces where those experiences can be recognized, named, and discussed.

recommendations, it is necessary to pause and examine the conditions that make speech possible, or impossible.

In other areas of social and political life, women's collectives have succeeded in creating spaces of our own for expression and support: women's healing circles, body mapping exercises, rituals of sisterhood and remembrance, conversations held in homes, on the streets, or among friends, and many other spaces that we have fought for, protected, and honored. In these spaces, we have given ourselves permission to speak, to name what is happening to us, the inequalities and forms of violence we experience, and to recognize ourselves in shared experiences that allow us to move from individual experience to collective strength. These spaces are historical achievements for us, the result of processes of feminist advocacy.

Beyond these developments, there were sectors that remained impenetrable to feminism for a long time, especially those that were highly male-dominated: scientific, formal, technical, and comfortable spaces. My colleagues in Argentina's nuclear institutions had been energized by the Green Wave, inspired by the expansion of rights that had been achieved and, at the same time, aware that in their daily work within the nuclear sector, a political and feminist perspective had yet to arrive.

Why?

Because spaces in science and technology were conceived, organized, designed, built, and protected under a logic of neutrality and scientific, technical, and institutional rigor that has also functioned as a pretext for depoliticizing women's experiences and relegating them to the realm of the personal, the anecdotal, or the "unprofessional." There was never "time for that".

We often forget that there are women who still do not have the opportunity to *acuerparse*², women who have never even heard the concept of sisterhood. Although women come together for mentoring initiatives, professional development, and technical skills training, there are no institutionally supported safe spaces where we can meet through our lived experiences, validate our trajectories, share what is happening to us, build relationships of trust and mutual support, and sustain one another in ways that allow us to remain in those spaces. As they themselves often say: gaining access is the easy part; staying is what is most difficult. These are careers in which women feel they are walking alone.

The absence of these spaces does not seem accidental to us: silence functions as an implicit requirement for women's belonging. The fear of being labeled "the complainer," of being perceived as conflictive or problematic, emerges repeatedly across all sectors. For women who want to keep the jobs we worked so hard to obtain, remaining silent becomes the safer option. The result is a nuclear sector in which barriers for women persist, not because they go unrecognized, but because they cannot be named without consequences.

In this chapter, I will write about a Latin American feminist experience of incorporating a gender perspective into the nuclear sector. The nuclear sector is a particularly significant

² Translator's note: *Acuerparse* is retained in Spanish because no single English term captures its full meaning. Derived from *cuerpo* ("body"), it refers to coming together in embodied solidarity: accompanying, supporting, and protecting one another, particularly in collective struggles and resistance. In this context, it also evokes the possibility of recognizing one's own body as a site of agency, care, and political action.

case study, not only because of its strong male dominance, with women representing just 34.9% of the sector's workforce (Nuclear Energy Agency, 2023), but also because of its symbolic weight.

The nuclear sector has historically been associated with masculinity, the male scientist, academic rigidity, and the technical realm, establishing itself as a space where discussions about gender are often perceived as foreign, irrelevant, or even bothersome.

Precisely for this reason, intervening *feministically* in the nuclear sector is innovative, hopeful, motivating, and challenging. We set out to challenge structures of thought and power, languages, and the self-perceptions of women themselves, aspiring to radically transform the way these spaces function, produce meaning and knowledge, and exercise power.

This chapter, then, seeks to address a central question: What feminist strategies can women deploy to become part of male-dominated sectors, challenge their rules, and transform them from within and from without?

Far from offering a single answer, this chapter explores multiple practices, at times contradictory, that combine adaptation, discomfort, rebellion, negotiation, and political advocacy.

Finally, this text seeks, through this experience, to contribute to opening up other male-dominated spaces where women's experiences, challenges, and barriers can be verbalized: to name the silence.

Feminist Strategies in Action: Disrupting, Challenging, and Transforming

The strategies we deployed did not follow a linear path nor respond to a single formula. Instead, they were articulated through three complementary movements: creating space for discomfort and collective voice; challenging the forms recognized as legitimate for producing knowledge; and transforming diagnoses and demands into tools for negotiation and institutional advocacy. These movements make it possible to understand how an experience initially developed at the margins succeeded in opening spaces for transformation within the nuclear sector.

Discomfort: "Informal" Methodology as the Only Possible Avenue for Expression

The reflections presented here emerge from a collective process of listening, dialogue, and knowledge production with women working in the nuclear sector across Latin America and the Caribbean. Many of the experiences that inform this chapter could not be shared in institutional meetings, official reports, or decision-making spaces. Instead, they had to be handwritten on anonymous sticky notes, shared in virtual online laboratories and in women's circles held in person, within spaces carefully protected by other women (ourselves):

- *I feel that opportunities for career advancement into decision-making positions do not take women into account because, as mothers, we have less availability outside regular working hours.*

- *We are closely scrutinized by our male colleagues. We must constantly prove our competence so that they do not underestimate us. We have to invest greater effort in demonstrating our mastery of knowledge than they do, since they are presumed capable from the outset.*
- *When people come to the nuclear institution I lead to verify that everything is in order, they ask whether the boss is available.*
- *I have felt insecure about sharing an idea, thinking that it would be taken as a joke.*
- *I had a supervisor who used to tell me he would wait for me outside after work. I had to resign.*
- *They stopped speaking badly about me and sexualizing me only when they found out that I had a boyfriend.*
- *I receive looks of desire directed at my body. I am the only woman on the team.*
- *I would speak with a male colleague and listen to him. Then, when it was my turn to speak, he would interrupt me.*
- *They took credit for my idea.*
- *When I became pregnant, I felt that my path toward promotion would come to a halt.*

- *I always feel that I am good at something, yet men always push me aside.*
- *I am assigned “women’s tasks,” such as preparing presentations or taking notes, because it is assumed that we are more delicate and organized.*
- *I have to adopt a different tone of voice than my own and raise my voice in order to be heard and perceived as a leader.*
- *I do not like riding in my supervisor’s car to meetings or training sessions.*
- *Because of my sensitivity, because I cry in response to certain situations, even when they do not involve me directly, people assume that I am weak, that I lack strength of character. I am not allowed to feel.*
- *They speak to me in a condescending manner because of my position, as though I did not have the same value as a human being; they make demands of me because they hold higher-ranking positions and have greater experience and recognition.*

The collection and group reading of these testimonies was a methodology that we recognized as potentially uncomfortable; indeed, its very purpose was to create the conditions for women to move through the discomfort of acknowledging themselves as unequal. These statements were not intended to generate spectacle or public denunciation; their power lay in the recognition of women as a collective, as a shared force.

They sought to place at the center experiences that, taken together, dismantle the notion of isolated cases and reveal recurring biases that must be addressed.

We set out to engage women in conversation as a political act.

At first, it was common to encounter resistance, distance, and even a certain reluctance to examine one's own trajectory through a gender lens. Many women stated that they had not faced any specific obstacles, relying instead on narratives grounded in individual effort and the meritocratic belief that "if it can be done, you'll get there." In many cases, they recounted their stories in ways that revealed clear gender-based barriers, yet they did not identify them as such, or they minimized, relativized, or reinterpreted them as personal and individual challenges that had already been overcome...

This difficulty in recognizing obstacles should not be interpreted as a conscious denial, but rather as the result of a lifetime spent adapting to an environment that demands the constant demonstration of competence, capability, and resilience, where acknowledging difficulties associated with gender can be interpreted as a sign of weakness, lack of motivation, or an inability to meet the sector's implicit standards. Faced with this threat, many women choose to maintain a narrative of normalcy and, although the emotional cost of this decision is high, it is often perceived as lower than the cost of speaking out.

The normalization of violence occurs because its manifestations are not always explicit: disparaging remarks, subtle forms of exclusion, excessive workloads, the invisibilization of

women's contributions, or constant questioning of their technical authority occur so routinely that they become almost imperceptible. The absence of spaces for collective reflection reinforces this normalization, as it prevents the identification of patterns and the construction of shared interpretations.

One element that emerges consistently across the narratives is fear: fear of losing one's job, of not having a contract renewed, of being excluded from projects, of receiving negative evaluations, or of being labeled as problematic. This fear operates as a form of structural discipline that regulates behaviors, discourses, and silences.

Only through building trust and creating carefully facilitated spaces was it possible to begin shifting these narratives and open the door to a deeper reflection on the barriers that, although rendered invisible, continue to operate within the sector, barriers that women came to recognize through listening to other women share their experiences: "Something similar happened to me too." "Never, in my 19-year career, had I had a space to talk about how I felt as a person, as a woman".

Rebellion: New Concepts for a Different Science

Presenting this methodological proposal to the nuclear sector, a field shaped by a strong tradition of technical rigor and highly specialized languages, was in itself an act of feminist rebellion. We did so from a clear conviction: this methodology distances itself from androcentric forms of knowledge without abandoning scientific rigor. On the contrary, it is grounded precisely in that rigor, as it is based on life stories, situated experiences, and narratives produced by the very women who inhabit and make up the nuclear sector.

Claiming that social science is science meant challenging deeply entrenched methodological hierarchies, those that privilege the quantifiable, the technical, and the depersonalized, in order to propose a methodology grounded in lived experience: a feminist methodology. Achieving this was also a political act.

The methodology that we proposed, and continue to propose, for addressing and healing violence is one characterized by the absence of individual authorship.

For science, authorship must be individually identifiable; for us, authorship belongs to all of us, collectively. We call this a “Feminist Care Methodology”.

It proved to be the most effective way for women to express, with honesty, what they had not said in decades: to name the violence they had experienced without exposing themselves and to build a shared diagnosis.

It was not an isolated methodological decision, but rather a response to the material and symbolic conditions of the nuclear sector. In contexts where speaking can have consequences, or even awaken insecurity, fear, or distrust among women themselves, the choice of non-individualized formats becomes a necessary condition for allowing stories to be told. In our case, there was no signature, no name, no career trajectory, and no nuclear institution attached to them: only a brief statement based on a personal experience, written in the first person.

Incorporating intersectionality into the construction of scientific knowledge was another disruptive gesture. Not all women

experience the nuclear sector in the same way and, although it is often perceived as a white and privileged space, this too is a limited and Global North-centered perspective. The intercultural diversity of women in the nuclear sector is vast and, for this reason, it is essential that the sector examine how gender intersects with class, age, nationality, race, and institutional position. Making these inequalities visible from Latin American contexts made it possible to build a distinctly Latin American and Caribbean perspective on the obstacles and barriers within the sector, one that challenges imported models and proposes thinking about science and technology from contexts shaped by the structural inequalities specific to the region.

Rebellion was also present in form. The choice of a disruptive visual aesthetic, the use of colors outside the traditional scientific palette, accessible and situated language, and a collective narrative were all conscious political decisions. Breaking with traditional ways of producing technical documents was part of the strategy.

Furthermore, this approach made it possible to challenge the neutrality of science by exposing the fact that, far from being sterile spaces, these environments are permeated by power relations, beliefs, hierarchies, and biases. Naming what did not previously exist within institutional language, experiences, inequalities, and invisible forms of violence, was an essential step toward imagining another way of inhabiting the nuclear sector: one that is more just and inclusive.

We recognized, named, and documented the obstacles and barriers we face. We shared them, brought them into the open, and, in doing so, stopped experiencing them as individual struggles and began recognizing ourselves as a political force

among ourselves. We came together, listened to one another, and allowed ourselves to imagine new and possible ways of inhabiting the nuclear sector free from violence. We conducted laboratories, not scientific ones, but social laboratories: virtual and in-person spaces where we shared experiences and knowledge and, from there, mapped out the paths we want the nuclear sector to follow. Paths that we know are possible, and for which we need, demand, and expect the support of nuclear institutions. In this way, we arrived at concrete recommendations, because our demands had already become clear to us. The challenge now was to influence institutions.

Negotiation and Political Advocacy

Driving this transformation within the nuclear sector also required advocacy strategies from within. Dialogue, colleagues allied with the feminist struggle, and collaboration with institutional bodies that had the political will to advocate for the recognition of women's value within the nuclear sector were essential to ensuring that this work did not remain at the margins.

In this process, the role of Women in Nuclear (WiN ARCAL), the Latin American and Caribbean chapter of the Global Women in Nuclear Network (WiN Global), was crucial, as was the Regional Cooperative Agreement for the Promotion of Nuclear Science and Technology in Latin America and the Caribbean (ARCAL) and the support of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

These alliances provided the work with institutional legitimacy, enabled its circulation within decision-making spaces, and made possible, in 2022, the funding and publication of the first guide in the world dedicated specifically to mainstreaming

a gender perspective in the nuclear sector in the region: *We Are Powerful: A Guide to Integrating a Gender Perspective into the Nuclear Sector in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Belinco et al., 2022).

This document analyzes and presents the situation of women in the nuclear sector across Latin America and the Caribbean with the aim of raising awareness about gender inequality and promoting new ways of inhabiting the nuclear sector. Through surveys and testimonies, it outlines structural barriers, stereotypes, biases, and difficulties in reconciling professional life with personal life and caregiving responsibilities. The document also seeks to educate by introducing key gender concepts and naming the visible and invisible forms of violence that persist within traditionally male-dominated institutions, while providing statistical data collected from women working in the sector throughout the region.

This tool is useful, relevant, and necessary not only because it creates a record of the life trajectories of women professionals in the nuclear sector as women, but also because it documents and shares, for the first time, how these same Latin American women, from different countries and acting collectively, became protagonists in the construction of strategies to dismantle the barriers they had identified. It also offers concrete institutional recommendations for transforming organizational culture toward a more inclusive and sustainable model.

These collaborative methodologies functioned not only as working tools, but as feminist practices in and of themselves. Building collectively, validating diverse forms of knowledge, and prioritizing the process as much as the outcome made it possible to create a guide that not only speaks about gender, but is itself permeated by a gender perspective in the very way it was produced.

This tool not only systematizes experiences, but also recognizes, documents, and preserves the history and collective memory of women in the nuclear sector. It positions us as political subjects capable of making demands, proposes collective strategies for inhabiting the sector in new ways, and offers clear guidance to national nuclear institutions, whose representatives were invited to its presentation and asked to publicly express their commitment. Its presentation across multiple countries in the region and its adoption as a foundational reference document have consolidated its role as a tool of regional feminist advocacy. Today, it remains the leading reference instrument for advancing feminist action within the nuclear sector, year after year, throughout Latin America.

The Commitment: Naming Silence Is Also Science

Transforming deeply male-dominated sectors does not simply mean adding more women to preexisting structures; it means ensuring that they can remain, grow, and advance free from sexist violence in spaces where concentrated hierarchies and predominantly male leadership still persist. This challenge is not directed only at women: it also requires the men who are part of the nuclear sector, especially those who occupy leadership positions, to be willing to embrace discomfort, examine their privileges, and actively participate in the processes of change that women are driving.

Incorporating an intersectional perspective and a Latin American and Caribbean lens is essential to avoid universalizing approaches that reproduce exclusions.

It is necessary to recognize that aesthetics, language, and the forms through which knowledge is produced also construct political meaning, and that they should not be understood or dismissed as a triviality attributed to women.

Institutional alliances have proven essential for turning diagnoses into concrete policies, but these policies will only be effective if institutions recognize the urgency of allocating specific and sustained resources to actions aimed at gender equality, prioritizing women without excluding the responsible participation of men.

Likewise, women need, want, and deserve legitimate spaces in which to share life experiences, make visible the burden of care work, and build community, networks, and sisterhood. These spaces can no longer depend on individual initiative nor remain relegated to extracurricular activities, adding yet another unpaid burden to already demanding workdays. Nuclear institutions must recognize, promote, and incorporate them as part of professional development, workplace well-being, and strategies for retaining women in the sector, until inequality disappears.

Documenting collective memory becomes a key political strategy for preventing setbacks, weaving bonds of feminist solidarity, and charting the roadmap toward where we want to go. If necessary, and if it makes us feel safer, we will do so through collective anonymity, not only as a practice of feminist care, but also as a valid and necessary form of evidence production in contexts that are hostile to women's voices, and

with the awareness that the transition from individual testimony to collective demands enables, for the first time for many women, the exercise of a form of political power that has historically been denied to them.

Naming silence is also a way of doing science. It is social science and feminist science.

REFERENCES

- Belinco, M., Garea, V., Di Lorenzo, D., Rothe, G., y Scamilla Aledo, R. (2022). *Somos Potencia: Guía para la inclusión de la perspectiva de género en el sector nuclear de América Latina y el Caribe*. Capítulo Women in Nuclear América Latina y el Caribe - WiN ARCAL. <https://www.arcal-lac.org/wp-content/uploads/documentos/comunicacion-divulgacion/Win%20-%20Arcal/SOMOS%20POTENCIA%20Guia%20para%20la%20inclusion%20de%20la%20perspectiva%20de%20genero%20en%20el%20sector%20nuclear%20de%20America%20Latina%20y%20El%20Caribe.pdf>
- Nuclear Energy Agency [NEA]. (2023). *Gender Balance in the Nuclear Sector*. OECD. https://www.oecd-neo.org/jcms/pl_78831/gender-balance-in-the-nuclear-sector?details=true

FIGHTING
TOGETHER

Ideas and experiences gain the power of shared action. These pages bring together lessons, tools and forms of organizing that have made it possible to weave networks, build alliances and sustain mobilization. They show that no transformation happens alone: it begins when we come together, grows through collective action and becomes possible when struggles recognize one another, accompany one another and move forward together.

EXPANDING UTOPIA

Lessons from the South



**Contributions
to the Global
Conversation on
Legal Abortion**

María Florencia Alcaraz

María Florencia Alcaraz

Journalist and holder of a degree in Social Communication, consultant for civil society organizations, and editor specializing in investigative journalism, human rights, and gender issues. She is a co-founder of *Ni Una Menos* and participated in the communications strategy of the *Green Wave* (*Marea Verde*), the campaign that succeeded in legalizing abortion in Argentina.

The hands hold, at their fingertips, a small triangular piece of green fabric. They gently stretch it out and raise it toward the sky. Millions of hands repeat this gesture with the determination that comes from a sense of ownership and the conviction of what is known to be just. Millions of green scarves face the building of the Argentine National Congress. It is a choreographed political demonstration, a performance with a concrete demand: Legal abortion now! It is August 2018, and the bill to decriminalize and legalize voluntary abortion is being debated in the national parliament for the first time. The Chamber of Deputies has already approved it in June, and now it is the Senate's turn. Seen from above, the crowd is a "Green Wave" occupying the streets surrounding the iconic building. In a historic all-night vigil, the protest unfolds around the palace as the law is debated, accompanied by an action *made in Argentina*, created in the heat of this struggle, which we call a *pañuelazo*¹. Never before had so many people demonstrated while awaiting the outcome of a legislative battle in this country: those taking part in the mobilization are spending the night outdoors, sleeping on the pavement in the middle of winter in the hope that the bill will become law.

¹ the name given to the mass demonstrations held in Argentina in 2018 in support of the legalization of abortion. Participants raised green bandanas, the symbol of the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion.

From the city of Rosario alone, one hundred and ten buses packed with feminists traveled to Buenos Aires. At more than forty Argentine embassies around the world, thousands follow the debate through their own pañuelazos. Expectations are running high. But the outcome is not the one they hoped for: there are not enough votes, and they will have to wait until 2020 to try again. “In the streets, it is already law” people can be heard saying that night. And indeed, it is: social decriminalization in Argentina was achieved before political and legal decriminalization. The experience of 2018, together with the historical groundwork and the broader context, proved fundamental in securing this right, which had long been denied to girls, adolescents, women, and all people with the capacity to become pregnant.

It did not happen overnight. Our achievement of the right to abortion, which has become emblematic around the world, did not spring out of nowhere. It was the result of decades of persistence, in which a network of intuitions, the perseverance and tenacity of activism, collective intelligence, political imagination, the contributions of specialized forms of knowledge, and the development of multiple creative strategies came together. There was no single recipe, nor was the path toward achieving the law a linear one. Like any social transformation, it was the product of a collective effort.

In this chapter, we will examine how the narratives and discursive strategies that opened a global conversation, from the Global South, on a sexual and reproductive rights issue that generates both passion and tension were constructed. I therefore propose an exercise in feminist memory aimed at recovering and revaluing, on the one hand, the historical

milestones advanced through abortion rights activism and political organizing; and, on the other, exploring how feminist communication was strategically developed in parallel to support the broader process of political activism.

To begin with, it is important to emphasize that in an age of likes, hearts, videos, and images that pass before our eyes with the unprecedented speed, immediacy, and fleetingness of an Instagram story or a TikTok video, the struggle for voluntary abortion taught us that, if we feminists want to challenge deeply rooted common-sense assumptions that we consider sexist, classist, racist, and misogynistic, we must be patient. We must trust that our messages work cumulatively and understand that, alongside our core slogans, we also need to listen closely to popular and mainstream language in order to use an empathetic discourse that builds bridges and creates powerful public moments, such as the images of Argentina’s “Green Wave²,” which traveled around the world.

The green scarf, a local invention, crossed borders and opened new horizons for decriminalization and legalization in other countries in the region, including several states in Mexico and Colombia. Activists from different countries across Latin America and the Caribbean embraced the symbol and adapted it to their own demands and slogans. At the time, many comrades from other parts of the world asked us

² the name given to the mass movement that emerged in Argentina in support of the legalization of abortion and reproductive rights. The term refers to the visual impact of thousands of demonstrators raising green bandanas during protests and public gatherings, creating the appearance of a vast “green wave.” The movement became a powerful symbol of feminist activism in Argentina and later inspired similar mobilizations across Latin America.

Argentines how to export the experience. While that is impossible, because contexts differ, it is possible to revisit some of its fundamental pillars. Here they are.

A Simple, Affordable, Easily Reproducible Symbol Is Always Effective for Rallying Support and Building a Shared Identity

The green scarf became a symbol of much more than the struggle for legal, safe, and free abortion. Hanging from necks and wrapped around wrists, but also attached to bicycles, backpacks, and handbags, it came to function as a kind of password, a marker of safe belonging in everyday life across our country. The scarf allowed us to come together, to recognize one another, and to send ourselves a message that strengthened us in the struggle: we are not alone; there are many of us in this fight.

The Blue Scarf

The power of the green scarf became particularly evident during Argentina's legislative debate, when opposition groups created a scarf of their own, only in light blue. It was a desperate attempt to rally their forces around a unifying symbol.

On May 15, 2018, after the first month of congressional debate on the issue had passed, those representing anti-abortion positions surprised the parliamentary scene by

appearing with a light-blue triangle of fabric around their necks bearing the slogan "Let's Save Both Lives." The "pro-life" scarf, as they themselves called it, appeared, with meticulous uniformity, during the interventions of some of the speakers opposed to the bills under discussion. They also wore it around their wrists.

Beyond the appropriation of a symbol and its attempted inscription into a tradition that is not their own, the imitation itself demonstrates the importance of having a symbol of one's own.

The power of mass demonstrations is dazzling, but behind those overflowing moments there is always quieter, more everyday work, smaller in scale and perhaps less exhilarating, that must also be remembered.

To tell the story of how this right was won, and of how the green scarf itself came into being, a symbol that now belongs to all of us, it is necessary to briefly revisit the history of the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion: a coalition of feminist, political, labor, and human rights organizations that submitted its bill to Congress on eight different occasions. For us, the green scarf is "the Campaign's scarf."

Since the 1990s, when the issue was still taboo, a small group of women, led by the feminist Dora Coledesky, would go out into downtown Buenos Aires, in front of Congress, handing out handmade leaflets. With a folding table and a megaphone, they spoke about abortion at a time when receiving free contraceptives was not even a right in Argentina.

They were then known as the Commission for the Right to Abortion and would later become the forerunners of the Campaign. They imagined that abortion could become legal, even when the conditions that might make such an achievement possible did not yet exist. They began with a simple, basic form of traditional politics: talking to people in the street and, just as importantly, listening to them. Passersby responded in different ways. Some listened and quietly shared stories about people who had had abortions; others argued with them and, in some cases, even shouted “Murderers!” at them. But they persisted. Week after week, they returned to the same corner of Rivadavia and Entre Ríos with their little table, their hand-made leaflets, and their megaphone.

The first step in building a narrative of our own is to break free from the frameworks imposed by hostile discourses. There is a beautiful phrase by the feminist Dora Coledesky that captures the spirit of the women pioneers who initiated this struggle: “In this fight, our very dignity is at stake, and that is why we say it is not merely a demand for rights: it is about not being treated as things, but as human beings determined to live lives worthy of being lived.

It is about pushing the boundaries of imagination and possibility. Feminist movements have always extended the horizon of utopia with persistence and determination. But it is also about understanding that being right is not enough. It is not enough to be right about a claim that is just; social consensus must be built, and majorities must be forged in order to transform reality as it exists. To do so, we must persuade more people, including the broader public, but also those in positions of decision-making power who are watching our actions.

By that time, in an era before social media existed, this group of women clearly understood that the media needed to be allies in spreading the message. On June 12, 1989, they published the first pro-abortion statement in a newspaper. It appeared in the newspaper *Sur* and was addressed to the governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, demanding the right for a woman who had been raped to terminate her pregnancy in a public hospital. These acts of micropolitics and these small-scale narratives gradually built a foundation of accumulated experience and support.

In the early 2000s, at a United Nations conference in New York, a group of these women carried purple fabric triangles with white lettering. They were trying to bring visibility to the struggle for access to contraception and to the plight of women dying from unsafe abortions. In such spaces, where civil society and human rights organizations attend as a counterweight to states, not everyone is given the opportunity to speak, but these women were determined to make their message heard. At one point during the conference, they stood up and staged their own *pañuelazo*.

It was not simply a stroke of ingenuity: this idea drew upon the genealogy of the human rights movement. Marta Alanis, one of the women present from *Catholics for the Right to Decide*, recalls that they took inspiration from the iconic white headscarves of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, who searched for their sons, daughters, grandsons, and granddaughters who had been abducted and disappeared during Argentina’s last military dictatorship. For the Mothers and Grandmothers, who marched in circles around the Pyramid of May because demonstrations were prohibited under the de

facto government, the white headscarf symbolized cloth diapers. They wore it on their heads so that others would notice them, helping to gather support for their search and their demand for justice.

After the action with the purple scarves in New York, Marta Alanis called Susana Chiarotti of Rosario, who belonged to another feminist organization, *Indeso Mujer*. They needed to find a color that would symbolize the struggle for abortion rights in Argentina and wear it at the National Women's Gathering in Rosario, a space that takes place year after year in the country and serves as the backbone of the movement of women, lesbians, crossdresser, and trans people.

Red was not an option because it represented the political left. Yellow was ruled out as well, since it was the color associated with the papacy. Light blue and white would have made it too similar to the national flag.

They settled on a unifying color: green. It was not used by political parties, and it was associated with the environment, health, and hope. "It was arbitrary. There is no particular history behind the color green, and people made it their own," Alanis recalls two decades later.

Católicas Por El Derecho A Decidir (Catholics for the Right to Decide)³ was the organization that distributed the green

scarves for the first time on August 16, 2003, at the XVIII National Women's Gathering in Rosario. That gathering opened with 10,000 women in attendance and an enormous purple banner that read: "For the right to free and cost-free abortion." The scarves would later come to encapsulate this message, along with the National Campaign's threefold slogan: "Sexual education to decide, contraceptives to prevent abortion, legal abortion to prevent death." Fifteen years would pass before the green scarf became a wave.

With the best of intentions, from that point on the threefold slogan came to define the terms and conditions of the public debate. The idea of abortion became associated with illegality, death, and darkness, which reflected a real situation, since women were dying as a result of clandestine abortions, but it also made it difficult to develop messages grounded in more positive frameworks. The threefold slogan was powerful and highlighted the movement's three central demands, yet it did not incorporate the idea of a "life worth living," a concept deeply rooted in the very identity of the Campaign and in the women pioneers of the struggle for abortion rights.

It was lesbian activists who began to promote alternative narratives around abortion. In 2009, *Lesbianas y Feministas por la Descriminalización del Aborto* (Lesbians and Feminists for the Decriminalization of Abortion) created the telephone hotline "Abortion: More Information, Less Risk," which became a turning point in the dissemination of information on the issue. They helped bring abortion out of the closet once and for all. They demonstrated that providing information within the existing legal framework is effective. From them, we learned that information is a right. Even in countries or cities where

³ Is a feminist organization founded by Catholic women that advocates for reproductive rights, gender equality, and the separation of religious doctrine from public policy. Drawing on Catholic traditions of social justice and individual conscience, the group argues that support for reproductive rights, including access to abortion, is compatible with ethical and faith-based commitments. It has played a visible role in public debates on reproductive rights in Argentina and throughout Latin America.

abortion is subject to severe legal restrictions, it is not illegal to talk about it or to acknowledge that it occurs frequently.

Clear, precise communication grounded in verifiable scientific evidence helps reduce both the stigma surrounding abortion and the spread of misinformation.

We learned that misinformation must be countered with information. It was necessary to build alliances with academics, researchers, and anyone with specialized expertise who could contribute data, figures, and reliable statistics on a subject long shrouded in opacity.

Interpreters of Data and Scientific Information

While data alone do not necessarily function as persuasive tools, audiences are increasingly shaped by fake news, misinformation, and gaps in available information. This trend persists even in countries where we have succeeded in opening up public conversation on the issue. As we have already noted, it is not enough to be right: our truth needs support, it needs to be reinforced with data. That is why providing useful information serves both as a firewall against existing misinformation and as a way of strengthening our position. It is important to always have official statistics or data from reliable sources at hand in order to counter false information in specific situations. Our goal has been to contribute to public conversations and debates with trustworthy information. This is a pedagogical effort: to consistently offer our

audiences arguments and evidence that they can, in turn, share and reproduce in other spaces and with other people.

Viral Feminism

The decisive push toward opening a mass public conversation about abortion came in 2015 with *Ni Una Menos*⁴, a watershed moment in Argentine political history. It was the first large-scale demonstration against femicides to challenge society as a whole, extending far beyond traditional activist circles. Five hundred thousand women took to the streets in the Plaza del Congreso⁵ and in hundreds of locations across the country. After *Ni Una Menos*, no one could simply look away from feminist demands. The movement legitimized and elevated our voice within the broader social conversation. The call to mobilize on June 3 of that year against a series of particularly brutal killings began to spread through what was then Twitter,

⁴ Is a feminist movement that emerged in Argentina in 2015 to protest gender-based violence and the killing of women. Its name, which means “Not One [Woman] Less,” expresses the demand that no more women be lost to femicide and other forms of violence. Through mass demonstrations and public advocacy, the movement became a major force in advancing debates on women’s rights, gender equality, and social justice in Argentina and across Latin America.

⁵ Major public square in Buenos Aires, Argentina, located in front of the National Congress building. Long associated with political demonstrations, civic gatherings, and public celebrations, it has served as a key site for social movements and protests. During the 2018 abortion legalization debate, it became one of the principal gathering places for the Green Wave (*Marea Verde*) and other activists advocating for reproductive rights.

at a time when social media platforms had not yet become a minefield for feminists.

As a slogan, *Ni Una Menos*, the desperate plea to stop killing us, became both a rallying cry and a social movement. It was a simple and effective message, a powerful message in narrative terms, because it condensed our political position. It was, in itself, our strategy; it was our story: how we wanted to be recognized. The message was also a particular interpretation of reality, a way of defining the terms of the debate, and a guiding thread for the entire communications strategy.

A message succeeds when it is able to activate supporters, attract those who are persuadable, and marginalize its opponents. Various studies agree that, on average, 50 percent of audiences in Latin America and the Caribbean are persuadable on issues related to gender.

Choosing Your Audiences Means Choosing Your Battles

From Argentina's discussion on abortion, we learned that feminisms, in the plural, make it possible to develop multiple strategies, because we are not always speaking to the same people. The most effective narratives are those that venture a little beyond our comfort zones, that leap over the fences surrounding traditional activism: a feminist communication strategy for the 99 percent. To expand our audiences, it is essential to speak to those who will stand with us while also keeping in mind persuadable audiences: those who are in the middle and who, on some issues, support us, but on others drift away because of prejudice, lack of interest, or simply misinformation.

It is important to study different audiences: their values, ideals, interests, and points of reference. We must understand what kind of messenger can best reach persuadable audiences as well as those who already sympathize with the cause. In this regard, qualitative research is essential. It is not enough to have the most creative communicators, nor is it always a matter of formats or a particular social media platform. Investing in interdisciplinary teams to design communication initiatives is an added advantage. Along this path, we communicators learned to forge alliances with academics, advertisers, public opinion researchers, and political communication specialists, and to apply tools such as surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.

What do we do about opponents? Whenever audiences are discussed, this question inevitably arises. There is little point in devoting our efforts to persuading opponents. We do not waste energy on that. Antagonistic groups cannot be convinced. What we learned instead is that opposition power groups should be investigated through investigative journalism as a too.

In *Ni Una Menos*, the precursor to the Green Wave, communicators, journalists, writers, poets, cultural workers, academics, and designers came together. Feminist illustrators, artists, and designers became key allies in crafting effective messages capable of reaching far beyond the audiences we traditionally engaged. There is a long tradition at the intersection of art and politics.

One year after *Ni Una Menos*, for the first time a campaign demanding legal abortion, also organized through Twitter, managed to trend for eight and a half hours. The message was #FreeBelén and #LegalAbortion. Behind the hashtag was the demand for the release of a young woman from Tucumán, a province in Argentina, who had been imprisoned and sentenced to eight years in prison for “homicide aggravated by kinship and premeditation,” a crime she did not commit. Although she had suffered a miscarriage, Belén was accused of having killed a fetus, which the hospital itself lost and on which no DNA test was ever performed. For a long time, activists had been speaking, through data and statistics, about the impact of clandestine abortion. Yet it was this individual life story that made it possible to foreground the demand for legislation to decriminalize and legalize abortion.

Desolemnizing Narratives

From viral feminism, we learned that it is important to listen to the majority and to build empathy through messages and language that everyone can understand. This meant avoiding entanglement in traditional feminist jargon, which is often shaped by legal, medical, or political language.

To bring abortion out of the closet and open up the conversation without sacrificing rigor, we feminist communicators and journalists came to understand that we needed to talk about this reality as a common, everyday practice and move beyond the more victimizing narratives or those centered primarily on death. We all knew someone who had had

an abortion and survived thanks to appropriate support and available medication. In search of these stories, at *LatFem*, the feminist digital media outlet that I directed at the time, and in alliance with the organization *Red de Mujeres*, we launched the campaign #JuntasAbortamos (#WeAbortTogether).

In 2017, for the Global Day of Action for Legal Abortion, we invited *LatFem*’s followers to talk about the support they had provided for voluntary abortions using that hashtag. The starting point was a simple question: How many abortions have you accompanied? We were looking for a form of collective storytelling that would engage our audiences while also highlighting accompaniment as a feminist practice without explicitly naming it as such. We would say: “A friend, a comrade, a neighbor, someone you know. We do not abort alone. Ever. #JuntasAbortamos”.

We received thousands upon thousands of messages containing a wide range of stories about abortion accompaniment. Beyond becoming a viral narrative that trended regionally on Twitter, it also became a collective, polyphonic narrative through which we built a shared story together with our audience, while seeking to move beyond the traditional narratives associated with abortion (death, pain, loneliness, stigma, and victimization). We tell stories to inform, educate, and entertain, while also mobilizing audiences to engage in collective action aimed at transforming real-world problems.

We sought out personal stories because they help people empathize with and understand a complex issue.

We came to understand that showing experiences can be more effective than presenting data. Most studies in neuroscience and communication agree that people tend to place greater trust in real-life experiences than in data, expert opinions, or the media. Evidence also shows that personal testimonies and life stories are particularly effective at mobilizing emotions. And we know that emotions drive people to act.



6

⁶ The post reads: “Forty years ago my mother became pregnant. My father was still married. He gave her money and disappeared. She went with Mary, a neighbor and now her best friend. #TogetherWeAbort.” Like other testimonies shared under the #TogetherWeAbort (*#JuntasAbortamos*) campaign, the post underscores the role of friends, neighbors, and support networks in abortion experiences, reinforcing the movement’s argument that abortion is often a collective rather than an isolated experience.



7

From the campaign and the experience of #JuntasAbortamos, we also learned that it is important to tell stories about collective forms of organizing to confront violence and inequality. There are always sources of support: networks of care and affection, community networks, social organizations, and public policies that stand alongside people. When we build feminist narratives aimed at transforming reality, they cannot be

⁷ The post reads: “How many times did you accompany an abortion? A friend, a co-worker, a neighbor, someone you know. We have never had abortions alone. Never. #TogetherWeAbort.” The message challenges the notion that abortion is an individual experience, emphasizing the networks of care, solidarity, and support that often accompany those seeking to end a pregnancy. The hashtag #TogetherWeAbort (*#JuntasAbortamos*) became a way of making that collective experience visible within the broader Green Wave (*Marea Verde*) movement.

composed solely of anger and denunciations of the conditions that make our lives more precarious.

In addition to using new strategic frames, we came to understand that our efforts must also be directed toward transforming our own positions of enunciation and the expectations placed upon us. Feminist spokespersons are burdened by a series of prejudices: we are often perceived as perpetually angry and inclined to police or discipline others. We are angry, and that is true. But if we want to persuade, we cannot be angry all the time. There is also a widespread assumption that we speak only in a complex register. That is why the search for new narratives is so effective: it allows us to embrace something that is not expected of us.

We also learned that it is necessary to avoid speaking about victims as though they occupy a static and paralyzing subject position. Victims are never isolated cases. We sought to move beyond sensationalism, fear, and narratives that serve primarily to discipline or control.

Humor as a Strategy

Along the same lines, in our effort to desolemnize narratives during the 2018 debate on voluntary abortion, we at *LatFem* also created a fictional character: *Dr. Abortion*. The character's visual style drew on that of one of the country's most prominent pharmacy chains. Another lesson we learned was that humor cannot be left out of our communication efforts, because it is an extremely effective tool. In the age of memes, we can create our own memes about complex issues.



⁸ The image advertises the fictional “Dr. Aborto Pharmacy” and includes the slogan “*Legal abortion + public production of misoprostol.*” Through satire, it advocates not only for the legalization of abortion but also for state-supported access to misoprostol, a medication used for medication abortion and included in reproductive health care policies in several countries. The campaign reflects Green Wave (*Marea Verde*) demands for abortion to be legal, accessible, and available through the public health system.

New Frames: Care and Public Health

Between 2018, the first time the bill was debated in Congress but failed to secure approval, and 2020, when it was finally passed into law, a process of transition took place in the messages we had been developing. We knew that the power of street demonstrations and the parliamentary debate, which lasted for half the year, had succeeded in bringing the issue into people's homes through television, social media, schools, labor unions, and universities. Yet there was still a segment situated between supportive audiences and opponents, a public we had not yet reached. These were people who, as noted earlier, perhaps had not yet taken a position simply because they lacked sufficient information.

In an effort to reach those audiences, we worked to incorporate perspectives from other fields and disciplines, including neuroscience, public opinion research, and political communication. We tested messages, reviewed countless focus group reports, and conducted surveys and interviews. In doing so, we came to the conclusion that we needed to rethink the discourse that had been circulating up to that point. The narratives of 2018 had been anchored in the concept of bodily autonomy: "My body, my choice." We realized that, if we wanted to go further, it was necessary to incorporate new frames grounded in a rights-based perspective that placed greater emphasis on public health, freedom, and justice. The backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic provided a context in which abortion could be discussed more explicitly as a public health issue.

The new frames we arrived at, after long discussions, exchanges, and conversations, were: FREEDOM, CARE, and

LIFE. We replaced autonomy with freedom in an effort to explain that the issue was not about imposing particular views or practices, but about having more tools with which to make decisions. We also incorporated CARE and LIFE in order to prevent deaths, physical or legal consequences, and forced motherhood.

We also learned, through media training and spokesperson workshops, that it was necessary to move away from framing the issue as a moral, ideological, or political matter. From a more positive and empathetic perspective, one that avoided explicit denunciation, we crafted messages that built bridges rather than walls.

Examples of These Messages

- ☒ "We cannot deny reality. We want public health and legal abortion in order to protect the health of girls, women, and all people with the capacity to become pregnant."
- ☐ "My body is mine, and I can do whatever I want with it."
- ☒ "Legality and access to public healthcare save lives; we have the opportunity to improve countless lives."
- ☐ "Patriarchy condemns us to clandestinity; illegal abortion kills us and leaves lasting consequences."

Data and Information in Public Spaces: It's Not All About Social Media

Over time, the various social media platforms that emerged brought with them new obsessions: the viral hashtag, the reel with the highest number of views, the TikTok trend. We came to understand that, in a country as vast as Argentina, marked by diverse realities and digital divides, narratives could not be designed exclusively for social media. They had to leap beyond the virtual sphere and enter into dialogue with the shared public space: the streets, the home, workplaces, public squares, public transportation, sports clubs, schools, every possible place.

These street-level actions, involving banners stretched across roads, stickers, and public posters, were driven by a federal network of feminist journalists in Argentina that produces communication and informational materials and campaigns aimed at helping more people gain access to sexual and reproductive health services, while also advancing advocacy efforts to promote and implement public policies related to rights and sexual and reproductive health.

During 2020, while the bill on voluntary abortion was under debate, billboards bearing the message “Legal abortion is a public health issue” were installed in public spaces across the country. The aim was to challenge prevailing assumptions and raise awareness through a public health lens.

Once the law had been passed and implemented, campaigns were developed featuring advertisements on public transportation and in public spaces, aimed at providing information about the new legislation. The messages were simple,

yet they were designed to address specific gaps in public understanding that had previously been identified through interviews with healthcare professionals:

- If you need an abortion or want to terminate your pregnancy, Law 27,610 guarantees that you can do so free of charge.
- If you need an abortion or want to terminate your pregnancy, Law 27,610 states that you can do so at any public or private healthcare facility.

Narratives of Hope

In the journey of learning about narratives that many feminist journalists and communicators have undertaken, one innovative approach I would like to highlight is the idea of “narratives of hope.” In these hostile times, cultivating such narratives is a genuine challenge. We live in an age of apocalyptic fatigue: the world is facing crises of every kind, ranging from economic, political, and institutional turmoil to environmental degradation and war. Within human rights and feminist organizations, we often focus on denunciation and demands for change and, although these are just and necessary claims, we are frequently not heard. In this context, there is little willingness to listen.

It is worth asking ourselves, as an exercise in political imagination: What kind of life do we dream of? How do we envision a world free from violence and more just? Is it possible to imagine that world together with our audiences?

The idea of “narratives of hope” is a pragmatic strategy informed by history, communication theory, activist experiences,

and insights from neuroscience and cognitive linguistics. Its leading proponent is Thomas Coombes, who has developed five core principles that may prove useful for imagining a new feminist narrative:

1. Communicate from the Possibility of Change, Not from Fear.
2. Show What We Stand For (Not Just What We Oppose).
3. Focus on Making Concrete Solutions Visible (Rather Than Merely Identifying Problems)
4. About Opportunities, Not Just Risks.
5. When It Is Necessary to Talk About Violence, Portray Victims as Heroines Who Can Draw on Human Rights to Improve Their Circumstances.

If we keep these principles in mind, the narrative shift we can propose is:

- Moving from FEAR to the Possibility of TRANSFORMATION: Agency in the Present.
- Moving from Identifying PROBLEMS to MAKING SOLUTIONS VISIBLE: Transformation and Social Change Are Possible.
- Moving from Talking About RISKS to Talking About OPPORTUNITIES.
- Moving from VICTIMS to HUMAN BEINGS.
- Moving from NOSTALGIA to INVESTING IN THE FUTURE.
- Start with Shared Values: Respect, Empathy, Hope, Solidarity, Humanity, Care, Well-Being, Dignity, and Responsibility.

With hope, without silence

From the perspective of the narrative shift we adopted in crafting stories to secure the right to abortion, it was crucial to make a shift and start showcasing what we support—not just what we oppose—as well as highlighting concrete solutions already underway. In this regard, all the stories and news reports about Socorristas en Red and the organizations that support people through pregnancy terminations played a key role.

We learned that amplifying positive stories and making solutions visible can help bring about real change and transform the narrative surrounding activism. In journalism, this approach is known as “solutions journalism”.

Thomas Coombes, who developed the concept of “narratives of hope,” argues: “Let us not talk about shrinking civic space, but about humanity’s shared future”.

Studies on the subject suggest that, in many cases, those who do not support our claims and demands are not necessarily unconvinced by them, nor are they always opponents; rather, they do not see those demands as achievable. Hence the importance of envisioning and shaping futures together.

Byung-Chul Han, the South Korean philosopher, writes in *The Spirit of Hope*: “Fear only sets up warning signs. Hope, by contrast, leaves markers and signposts along the way. Hope is the only thing that sets us on a path. It provides us with meaning and direction, whereas fear makes

movement impossible.” He adds: “Hope does not isolate; rather, it reconciles, connects, and unites”.

The struggle for legal, safe, and free abortion in Argentina brought us together and gave us a sense of belonging, while also enabling us to reach people we had never reached before. If it was possible here, in the far South, it is possible elsewhere. The point is not to export the experience, but to imagine situated feminist narratives shaped by the realities of each context. I like to think of feminisms as a conversation: sometimes it can be massive, and at other times it is a whisper. At times, it is a collective cry that brings many people together; at others, it is a message in a bottle cast into the sea. What matters is that we never stop talking, and that silence is never again an option for us.

SOLIDARITY WOVEN THROUGH COMMUNITY

Caring for Life, Weaving Peace



**Embracing a
Security That
Includes Us**

Rosa Emilia Salamanca

Rosa Emilia Salamanca

Feminist leader and expert in peacebuilding. Director of the Corporation for Social and Economic Research and Action (CIASE), consultant on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and member of the women's group that incorporated a gender perspective into Colombia's Peace Agreement with the FARC.

This text was born in company. It is the fruit of many conversations over time—around a fire, in workshop rooms, at conferences, and in gatherings with friends and colleagues who hold different worldviews—about violence against women and about security.

It took shape through affection and listening, using feminist participatory action research (FPAR)¹, and was driven by curiosity about how we interpret reality from within our own surroundings. It is an invitation to seek new perspectives alongside a wide range of women leaders from urban and rural settings—mestiza, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant Latin American women like you—who recreate life every day, activate transformative resilience², find harmonious ways to

¹ Feminist participatory action research (FPAR) is a collective research method that brings together contributions from the social sciences and approaches such as those of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda with feminist political activism. It seeks to transform gender and power inequalities through the horizontal participation of communities of women and gender-diverse people, recognizing them as co-researchers of their own reality in order to generate immediate social change within their territories.

² For me, transformative resilience goes far beyond resisting or “empowering ourselves.” It is the fruit of the many lessons we have gained, whether through joy or suffering. It is the reflective pause, the deep acknowledgment of our histories, and the lessons that difficult moments leave us. From these emerge new tools, shared strategies, and a renewed awareness that drives us forward with a strength capable of transforming reality.

transform fragile environments, and play a leading role in building many forms of knowledge.

For me, particularly in the work undertaken here, research means conversation; it is a constructive political practice that enriches the relationship between knowing and doing. In this way, from the micro, meso, and macro levels³, we understand the origins of the situations that affect us and design caring and persistent ways to transform them. This is therefore not a text to be filed away; it is a meeting place containing analysis, practical tools, and questions that invite us to think collectively.

What Kind of Security Are We Being Offered, and Why Do We Still Feel Afraid?

When we reflect on the forms of violence that affect us, we inevitably ask: what do they have to do with security? Above all, what kind of security are we being offered when the State insists that it protects us, yet women continue to feel afraid?

This question is the thread running through our analysis. When we examine institutional discourse, we uncover a fundamental political problem: many forms of security have been conceived without women or are profoundly restrictive

³ By the micro, meso, and macro levels, I mean three interconnected dimensions of our reality: the micro encompasses what is closest and most immediate to our situated position (the body, the home, everyday life); the meso corresponds to the intermediate level (the community, the local organization, the neighborhood); and the macro encompasses the structural and global forces that also shape and affect us. Awareness of these connections is vital to developing effective strategies for rejecting all forms of violence.

for us. Traditionally, the architecture of order has rested on the archetype of *Homo Securitas*⁴, a patriarchal analytical concept that understands security as synonymous with control, surveillance, punishment, restrictions on autonomy, or the disappearance of those who think, live, or feel differently. This model prioritizes the State, its territory, and its material and institutional elements over people, assuming that tranquility means greater moral, personal, and territorial control.

However, when we observe our reality as diverse women and leaders from our situated perspectives⁵, we see that, despite promises of security and State control, we all walk quickly along dark streets, feel tension in spaces of participation, experience fear on public transport, and often face danger even in our own homes.

So why do we feel this insecurity and lack of protection?

⁴ *Homo Securitas*: we understand this concept as the archetype through which the patriarchal system has defined how, for whom, and in which spheres security should be managed. It is an architecture designed by men in positions of power to serve the interests of patriarchal domination; it is therefore a form of security strictly based on control and the management of force through pacts among men. Because it was conceived neither from life nor for life, this form of security neither embraces nor protects women.

⁵ Situated perspective: drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge, developed in *Science, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1995), this refers to the specific social, historical, bodily, and geographical position from which we experience reality and produce knowledge. It begins from the premise that no perspective is neutral or universal, since everything we think is conditioned by our bodies and our place in society. Inhabiting this perspective requires acknowledging our own partiality in order to build more transparent, ethical, and responsible knowledge. This position is dynamic and changes as women transform the power relations around them.

Fear persists because, under the logic of Homo Securitas, dominant security confuses tranquility with surveillance.⁶

This form of security was not designed to place the lives and well-being of women—and human beings in general—at the center, but rather the security of the State, understood exclusively as the monopoly of State force and the defense of territorial sovereignty over human bodies. For women and their communities, it therefore tends to translate into distance and suspicion, in the construction of an internal enemy, or a delayed and indifferent response.

One reality thus becomes evident: security as we know it was not designed to protect us. Violence is a clear expression of this fact: it continues, does not disappear, and directly affects our participation, our daily lives, and peacebuilding. In response, we urgently need to build a form of security that genuinely embraces and prioritizes us and provides comprehensive responses to the constant lack of protection we experience.

The Continuum of Violence⁷: The Invisible Thread of Insecurity, from the Everyday to the Structural

⁶ This is the author's own development based on homo economicus, a concept used in contemporary feminist studies.

⁷ Continuum of violence: this concept helps us understand that attacks against women are not isolated events but part of a continuous mechanism that moves without interruption across private and public spaces. Violence unfolds everywhere: from the most intimate spheres of relationships and the home to the streets and institutions. Despite this, the State has historically justified its inaction in the domestic sphere through the traditional

To understand how this thread operates, it is essential to analyze the *continuum of violence as a continuum of insecurity*. This allows us to see clearly that violence against women does not consist of isolated events or disconnected incidents. On the contrary, it forms a systematic mechanism that disciplines women, restricts their movement, punishes their leadership, and drastically reduces their participation in public life. In other words, denying women security and making them feel permanently at risk is a clear strategy for curtailing their autonomy and making them dependent on a form of security based on control.

Imagine an invisible thread connecting normalized, everyday expressions of violence—such as street harassment⁸, which forces us to change our route, alter what we wear, or quicken our pace—to more serious forms of domination in the domestic sphere and, ultimately, to the most extreme and lethal expressions, such as femicide⁹.

liberal division between the public and the private, shielding the home as an inviolable sanctuary. Feminism, however, has shown that this supposed privacy actually functions as an ideological trap and a shield of impunity that conceals profound power asymmetries, leaving violence against women unaddressed under the false premise that the personal is not political.

⁸ Street harassment: I use this term to refer to all those expressions—crude comments, whistles, gestures, leering looks, or unwanted touching—that occur in the street, on buses, or in other places without our consent. They are forms of disrespect that make us uncomfortable, force us to change our route or quicken our pace, and deprive us of the right to walk calmly and safely through our neighbourhoods.

⁹ Femicide: the most extreme form of violence against women. It is the killing of a woman for gender-related reasons—for example, where there is a history of intimate-partner violence, harassment, contempt, or the public display of her body. Unlike ordinary homicide, it reflects a social structure of unequal power and discrimination.

This thread connects the violence of a disparaging comment or verbal assault on public transport with domestic violence that isolates a woman in her home, and links all of this to the lethal risk faced by women social leaders, human rights defenders, and peacebuilders when they decide to make their voices heard in their communities. We therefore argue that acts of violence become more serious as they accumulate, because new forms of aggression are added to the initial conditions of discrimination, turning violence against women into a permanent and growing threat. While the justice system fragments these forms of violence and treats them as “isolated cases” without identifying their structural roots, society normalizes them. We therefore choose to heal these harms at their source and to view reality as a whole.

Institutional or Social Revictimization: When Security Turns Its Back on Us

Across Latin America, women experience time and again how State responses to violence often become additional mechanisms of revictimization. We see this dramatically when a woman goes to a prosecutor’s office, police station, or local authority to report domestic or gender-based violence and encounters a system that is overwhelmed, indifferent, or steeped in patriarchal prejudice. Let’s consider some everyday situations that illustrate this reality:

- A husband arrives home late. His wife is getting dinner ready and has not had time to complete all the care work. He becomes angry and tells her she is useless, that she does

nothing and spends all her time being lazy. She explains everything she has had to do at home and that she receives no help from him. He becomes even angrier and hits her. Her screams can be heard outside the house; the neighbors listen and comment: “Who knows what she did to make him so angry? She probably went out partying and failed to finish her duties. It’s better not to get involved.”

- Early in the morning, a frightened woman arrives at a police station with visible injuries to her face. Staff tells her that “the person responsible for gender-based violence cases has not arrived” or that “many people are ahead of her.” Hours pass by. Unable to remain seated there, exposed to the public’s gaze and without receiving urgent medical or psychological care, she leaves.
- A police officer listens as a woman recounts death threats made by her partner and responds with phrases such as: “Well, he only insulted you; he hasn’t hit you yet. Come back when he does something to you,” or “It is a normal argument between partners; it will pass.”
- A woman is forced to recount intimate details of an assault or sexual abuse in a public corridor or an open office, in front of other people filing unrelated complaints. There is no care, no privacy, and no protection. The situation becomes worse when several of those present know the aggressor; the intimidation is devastating.
- A woman calls the police because her aggressor is violating a restraining order outside her home. The emergency operator replies that “there are no units available at the moment” or asks the victim to “try not to leave her home,” rather than sending immediate assistance. The risk is imminent.

- A man presses himself against a young woman from behind on a packed bus during rush hour as she travels to work, taking advantage of the crowd to touch her without consent. Frightened but angry, she turns around, confronts him loudly, and asks the driver to close the doors and call the police. Annoyed, the driver rudely tells her to get off and argue in the street because he has a route to complete. Other passengers join in and ask her to get off because she is making them late, while some justify the assault by saying, “That is what happens when you travel dressed like that at this hour.”
- An older woman signals for a bus to stop. The driver does not wait for her to finish boarding or secure her footing before pulling away abruptly, causing her to lose her balance, hit her knee against a step, and drop her handbag. In front of everyone, the driver shouts: “Hurry up, ma’am! If you can’t move anymore, stay at home and stop getting in the way—this isn’t an ambulance.” In pain, the woman gets up and moves towards the priority seats, which are occupied by young people pretending to sleep or looking indifferently at their phones. No one gives up their seat, so she is forced to ride standing up, losing her balance at every turn and feeling humiliated and invisible.

How Can We See the Continuum of Violence Here?

The continuum of violence teaches us that attacks against women are not isolated cases or bad luck, but a continuous chain of abuse that moves without interruption through the

home, the street, workplaces, and State offices. This reality shows that the traditional security model—*Homo Securitas*—fails to protect us and leaves us on our own.

This is how the stitches of this invisible thread become connected.

The thread begins with the overload of care work at home and escalates from insults to physical assault. The community conceals the violence through its silence and suspicion of the woman, turning the home into a territory of insecurity. Then, when she dares to report the abuse, she finds police stations that make her wait for hours or ignore her, punishing her for breaking the silence. This becomes worse when she is economically dependent on the aggressor, as she is often forced to withdraw the complaint. The thread continues when authorities describe death threats as “normal arguments between partners,” disregard warnings, and open the door to possible femicide. Forcing a victim to recount intimate details in a public corridor undoubtedly destroys her dignity and revictimizes her. Similarly, when the police fail to respond while the aggressor violates a restraining order, the frequent ineffectiveness of official protection mechanisms becomes evident. The thread then reaches public indifference towards street harassment, justified by drivers and public transport users, showing that women’s freedom continues to be judged in the streets. Finally, intersectional violence appears in old age, where sexism and ageism overlap: treating an older woman harshly on public transport completely undermines her physical and emotional security.

These forms of violence show that the State and society, in their current structures, do not provide us with answers.

Security fails when, instead of offering a safe environment, women are routinely required to repeat accounts of their trauma while their credibility is questioned.

“What time was it?” “What were you wearing?” “Why do you want to report it if it was not that serious?” Ineffective protection measures are imposed while the State’s control mechanisms focus on “truly important matters,” leaving women completely unprotected.

Dismantling the Narrative of Blame¹⁰

Insecurity and victimization largely depend on making us feel guilty for failing to conform to the demands of control. Questions such as “Why were you in that place?” or “Why do you lead those processes?” are favored by a control-based approach to security, whose purpose is to shift responsibility onto women themselves and require us to restrict our freedom as a means of prevention. In response, we affirm:

Being safe is a right, and ensuring safe environments is a shared responsibility of the State and society—not an imposed restriction.

¹⁰ From a feminist perspective, blame is a mechanism through which society constructs expectations of how women ought to be. It is a pervasive form of control that we normalize and that serves either to punish us from the outside or to lead us to judge ourselves for failing to comply with the gender mandates imposed on us.

Blame and double standards are not merely opinions; they are invisible forces that ultimately protect aggressors and punish victims through four mechanisms:

1. Blame in the street: women are made to believe that our safety depends on behaving properly and avoiding the streets at certain times, thereby restricting our freedom.
2. The perfect victim (ELSA, n.d.): the justice system requires an assaulted woman to be morally perfect before it will believe her, judging her behavior instead of punishing the aggressor.
3. Blame within the relationship: traditional morality requires women to endure violence under the pretext of saving the family (“you have to be patient with him” or “I hit you because I love you”)¹¹, leaving them paralyzed.
4. Fear of what people will say and of social stigma: when a woman chooses freedom, separates from her partner, or reports abuse, society punishes her through moral judgement and gossip, driving her into silence.

Ultimately, blame reverses the roles of victim and perpetrator: it absolves the State and society of responsibility and places the entire burden on the woman.

¹¹ This is a traditional saying that illustrates the normalization of punishment against women.

The Body as Territory: Political Violence and Fear— Violence as a Barrier to Our Participation

The body, mind, and emotions are the first territory of every human being. Unfortunately, the logics of punishment and control often target these territories to discourage women from organizing and participating actively. It is therefore clear that when a woman leader, human rights defender, or peacebuilder is harmed, a warning is sent to an entire collective, weakening the social fabric and obstructing the transformations generated by her participation.

Political participation is not merely physical presence in decision-making spaces; it profoundly challenges the established order, since throughout history patriarchy has assigned women to silence, docility, and the private sphere. When women take leadership roles in organizing processes, they disrupt the forms and priorities of *Homo Securitas*. We do not merely occupy a seat in traditional spaces; we transform how politics are done: we place care for life at the center, demand transparency, unravel the logics of conflict and war, and propose spaces for dialogue.

Organized women challenge the system because they demonstrate that it is possible to build power without domination and security without repression.

Yet attacks against women leaders are not isolated events; they are ways of teaching lessons about discipline and order to generate fear. When gender-based violence, systematic

defamation, or online harassment is used, the aim goes far beyond silencing one particular woman: it acts as a warning to the entire community. Gender-based violence seeks to degrade the bodies of women leaders as though they were territory open to abuse, sending a clear message: “This is what happens to those who dare to disobey.”

These invisible threads therefore continue to weave insecurity: fear of harassment, threats, or the danger of assault makes us think twice before attending a meeting, running for election, or leading a group, thereby restricting our mobility and our voice. Violence and coercion also emerge at work or within intimate relationships because of financial dependence. This is compounded by the lack of resources available to sustain women’s and feminist organizations, obstructing continued political participation. Attacks also take place on social media: when a woman assumes a leadership role, the attacks are directed not at her ideas but at her body, her sex life, or her role as a mother, seeking to destroy her reputation so that she will abandon the public sphere.

We therefore ask: what purpose does a profound transformation of security serve in breaking this invisible thread of violence? It matters because security grounded in a feminist, intersectional approach to care focuses not on protecting the State but on ensuring State protection for human beings in all their diversity. This approach examines the multiple intersecting forms of discrimination and violence and frames security as a comprehensive conversation oriented towards a reimagined form of care grounded in redistribution and freedom.

From this perspective, a society's security is measured by access to a dignified life free from normalized violence.

Lessons from Colombia's Path towards Peace

Women in Colombia have been a driving force in peacebuilding, weaving hope from the most remote corners of the country to national decision-making spaces. In the face of the logics of war and militarization, women leaders, human rights defenders, and peacebuilders have demonstrated that genuine protection grows out of working with people in the regions. A fundamental milestone in this advocacy was the women's movement's pressure to create the Gender Subcommission within the Final Peace Agreement (Government of Colombia & FARC-EP, 2016), demonstrating that participation must not be decorative but must carry binding decision-making power.

Beyond the territorial and national achievements of this process, we have learned profound lessons. The most important is to question why the Agreement did not address security in depth—a field from which we had historically been excluded. Peace and security are generally viewed as separate and opposing fields, especially through the lens of control-based security. The lesson, however, is that peace and security grounded in feminist, intersectional, and care-based approaches are vital for recognizing how inequalities of gender, age, class, and ethnic and cultural belonging intersect, allowing us to see the structural roots of violence. Peacebuilding in our countries is therefore not only about signing agreements; it is an ongoing

dialogue that requires building bridges and organizing everyday networks in which mutual care guarantees genuine and lasting peace.

In the face of multiple forms of insecurity, women respond through networks of care: community early-warning systems, circles for listening and emotional healing, feminist accompaniment along legal pathways, and the promotion of dialogue among multiple actors and levels to strengthen democracy. Caring for one another is a transformative act that moves us away from control and builds peace within territories and organizations.

In this sense, international instruments such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) come to life when we understand them and adopt them from a situated perspective. This means translating the global standard into the realities of the home (micro), the organization (meso), and the country or region (macro), so that it can support women leaders, defenders, and peacebuilders as they protect their environments and engage with institutions on equal terms.

It is time to transform our mindset and move towards a situation in which addressing the violence we face means making people's overall well-being, health, food security, economic autonomy, and happiness our collective priorities, displacing the obsession with material, territorial, and punitive control. In the face of a security model that prefers us to be silent, we cultivate autonomy and well-being through new dimensions of everyday security.

We have reached this point with an unshakable certainty that must resonate in every place where women work, participate, live, and dream: security can no longer be synonymous

with control, surveillance, or restrictions imposed on our bodies and territories.

For us, being safe with dignity means demanding and building the real conditions for a dignified life: autonomy, participation without fear, networks of care, health, well-being, and freedom. Some proposals that may contribute to collective protection are based on three dimensions:

- Security through care: to make sustaining life a shared priority and a network that supports us all.
- Everyday security: to move through our days and our streets freely, without the shadow of controlling surveillance.
- Comprehensive security: to guarantee real, collective, and effective access to economic, social, political, environmental, and territorial rights.¹²

Some Pedagogical Proposals

These proposals are flexible guidelines. Remember that not all territories offer safe environments: in contexts marked by intense hostility or the presence of armed actors, mapping fears or exposing leaders may entail serious risks. Adapt the exercises by prioritizing confidentiality, self-care, and collective protection.

¹² CIASE and other feminist organizations have been working to redefine security in this way. Their work has also produced a protection tool grounded in this approach called SAYA (Safe Here and Now) (Corporation for Social and Economic Research and Action, 2025).

Tool 1: “The Map of Our Fears and Strengths”

- Objective: to collectively identify support networks and safe spaces in the face of institutional or territorial control.
- Suggested duration: 45 minutes.
- Materials: paper and markers (optional; the exercise may also be carried out through spoken dialogue if the context requires discretion).
- Basic steps:
 1. Sit in a circle and discuss the places in our surroundings where we feel the greatest calm and trust (the home of someone in a support network, a community space).
 2. Realistically assess how safe these spaces are and what we need to strengthen them without exposing ourselves to risk.
 3. Agree on discreet communication channels among participants for early warnings.
- Closing questions: What networks do we currently have to care for one another without exposing ourselves to danger? What confidentiality agreements do we need to maintain?

Tool 2: “Changing the Script” (Forum Theatre)

- Objective: to collectively rehearse dignified responses to institutional coldness, revictimization, or stigmatization when we are blamed for our own insecurity.
- Suggested duration: 45 minutes.
- Materials: none.
- Basic steps:
 1. Briefly act out an everyday scene in which a woman seeks institutional support and receives a bureaucratic or indifferent response.

2. Pause the scene and reflect on how that frustration affects us bodily.
 3. Repeat the scene, allowing participants to intervene and propose firm responses grounded in rights and mutual support.
- Closing questions: How does our security change when we decide not to face institutions alone? What legal or collective tools support our demands?

Tool 3: “The Care Thermometer”

- Objective: to measure the state of personal, collective, and political care within our organizational spaces and assess how we care for one another.
- Suggested duration: 30 minutes.
- Materials: a sheet of paper with a thermometer diagram (cold, warm, hot).
- Basic steps:
 1. Discuss three dimensions: personal care (health/rest), collective care (internal relationships), and political care (guarantees for participation).
 2. Collectively place the current state of each dimension on the thermometer.
 3. Define one minimum, feasible well-being agreement for the following week.
- Closing questions: Are we reproducing dynamics of control or genuine care within our organizations? What concrete action can we adjust today?

Dear reader and compañera¹³, this book is neither a document to be filed away nor an endpoint; it is a living tool for opening conversations in rural communities, neighborhoods, and organizations. Peace is not a distant signature or an institutional promise: it is woven daily through our everyday actions, shared words, and the conviction that caring for one another is a transformative act. Caring for life is our horizon; dismantling control-based security and weaving peace is our commitment today.

REFERENCES

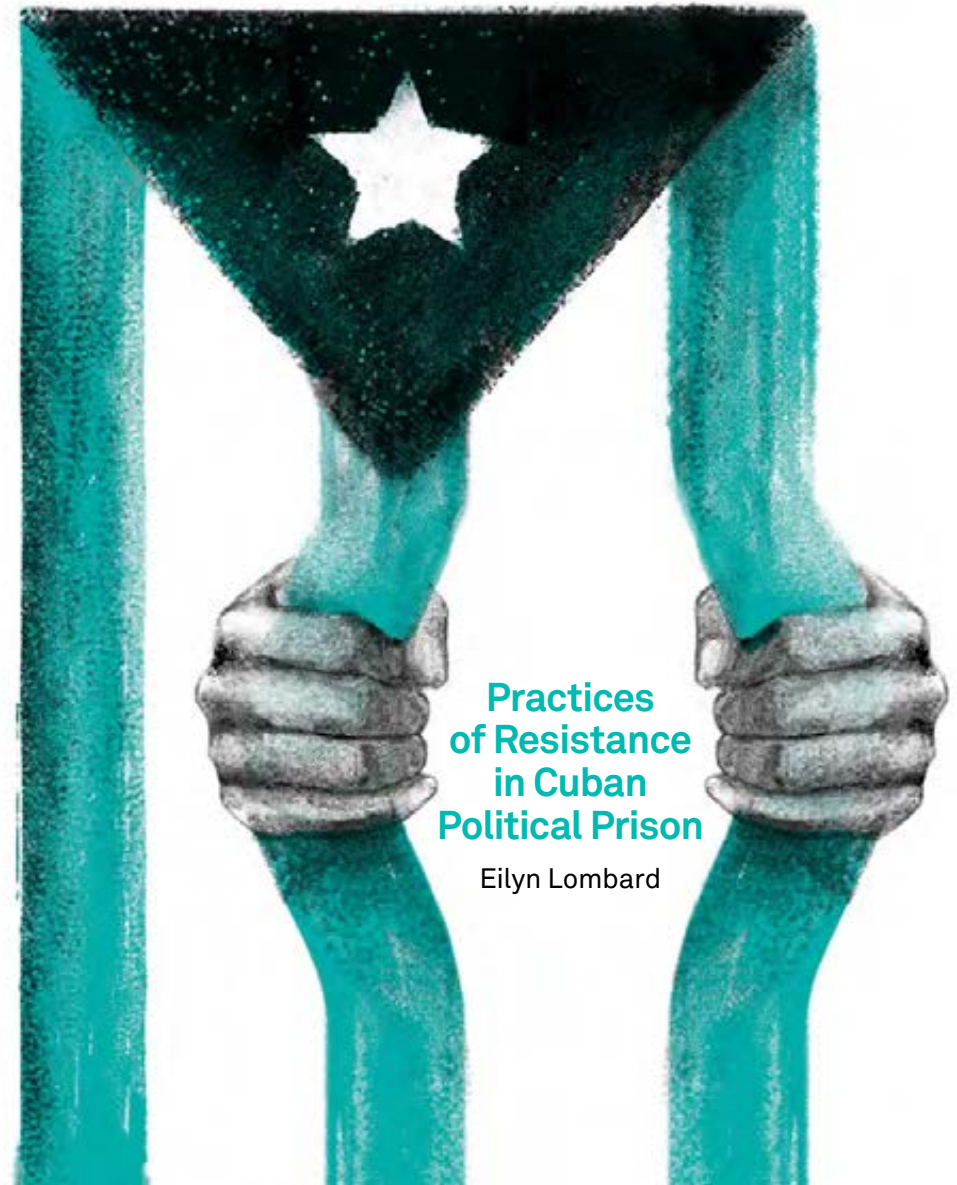
- Congress of the Republic of Colombia. (2008). *Law 1257 of 2008, establishing measures to raise awareness of, prevent, and punish forms of violence and discrimination against women*. Official Gazette No. 47,193. <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=34054>
- United Nations Security Council. (2000). *Resolution 1325 (2000) [S/RES/1325]*. United Nations. [https://docs.un.org/es/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](https://docs.un.org/es/S/RES/1325(2000))
- Corporation for Social and Economic Research and Action. (2016). *Collective for Thought and Action: Women, Peace and Security in Support of Peace*.
- _____. (2025). *SAYA Tool (Safe Here and Now Indicator Battery) and approaches to feminist everyday security*.
- ELSA. (n.d.). *The perfect victim of workplace sexual harassment*. <https://www.elsa.la/es/recursos/la-victima-perfecta-de-acoso-sexual-laboral>

¹³ Translator’s note: *Compañera* is left in Spanish because no single English term captures its meaning here. In this context, it conveys closeness, mutual recognition, and a shared commitment to dialogue and collective care, without assuming that the reader is a woman, a feminist, or affiliated with a particular political movement.

- Government of Colombia and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army. (2016). *Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace*. <https://www.jep.gov.co/Documents/Acuerdo%20Final/Acuerdo%20Final.pdf>
- Haraway, D. (1995). *Science, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Cátedra.
- International Catalan Institute for Peace and Latin American Women, Peace and Security Network. (2022). *Conceptual contributions towards a feminist perspective on security, peace, and dialogue in Latin America and the Caribbean*.
- Latin American Women, Peace and Security Network. (2023). *Working papers, reflections, and records of the Feminist School and regional meetings on everyday security and peace*. <https://mujerespazyseguridad.org>
- Salamanca, R. E. (2014). *Ensuring stable and peaceful societies* [Conference presentation]. United Nations General Assembly, New York, United States.
- _____. (2025). *Will we remain anchored in force-based security, or move towards security grounded in care and vulnerability?* [Presentation]. UN Women, Latin America and the Caribbean.

BETWEEN THE CRACKS

Revolution and Punishment



Practices
of Resistance
in Cuban
Political Prison

Eilyn Lombard

Eilyn Lombard

Professor of Latin American Studies and Spanish at Central Connecticut State University. Her research focuses on poetry under authoritarian regimes, and she coordinates Gender, Diversity, and Alliances at the Initiative for Research and Advocacy. Co-founder and Co-director of the Afrofeminist journal *Candela Review*.

In this chapter, I reflect, from a decolonial and intersectional feminist perspective, on the strategies of resistance employed by Cuban women human rights defenders who have experienced imprisonment or prolonged detention in the context of the Cuban regime. Between 2022 and 2024, I had the privilege of interviewing several of them and of accessing additional testimonies and reports as part of my work with the *Initiative for Research and Advocacy* (Iniciativa AC).

The prison experience under the Cuban regime presents particular characteristics associated with a shifting legal-political apparatus, its ideological rhetoric, and a surveillance structure marked by a dual form of oppression: gender-based and ideological. These dynamics are embedded within a broader context of authoritarian configurations across Latin America.

Within the region, some cases have received more scholarly attention than others: women who were tortured or disappeared during the Southern Cone dictatorships; women who were forcibly sterilized, subjected to violence, or killed in Central America as part of genocidal policies targeting Indigenous populations; women who were tortured and murdered in the Dominican Republic and Haiti; and those who were imprisoned or forced into exile under the regimes of Nicolás Maduro or Daniel Ortega.

While the focus or intent of many of these studies has been shaped by ideological disputes or alignments, I start from the

premise that all these experiences constitute forms of oppression and should be examined as such.

It is true, however, that women who experience these forms of oppression perpetrated by the state perceive them in different ways, according to their own lived experiences and the ways in which these experiences intersect with social class, educational attainment, religion, race, and other factors.

In the Cuban case, for example, the social bonds, affections, and ruptures, as well as the collective memories that women who dissent from the government weave from within confinement, and beyond it, are conceived and produced from within the prison experience itself. These processes have been studied from different perspectives, often shaped by ideological reservations or disputes.

In my approach to these experiences, I have engaged with the ideas of the Argentine theorist María Lugones regarding the colonial imposition of gender in the territories we now refer to as Latin America. This framework allows me to reflect on how Cuban women involved in acts of resistance to power understand and relate to their identities. Likewise, the analyses of the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato on prison experiences in the Latin American context, and her study of the gendered structure of violence, have shed light on the possible origins of these practices, as well as on the resistance to recognizing oneself either as a perpetrator of violence or as a victim. Finally, the notion of *cracks* developed by researcher Catherine Walsh has provided me with a lens through which to glimpse hope in the various practices of resistance outlined in this text.

I do not seek here to define what revolution is or what it means to be revolutionary in Cuba, or elsewhere. Every person

who reads this will have their own ways of relating to those terms. However, the fragments of the stories of several women human rights defenders in Cuba that I present in this chapter make visible the forms of punishment employed by a system of government that wields its particular concept of revolution as both shield and banner.

Based on these events, supported by the testimonies of these and other women, it becomes necessary to develop studies on the strategies of power, not only to understand how punishment is inflicted, but also how it is concealed beneath a “revolutionary” discourse. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that practices of resistance to such power emerge from a diverse range of ideological and cultural positions, influenced by factors such as place of residence, type of education, social background, economic circumstances, and access to information that may be biased to varying degrees.

The Revolution's Punishments

Among the repressive practices to which Cuban women who express dissent toward the state have been subjected to are imprisonment, prolonged house arrest, covert surveillance, police harassment, and family separation, among other forms of punishment.

According to a report by the *Centro de Documentación de Prisiones Cubanas* (CDPC), based on the “monitoring of repressive incidents and human rights violations occurring within Cuban penitentiary facilities” (CDPC, 2024), conducted

between March 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024,¹ deficiencies in food provision, denial of access to medical care, incidents of harassment and repression, as well as neglect of older women, targeted abuse against girls and adolescents, and inadequate treatment of pregnant women or women living with chronic illnesses were reported. Although similar practices have been employed by different governments in situations of political imprisonment, two aspects stand out in the Cuban case: first, the fact that punitive power, which instrumentalizes gender as an additional tool of control, is exercised by a state that presents itself as “socialist”; and second, that the women who experience these forms of violence do not necessarily recognize the gender dimension either as a constitutive component of the punishment itself or as a potential source of resistance.

The Cuban government has maintained, for more than six decades, the fiction that the revolutionary project has overcome gender- and class-based forms of violence. However, the voices of dissident women reveal a different reality.

In the nine interviews compiled by the *Cubanas en Resistencia* campaign (Iniciativa AC, n.d.-a), as well as in others published by the *Centro de Documentación de Prisiones Cubanas* (CDPC, n.d.),

¹ The report documents twenty-two complaints from seven women’s prisons: the *El Caramelo* Camp, the *Ceiba 4 Women’s Penitentiary Center*, the *Matanzas Women’s Prison (Bellotex)*, the *Western Women’s Prison*, the *Guamajal Women’s Prison*, the *Guantánamo Provincial Women’s Prison*, and the *Camagüey Provincial Women’s Prison, Granja 5*.

an archive emerges that challenges the official state narrative and exposes a form of violence rooted at the intersection of ideological control, exemplary punishment, and a patriarchy that operates both within and beyond penitentiary institutions.

Upon analyzing these materials, I observed that the Cuban state employs mechanisms of repression and torture explicitly linked to the female gender, whether understood as assigned at birth or as a chosen gender identity. These are practices that punish women for menstruating, for being mothers, for being women.

Some testimonies clearly illustrate these dynamics. Iris María Mariño (Iniciativa AC, n.d.-b), a journalist detained following the July 11 protests (11J), was taken to an interrogation while her clothing was visibly stained with menstrual blood because she had not been granted access to a sanitary pad. The State Security officer proceeded with the interrogation without regard for either the physical discomfort (pain, irritation) or the humiliation that this situation entailed.

In another case, Marisol Peña (Lombard, n.d.-a), an opposition activist, turned herself in to the authorities in 2003 after learning that she was pregnant. She had escaped in 2000 and had not been located by the authorities. Her decision was motivated by the need to ensure access to medical care during her pregnancy and following the birth of her daughter. She served her sentence from the sixth week of pregnancy until her daughter was one year and one day old.

Finally, some trans women, such as Brenda Díaz (Espinoza, 2022), a participant in the July 11 protests (11J), have been forced to cut their hair, wear clothing associated with the male sex, and serve their sentences in men’s prisons.

In these cases, those vested with the authority to represent the dominant power structure, whether men or women, appropriate the male/female binary distinction as part of the mechanisms of punishment. This form of appropriation dates back to the processes of conquest and colonization, as explained by María Lugones. According to Lugones, the very constitution of gender as a category of distinction is a European imposition, since such classifications did not operate in the same way in the colonized territories. The forms of oppression imported through the colonality of gender are also articulated through other classifications: man/woman, pure/impure, human/nonhuman. As Lugones (2011) argues, “The behaviors of the colonized and their personalities/souls were judged as bestial and therefore ungendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful” (p. 107). Within this logic, the feminine becomes associated with impurity and, often, with immorality.

Some of the ways in which this matrix of domination has been reproduced and remains in force can be identified in the cases analyzed here: violence inflicted through a deliberate indulgence in bodily suffering, as in Mariño’s case; motherhood transformed into a source of guilt, as in the cases of Peña, Nieto, Góngora, and others; or identity itself turned into both punishment and a cause for shame, as occurs with Díaz and other trans women (Hernández, 2023).

Making Sense of Punishment

In women’s prisons, it is generally women who serve as officers: they monitor, organize, control relationships and activities,

regulate behavior, and administer punishment. For this reason, and because most of the women whose testimonies I have presented here are regarded primarily as political dissidents, some do not recognize that a significant portion of the violence they have endured is also rooted in gender oppression.

When explicitly asked whether they felt discriminated against during their time in prison, several of the women tended to interpret these experiences primarily through an ideological lens, downplaying or minimizing the gendered component. Thus, in response to this question, one of them stated: “Anyone who stands up to them, they do not care what color you are or who you are, they mistreat you” (Peña, in Lombard, n.d.-a). Another remarked: “Because of my ideology, from the very beginning [I felt discriminated against in prison]. The treatment we received from the guards was very harsh. We also felt excluded by the other inmates, who looked down on us as a result of years of indoctrination” (Garrido, in Fernández, n.d.). More succinctly, a third woman simply replied: “Because of my political views, yes” (Solaya, in Iniciativa AC, n.d.-c).

These responses suggest that the gendered dimension of the violence experienced in confinement is seldom explicitly identified as such by the women themselves and is often subsumed under explanations centered on ideological persecution, even when the practices described reveal a clear gender-based component.

However, this interpretation becomes more complex in light of two additional elements introduced by Salcedo in her testimony (Fernández, 2024). First, imprisoned women themselves may, at times, reproduce oppressive practices. As she

explains, “they use the most violent prisoners to repress those of us who, like me, were imprisoned on fabricated charges,” a statement that echoes Garrido’s testimony. Second, the violence does not come solely from other women, but also from men operating within the prison system. “There are men as well. There are doctors, young men performing their military service, and officers who try to take advantage of the situation and of their position. I shared barracks with young women who were abused by officers,” Salcedo recounts.

These testimonies make it possible to formulate a series of arguments regarding the nature of punishment and those who inflict it. In this regard, the concept of the pedagogy of cruelty, developed by Rita Segato (2018), helps explain how these forms of violence are produced, reproduced, and normalized². Based on the materials examined, it is important to emphasize that both the women who perpetrate violence and the women in prison who endure it tend to normalize these practices and, at times, do not identify them as forms of gender-based violence.

This is the case of Peña, who recounts being insulted with expressions such as “you fucking Black woman” and “slave” because she was not white and, at the same time, opposed the regime. Another example appears in Solaya’s statement: “we were the ‘worst ones.’” The language used in these cases turns characteristics associated with race, gender, or morality into forms of insult, reproducing a mechanism inherited

² Segato explains that men’s violence against the women in their households reproduces all the violence to which they themselves have been exposed, as well as the violence they observe and come to regard as natural through mass media (2018, p. 14).

from colonization that equates difference with the notion of the “nonhuman” developed by Lugones (2011).

However, other women do explicitly recognize the violence they endured as forms of gender-based discrimination. This is the case of Mariño (Iniciativa AC, n.d.-b), who states: “I feel discriminated against. Perhaps many women do not feel this way when they are harassed, especially by men,” and of Marthadela Tamayo (Lombard, 2025), who maintains: “I insist that, as a woman, I have been a victim of all these forms of repression.

(Diverse) Practices of Resistance

But the women who speak in these interviews do not define themselves by the violence inflicted upon them, but by the tactics they have woven to resist it. Far from conforming to a single pattern, these strategies form a heterogeneous landscape. One dimension of this resistance is linked to the recognition of a power that emerges from direct confrontation and prepares them to bear witness and denounce abuse. Garrido’s testimony is particularly important for understanding this position:

“The regime’s greatest mistake was imprisoning us; that’s when we saw everything”.

This refers to the ways in which the state seeks to break not only political will, but also spiritual and emotional identities. Within this context, collective spaces of prayer for those who practice the Christian faith, as in the case of the Garrido sisters, as well as the willingness to care for and support other

inmates, as recounted by Peña and Salcedo, emerge as forms of collective action oriented toward the community, a fundamental step in these women's struggles.

Another central practice of resistance has been the public exposure of violence: denouncing, writing, and bringing it to light.

From within prison, some significant examples include the letter, signed in blood, that ten Cuban women political prisoners incarcerated following the July 2021 protests addressed to the President of the Republic, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez (Rodríguez, 2023), as well as the hunger strikes undertaken by Aymara Nieto, Garrido, Lizandra Góngora, Yunaiki Linares, and Peña, among others. These actions are complemented by protests and sit-ins, both individual and collective, as well as letters and complaints submitted to international bodies.

For other interviewees, a central tool of struggle has been the strategic use of the law.

The activist María Mercedes Benítez Rodríguez (Lombard, 2025), who was detained in 2020 for supporting a hunger strike, appealed a fine imposed against her and succeeded in having it overturned. Neife Rigau insists that “the best thing to do ... is to denounce and expose the situation.” In the absence of independent institutions capable of guaranteeing rights, public denunciation thus becomes one of the most effective tools available. Along the same lines, Miryorli García (Rodríguez, n.d.), who has been detained on several occasions though never

imprisoned, maintains that “the best way to confront violence is to unite and leave the abuser isolated and exposed.”

From exile, and from an explicitly feminist standpoint, Marta María Ramírez (Lombard, 2024), an activist who was not imprisoned but did endure multiple forms of oppression because of her work, states that “feminism has saved me spiritually and physically.” Other women in exile, such as María Matienzo, Kirenia Yalit, Yanelis Núñez, Camila Rodríguez, Katherine Bisquet, and Luz Escobar, have continued to denounce, through art and journalism, both the punishments they themselves experienced and those that others continue to endure in Cuba.

These are just a few examples that invite reflection through both theoretical frameworks and personal testimonies, and that can be contrasted with other Latin American contexts. In the Cuban case, the distinctive features of punishment are manifested in the near-total control of information, the ideologicalization of the penal apparatus, a system of community surveillance that extends beyond prison walls, and, above all, in a state discourse that conceals these forms of violence. I offer these pages as part of a possible handbook-in-the-making of practices of resistance “within the cracks,” following the concept developed by Catherine Walsh, through which to consider how Cuban women resist through the body, faith, fear, public denunciation, biased information, the silence of those who watch, exile, and hope.

REFERENCES

- 14ymedio (2025). La Dama de Blanco Aymara Nieto sale de la cárcel a cambio de su destierro a República Dominicana. *14ymedio*. https://www.14ymedio.com/cuba/dama-blanco-aymara-nieto-sale_1_1116860.html
- Centro de Documentación de Prisiones Cubanas. (2024). *Incidentes represivos o violatorios de derechos humanos en centros penitenciarios cubanos (1 de marzo de 2023 - 30 de junio de 2024)*. CDPC. <https://docubprisiones.org/incidentes-represivos-centros-penitenciarios-cubanos/>
- Centro de Documentación de Prisiones Cubanas. (n.d.). *Testimonios*. CDPC. <https://docubprisiones.org/testimonios/>
- CubaNet (2023). Régimen aumenta represión a la presa política Lizandra Góngora: hace dos meses que no ve a sus hijos. *CubaNet*. <https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/qurium/cubonet.org/noticias-regimen-aumenta-represion-a-la-presa-politica-lizandra-gongora-hace-dos-meses-que-no-ve-a-sus-hijos.html>
- Espinosa, J. C. (2022). Brenda Díaz, la manifestante cubana trans del 11J encarcelada entre hombres. *Martí Noticias*. <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/brenda-d%C3%ADaz-la-manifestante-cubana-trans-del-11j-encarcelada-entre-hombres/329808.html>
- Fernández, L. (2024). *Diasniurka Salcedo: “Es tanto lo que han hecho que no hay modo de que paguen”*. Centro de Documentación de Prisiones Cubanas. <https://docubprisiones.org/entrevista-diasniurka-salcedo/>
- Fernández, L. (n.d.). *Angélica Garrido: “El mayor error del régimen fue encarcelarnos, vimos la forma inhumana en que viven los presos en Cuba”*. Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. - Mujeres Cubanas en resistencia. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/angelica-garrido-el-mayor-error-del-regimen-fue-encarcelarnos-vimos-la-forma-inhumana-en-que-viven-los-presos-en-cuba/>
- Hernández, Y. (2023). Mujeres trans en las cárceles cubanas. *Periodismo de barrio*. <https://periodismodebarrio.org/2023/12/mujeres-trans-en-las-carceles-cubanas/>
- Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. (n.d.-a). *Mujeres Cubanas en resistencia*. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/>
- Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. (n.d.-b). *Iris Mariño: en la prisión yo estaba en condiciones de tortura psicológica*. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/iris-marino/>
- Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. (n.d.-c). *Yanay Solaya: “si las presas del 11J teníamos alguna situación, nadie nos socorría”*. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/yanay-solaya/>
- Lombard, E. (2024). Marta María Ramírez: ‘El feminismo me ha salvado en términos espirituales y físicos’. *Diario de Cuba*. https://diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1732708156_58541.html
- Lombard, E. (2025). Marthadela Tamayo: ‘Cuba tiene una deuda pendiente con la sociedad civil, especialmente con las mujeres’. *Diario de Cuba*. https://diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1737666029_59550.html
- Lombard, E. (2025). ‘Sé que no puedo rendirme’: María Mercedes Benítez y su ‘receta invencible’ frente a la dictadura cubana. *Diario de Cuba*. https://diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1741891256_60303.html
- Lombard, E. (n.d.-a). *Marisol Peña Cobas: “Cuando estás luchando por la libertad, no hay golpe que te detenga”*. Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. - Mujeres Cubanas en resistencia. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/marisol-pena/>
- Lombard, E. (n.d.-b). *Neife Rigau: “Llevaba muchos años esperando escuchar a la gente gritar libertad”*. Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. - Mujeres Cubanas en resistencia. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/neife-rigau/>
- Lugones, M. (2011). Hacia un feminismo descolonial. *La manzana de la discordia*, 6(2), 105-119. https://manzanadiscordia.univalle.edu.co/index.php/la_manzana_de_la_discordia/article/view/1504/pdf
- Rodríguez, C. (2023). Cuba: las presas de la dictadura. *Confidencial*. <https://confidencial.digital/opinion/cuba-las-presas-de-la-dictadura/>
- Rodríguez, C. (n.d.). *Miryorly García: “Vivimos una de las últimas funciones de este circo”*. Iniciativa para la investigación y la incidencia A.C. - Mujeres Cubanas en resistencia. <https://cubanasenresistencia.iniciativaac.org/miryorly-garcia/>
- Segato, R. (2018). *Contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*. Prometeo libros.

SUSTAINING LIFE

Economic Justice and Decent Work



**The Challenge
Faced by Women
Maquila Workers¹
in Ciudad Juárez**

Betty Ávalos
Norma Garduño

¹ Workers employed in maquilas, export-oriented manufacturing plants, primarily located along Mexico's northern border, that assemble goods for foreign markets. The term maquila is retained in Spanish because it refers to a specific economic and labor system with particular social, historical, and political implications in Mexico. It is also the term the authors use to describe themselves and the women whose experiences they discuss.

Betty Ávalos

Elizabeth “Betty” Ávalos Jáquez is the founder and coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Women’s Collective. An activist with more than 30 years of experience defending the labor rights of women industrial workers in Ciudad Juárez, she draws on her own experience as a maquila worker.

Norma Garduño

Norma Garduño is a human rights defender and an advocate for organizing and participation processes among women workers. For several years, she has accompanied women workers in Ciudad Juárez’s maquila industry in the defense of their labor rights, occupational safety and health, and the development of alternatives that allow work to adapt to women’s lives, rather than the other way around. She is a member of the Rosa Luxemburg Women’s Collective, where she promotes processes of organizing, care, and collective power.

A Day on the Assembly Line¹

At 3:30 in the morning, an alarm goes off that does not always wake her. “My body no longer heard anything,” Cynthia will say later. She gets up in the dark, feeling her way through the kitchen to make a quick cup of coffee before walking to the bus stop. Outside, Juárez’s dusty valley is still asleep, but the white lights of the maquilas are already shining like beacons that never go out. In a few hours, the sun will barely fall upon the parched city; by then, she will be assembling parts, repeating the same motion for nine hours.

By seven o’clock, she is home. Her daughters are already about to wake up. She says she sleeps “in intervals,” as if her rest was an unfinished puzzle. At noon, she gets up again, prepares a meal, gathers notebooks, sweeps, tidies up. And then she returns, once again, to the maquila.

¹ The term refers to the production line characteristic of *maquila* manufacturing, in which workers perform specialized, repetitive tasks as part of a highly coordinated industrial process. The title “A Day on the Assembly Line” is retained rather than shortened to “*A Day on the Line*” because *assembly line* emphasizes the factory’s logic of efficiency and synchronization, evoking the experience of workers functioning as part of a system designed to operate with the precision of a machine.

We know that feeling well: being there and not being there. Being physically present on the assembly line², yet feeling life outside slip through our fingers amid reports, supervisors, production quotas, and bus routes that are never delayed, even when we are exhausted. It is the rhythm of the border, where thousands of women sustain families, neighborhoods, and entire communities with a mixture of strength, guilt, weariness, and love.

—“Are we living?” a coworker asked during one of our meetings. The question hung in the room as though it were meant for all of us... And it was.

Ciudad Juárez, the Maquila Industry, and Us

We write from Ciudad Juárez, a city that has grown to the rhythm of machines, assembly lines, the dust that blankets the outskirts, and an industrial model that, for more than fifty years, has shaped the lives of those of us who inhabit it. The maquila industry, that great promise of modernity, employment, and social mobility, took root in our neighborhoods long before we were aware of what it would come to mean for our bodies and our lives.

² The phrase refers not merely to occupying a physical space at work, but to the constant demand that workers remain at their stations and maintain the pace of production without interruption. In the context of *maquila* labor, it evokes the discipline of the assembly line, where productivity depends on workers' continuous presence and limited ability to pause, rest, or step away from their tasks. Beyond physical presence, the expression conveys the pressures of a system designed for uninterrupted productivity, in which workers are expected to keep pace with production targets even under conditions of exhaustion.

We are part of that machinery, but we also challenge it. We began working when we were young, some of us even as children, falsifying birth certificates, learning to breathe inside enclosed plants where everything is fast, urgent, replaceable. As Betty recalled: “On my first day, I wanted to cry... you see the machinery and the crowds of people. I was terrified, ready to run away”.

That early experience of fear, of forced adaptation, is coupled with another dimension: the home, where we are also expected to sustain life. And there emerges the double and triple burden, one that is never acknowledged in corporate or government discourse, yet runs through every hour of our days.

In this chapter, we pause to examine the web of this intersection that sustains, and strains, our daily lives: paid work in the maquila industry and unpaid care work; economic justice, which remains unfulfilled; and the organized resistance that, as women and workers, we have been weaving together.

We do so from our own voices, both individual and collective, and from the voices of other fellow workers whose journeys are also part of this story. Because situated feminist writing is precisely that: a blend of memory, analysis, body, and territory; a political practice grounded in lived experience that seeks to name injustices, imagine what should be, and contest dominant meanings.

Ciudad Juárez and the Maquila Model: A History Written on the Body

Ciudad Juárez is one of the most industrialized regions in Mexico: thirty-five industrial parks, thousands of women crossing

the city each day, a productive system that depends on our labor and on our bodies, young, fast, disciplined. Yet that is not how the story is told in our neighborhoods.

For many of us, our first encounter with the maquila industry was not a contract, but a necessity. “I started at fifteen and falsified my birth certificate because we needed to eat,” Betty recalls. “By seventeen, I was already working overtime every single day,” says Mireya.

The governments promised development; the companies promised a future. What arrived instead were long working hours, the pressure to meet production rates designed for machines, not people, and the normalization of practices that persist to this day: pregnancy tests, questions about who takes care of our daughters while we are at work, restrictions on bathroom breaks, repetitive motions that wear down joints from the age of twenty onward.

Added to this reality is another factor that is rarely acknowledged by outsiders: distance.

Living on the outskirts means getting up two or three hours before a shift begins. It means combining multiple bus routes. It means that transportation shapes family life, rest, and education.

Lorenza explained it clearly: “If I got out of school late, I would miss the bus back to my town. That’s why I couldn’t finish secondary school while working in the maquila”.

The maquila industry shaped the city, and it also shaped the lives of those who sustain it. And in that process of shaping, gender is not incidental: it is the axis.

Women make up the majority on the line, yet we remain a minority in decision-making positions. We are the foundation of the productive model, yet we continue to be excluded from public policymaking.

The Double and Triple Burden: Sustaining Life at All Hours

The Visible Shift and the Invisible Shift

In the maquila, our clock-in and clock-out times are recorded. But no one records who cooks before the shift, who washes the uniforms, who cares for a sick mother, who checks homework, who carries the fear when daughters leave for school, who survives on barely three accumulated hours of sleep.

Women devote 15.9 more hours per week than men to care work, according to data from Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). And that figure, which may seem merely statistical, translates in our everyday lives into a mixture of exhaustion, guilt, and strategies for keeping things going however we can.

Marisela puts it plainly: “At the maquila, I was there, but I wasn’t really there. My children grew up on their own, even though I was there... or at least I thought I was”.

Shifts That Consume Life

The third shift, which on paper seems advantageous, “it leaves you with the whole day free,” is actually a mirage. Cynthia experienced it this way: “I slept in intervals. Sometimes, at

nine o'clock, I was still awake. At noon, I would get up to make lunch. At one, I would go pick up my daughters. Sometimes I felt as though we were living in our sleep”.

Sleeping poorly is part of life in the maquila. So is becoming ill from lack of rest, from not being able to go to the bathroom, from carrying hot parts, from repeating the same motion ten thousand times. The International Labour Organization (ILO) identifies long working hours as the leading risk factor in work-related deaths. We have always known this instinctively.

Daughters Who Become Mothers

Another painful reality, one that repeats itself time and again: when there are no childcare centers, when there are no care policies, when shifts do not change, daughters become mothers to their sisters.

“My twenty-year-old daughter became the mother of my other two children,” Lorenza recalled. In that single sentence lies what this extractive model produces: it extracts time, futures, and possibilities not only from women workers, but from entire generations.

The Care Economy from Juárez: Who Sustains What No One Counts

The care economy explains that life is only possible because someone sustains it. But for us, it is not a concept: it is the hands of neighbors who take turns bringing girls and boys to school; it is paying a woman to care for your children

while you work twelve-hour shifts; it is the friend who picks up your daughters because you are still making your way between bus routes; it is raising children with fear because you cannot be present.

Angélica López sums it up this way: “Hiring conditions are structured around male norms, even though the labor force is predominantly female. Women’s personal lives become a criterion for employment”. Even today, in a job interview, if you are a woman, you may be asked how many children you have, who takes care of them, who will look after them if they get sick, whether you could stay for overtime, whether you “really want to work”... No man is expected to answer these questions.

A year without employment is interpreted as a lack of need, rather than as accumulated exhaustion or the absence of support networks.

And in a context where violence cuts across every neighborhood, where mothers fear leaving their children alone in the face of the possibility of forced recruitment -according to recent studies, more than 160,000 people have been incorporated into organized crime in Mexico- the lack of time to accompany young people is also a policy of risk.

Economic justice, then, cannot be defined solely in terms of wages or productivity. It has to do with time, well-being, and safety; with the possibility of living without fear, of loving without guilt, of resting even within our precarious spaces. And today, that is not guaranteed.

Between Exhaustion and Guilt: When the System Becomes Invisible

The following testimony, shared in a women's support and accompaniment space, captures many of the everyday tensions experienced by women maquila workers when exhaustion has no collective name.

"Good evening. Do you believe that witchcraft or negative energy can affect a person's emotional state that much?... Let me tell you a little about my situation. I work and I have a ten-month-old baby. I'm a first-time mother. Of course, my husband also works and helps care for the baby. We take turns..."

There are moments when the body simply stops responding, but we do not know why. It is not laziness. It is not a lack of willpower. It is not a lack of commitment to work. It is profound exhaustion. Yet women maquila workers have been taught to look for explanations everywhere except in the system that exploits us.

"The thing is, I always feel tired, with very little energy. It's really hard for me to get up in the morning to go to work (at the maquila). I've always worked, even overtime... I'm not lazy..."

A young woman, a maquila worker and first-time mother to a ten-month-old baby, makes this clear when she feels compelled to justify herself: she does not describe herself as exhausted by the system, but rather as someone who needs to make it clear that she is responsible and committed. In her account, there is

no complaint about the work itself, "I like working," she will say later, but rather a desperate search for meaning in the face of wear and tear.

"But I feel negative energy coming from my husband's family, especially his mother... I'm not blaming them, but I've never felt this way before... Or maybe it's because now I have more responsibility..."

When no structural explanation is available, exhaustion becomes a personal, emotional, or even supernatural problem. It is easier to think that someone has "done something to us" than to recognize that we are being squeezed dry by a precarious system that normalizes extreme exhaustion.

"But I want to make it clear that his mother does know about witchcraft, and maybe she doesn't like me because her son doesn't go to see her. But it's not because I tell him not to go. It's because her own actions have pushed him away... And honestly, I have no problem going with him to visit her, but he's the one who isn't interested"

Here, guilt is displaced: never toward the labor model, always toward personal relationships. The system remains intact, invisible, outside the frame.

"During my pregnancy, I was studying and decided to finish my degree. So yes, I was losing some sleep, but thank God I've finished..."

This search is not incidental, either. It is the result of a profound mismatch between women's life cycles and the productive cycles of the maquila model. While the maternal body moves through the postpartum period, breastfeeding, sleep deprivation, and the emotional and physical reorganization that raising a child entails, the maquila demands absolute punctuality, consistent performance, availability for overtime, and a steady supply of energy, as though the body had no processes of its own, as though life itself did not happen.

"I want to make it clear that my job isn't physically demanding... I'm not complaining about that. I like working..."

Naming exhaustion always seems to require an apology. The productive system does not recognize the rhythms of care or the rhythms of life. On the contrary, it denies them. And when there is neither the time nor the conditions to pause and reflect collectively, narratives emerge that place responsibility on the individual.

"I'm simply looking for some advice: what can I do to feel more relieved and have more energy? I've even thought about quitting my job because I feel so tired, but I'm still young and there are many goals I want to achieve... I don't want to give up..."

Here, another dimension of economic injustice becomes evident: not only is our labor power extracted, but so too is our ability to understand what is happening to us. The double and triple burden, paid work, domestic work, and care work, leaves so little room for rest and reflection that systemic analysis becomes a

luxury. There is no time to politicize exhaustion, to name the model itself as responsible.

In this context, exhaustion is not recognized as a logical consequence of the system, but as a personal failure. And that is profoundly violent. Because it shifts responsibility away from the structure and leaves us alone, wondering what we are doing wrong when, in reality, we are doing too much.

This anonymous testimony is not an exception. It is an everyday expression of how the maquila model disrupts the harmony between life and work and of how, in the absence of public care policies and genuine economic justice, women end up carrying explanations that are not ours to bear.

Naming this is a political act. Saying that it is not witchcraft, not weakness, not a lack of will. It is exploitation.

This is precarization. It is a system sustained by exhausting feminized bodies while convincing us that the problem lies within us.

Economic justice, then, appears as something distant, almost abstract, removed from the everyday experience of feminized labor. What kind of justice can there be when a young woman, with a completed education and a formal job, considers quitting not because she lacks aspirations, but because she is exhausted? What economic justice exists when the care system still fails to respond effectively to the real needs of women workers, and motherhood is experienced as an individual burden that must be managed "however one can"?

Labor cycles, moreover, are becoming increasingly short. Constant turnover, instability, fragile contracts, and the demand

for continual adaptation erode any possibility of balance. There is no time to heal, to settle in, to build sustainable processes. Everything is urgent. Everything is immediate. Everything is replaceable.

Resistance and Alternatives: When Our Bodies Can No Longer Keep Up, We Turn to the Collective

When exhaustion can no longer be borne alone, seeking out others becomes a way of surviving.

The Rosa Luxemburg Women's Collective was born this way: from exhausted bodies that began to ask questions. "Is this normal?" Mireya would ask. "Why can't I see my children?" "Why, if I get injured, am I not reassigned to another operation?" "Why do they ask about my children when it comes to promotions?"

They began in homes, in neighborhoods, without funding. They organized themselves to understand their rights, to support one another, to stand together against an industry that, for decades, had made them feel isolated and replaceable.

Today, ten years later, the Collective has established the Center for Worker Support and Organizing (CAOPT), but its essence has not changed: it continues to work "from the ground up," rooted in real life. "We are still workers," Betty says. "The legal structure is only a means of being where we have always been: alongside women".

Weaving Networks to Sustain Life

The women organize to accompany complaints, create spaces for learning, document discriminatory practices, demand public care policies, promote alternatives through the solidarity economy, and use activism and the Theatre of the Oppressed to name what for far too long has gone unnamed.

A recent study on hiring barriers, conducted by the Rosa Luxemburg Women's Collective, revealed something we had all long suspected: women face inequalities not only within the maquila, but even before entering it. Discrimination begins before the first day, before the clock starts running, before a supervisor ever lays eyes on us.

That reality creates a dangerous narrative: that employment is a favor; that we should be grateful for the bus route and the cafeteria; that if we cannot manage it all, work, daughters, sons, home, studies, it is our fault and not the system's.

We are dismantling that narrative.

Perspectives on Economic Justice from Juárez

Economic justice, from the perspective of Juárez, means something different from what it does in textbooks. It is not only about the redistribution of income, but also about the redistribution of time, care, and dignity. Thinking about it from a maquila city means starting from concrete life and from the

real conditions under which we work, raise our children, and sustain everyday life.

Imagining a comprehensive care system for a maquila city

What if Juárez had full-time childcare centers, work shifts compatible with school schedules, safe transportation with community-based routes, caregiving leave without retaliation, dignified rest, and wages that made it possible not only to survive, but also to study, rest, and live?

Cynthia put it very clearly: “I wish I could work fewer hours and earn a better wage, one that would help me cover my household’s expenses”.

A maquila that adapts to women, not the other way around

Angélica sums it up this way: “Work should adapt to women, not women to work”.

That shift is fundamental. It means rethinking the way workers are hired, what is understood as productivity, who determines the pace of the line, what social responsibility means, and how power is distributed within the factory.

The horizon of what is possible

Economic justice requires dismantling the patriarchal foundations of the maquila model: recognizing that our lives matter more than the line, and that care is not a private matter but a right. A possible horizon is built when work ceases to be organized against life and finally begins to sustain it.

A Vision for the Future

We return to the question that lingered in the air: Are we living?

Perhaps living, for us, does not mean having free time every day, but knowing that we are not alone. It means that our daughters will no longer have to falsify their birth certificates to get a job in the maquila; that they will be able to study if they choose to; that they will be able to work without their motherhood being seen as an obstacle; that they will have time to love, to rest, and to grow.

To live is to organize.

To live is to say out loud what for years they made us keep silent.

To live is to remind the city that without us, without our hands, our bodies, our care, nothing moves.

To live is to allow ourselves to cultivate the deep conviction that, if we were able to sustain this city for decades, we can now transform it as well.

HACKING
POLITICS

REPRESENTING
COLLECTIVES

Taking Power

Women's Collective Action as a Tool for the
Conquest of Rights and the Consolidation
of Political Power

Hannah Maruci Aflalo



Hannah Maruci Aflalo

Hannah Maruci Aflalo is a Brazilian political scientist, researcher, and activist. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of São Paulo (USP). She is the co-founder of the NGO A Tenda das Candidatas, through which she actively works to advance women's political representation and gender and racial diversity.

Thinking from Experience

That political exclusion of women would reveal itself to me as one of the serious problems of the systemic oppression of women in Brazil was not a theoretical abstraction, but rather the result of my research into the achievement of women's suffrage. I understand the political landscape as a reflection of a structure that excludes women and Black people from spaces of power, decision-making, and access to rights.

This was, therefore, the necessary trigger for my academic trajectory to soon merge with a form of engagement that, at the time, was not viewed favorably within the research community. After all, how could I study my object of inquiry if I was so closely attached to it? Or, indeed, if I myself was part of that very object? Initially, in a predominantly male department with little room to think about gender issues, which were always understood as forms of dissent and dismissively referred to as “anthropology stuff,” this criticism had some impact.

However, it was with the founding of GEPÔ, the Gender and Politics Studies Group of the Department of Political Science at the University of São Paulo, together with other women who were equally committed to demonstrating that the relationship between subject and object is not neutral, that I gained the confidence to continue pursuing my academic studies alongside political engagement. At that time, the writings of

Lélia Gonzalez, Joan Scott, and Donna Haraway provided me with the affirmation and theoretical grounding I needed to understand that there is no science without political engagement, and that I could not study women's political participation as an external or neutral subject, even if I had wanted to.

It was from that point onward that I chose to situate myself. As a white woman in a country with a long history of misogyny and racism, none of those identities could pass unscathed through a study on this subject; and I believe the same holds true for any research endeavor. It was during my master's studies that I began working as a project coordinator at the Coordination Office for Women's Policy within the São Paulo City Government, where I came into contact not only with the inner workings of policies for women, but also with women from every region of a city as vast as São Paulo. This exposed me to a world of vulnerabilities that far exceeds the scope of any individual action.

By interacting with the few women councilors elected to the Municipal Chamber, it became evident to me that the presence of women in politics had a direct impact on public policies aimed at women in the municipality of São Paulo. And not only the presence of women elected to legislative office, but also that of representatives elected to the Municipal Council for Women's Policies, which plays a significant role in shaping the municipality's public policies and exercises a coordinated capacity to exert pressure on public authorities.

Convinced that the underrepresentation of women, especially Black women, in Brazilian politics lay at the root of many of the problems I witnessed and hoped to help mitigate, I began to consider how my training in Political Science could

contribute to that effort. By then, I had already had extensive contact with women who had run for office but had not been elected, and who described complete neglect by their parties, including those that identified themselves as progressive, with regard to their candidacies. They recounted that they were initially invited to run for office. It is worth noting here that political parties in Brazil have been required since 1997 to field at least 30 percent of candidates from one of the genders on their electoral lists, a requirement established under the Candidate Quotas Law. Candidates were promised the moon, led to believe they had a genuine chance of being elected, and then, once their candidacies had been formally included on party lists, were abandoned without resources, information, or any form of support.

Beginning to Take Action

It was on the basis of these accounts that I joined Caroline Maria in serving as an Open Government Agent within the São Paulo City Government, as part of a training initiative aimed at helping women learn about their political rights and engage politically, both through legislative office and through participatory councils. We trained more than 300 women in neighborhoods across every region of the city, and it was through that experience that I came to understand the power of women's collective political engagement. I am especially fond of recalling the case of Fe Maidel, now a friend: a trans woman who, after completing the training, decided to run for a seat on the Municipal Council for LGBT Policies, was elected, and

later became coordinator of the LGBT Policy Coordination Office of the São Paulo City Government.

It was at this point in my trajectory that I also joined the More Women in Politics Movement, a coalition of legal experts, activists, and public-sector practitioners formed with the goal of drafting a popular initiative bill proposing that 50 percent of legislative seats be reserved for women, of which 25 percent, a provision introduced by Laura Astrolabio, would be allocated to Black women. Within this movement, I was responsible for drafting what became known as the “Weight 2 Bill” (PL Peso 2). By then, I had already come to understand that political parties had no genuine interest in expanding women’s political representation and that, whenever possible, they would continue to circumvent affirmative action measures such as candidate quotas.

It was from this realization that I came up with the idea of proposing a measure that would encourage political parties to invest in women; in other words, a measure that would reward them for electing more women, especially Black women. The proposed bill therefore stipulated that parties that had elected women and Black candidates in the previous legislature would receive twice the amount of public financial resources for each woman or Black person elected, compared to those allocated for men and white individuals. As a result of the collective advocacy efforts of the More Women in Politics Movement, which involved discussions with women members of parliament from across the political spectrum, participation in public hearings, and the production of technical briefs, the “Weight 2” proposal (PL Peso 2) was incorporated into the 2022 electoral mini-reform.

Nevertheless, the proposal was ultimately altered, and the “Weight 2” mechanism came to be based on the number of votes received by women and Black candidates, rather than on the number of women and Black individuals actually elected. What is the problem with this change? Although the approval of the law was important in recognizing the significance of electing women and Black people, the fact that the criterion is based on votes rather than on the number of elected representatives does not necessarily lead to an increase in the political representation of these groups. A single woman, for example, with a strong capacity to attract votes, could be, and in fact was, prioritized over many women who received a moderate number of votes. This change demonstrates how legislative advocacy is a meticulous process that requires sustained political pressure before a measure is effectively adopted.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Creation of *A Tenda das Candidatas*

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a new obstacle. It is important to recall that, during this period, Brazil was under the leadership of a president whose handling of the crisis was deplorable in every respect: he opposed social distancing measures, delayed the purchase of vaccines, and denied the seriousness of COVID-19. These actions had severe consequences, plunging the country into a state of social and public health calamity that resulted in a death toll far greater than what could have been avoided through even minimally responsible governance.

That same year, municipal elections were scheduled to take place. Confined at home, watching people close to me die and feeling utterly powerless, I joined other women who felt much the same way, and together we concluded that we needed to do something meaningful in response to the elections that were approaching. It was out of that realization that, also in 2020, we founded what is now the NGO *A Tenda das Candidatas*. Without funding or institutional support, we developed an online training program for women who wished to run for office, providing instruction in legal matters, political communication, agenda-setting, campaign strategy, and volunteer mobilization, among other topics. In addition, we launched an open call to select ten women who would be mentored directly by us throughout their political campaigns.

With nothing more than a newly created Instagram page to publicize our initiative, we had nearly 400 women sign up for mentoring within a single week. We were astonished, and that number showed us that we were on the right path, as many women were seeking exactly what we were offering completely free of charge and online. We interviewed as many women as possible and, with great difficulty, managed to select ten. After a long struggle, which included directly pressuring their political parties to allocate resources to them, we succeeded in securing some funding for these women, although it still fell far short of what was fair and necessary. Drawing on that experience, we also developed a guide providing step-by-step instructions on how women could pressure their political parties, and on the day of its launch, it was downloaded so many times that it crashed our website.

In October 2020, we gathered online to await the election results. It was a moment of great excitement. Jacielma, a quilombola woman, a descendant of formerly enslaved people who had escaped slavery, from the interior of Pernambuco, who received death threats during her campaign and nevertheless chose to stay in the race, was elected, becoming the first Black quilombola woman elected in the municipality of Orocó. Thais Ferreira, after being completely ignored by her party, which provided her with no campaign resources whatsoever, was also elected. In addition, Ingra, in Rio Grande do Sul, secured a position as an alternate representative, as did the Mandata das Pretas (Black Women's Mandate), a collective candidacy composed of two Black women that, two years later, took a seat on the city council through Giorgia Prates.

From that point onward, my conviction came to rest entirely in the collective action of historically marginalized women: women who work within their communities, neighborhoods, and cities to promote collective well-being, food security, and the struggle for rights. The conviction that guides the work of *A Tenda das Candidatas* today, now led by one of its co-founders, is that these women need to occupy positions of decision-making power; they need to hold the pen in their hands; they need to take power. As Carolina Maria de Jesus wisely put it, Brazil must be governed by someone who has experienced hunger.

And what does this mean? It means that the perspective articulated in the writings of Carolina Maria de Jesus, and later theorized and named by Iris Young, is essential to politics.

The Lived Experience Embodied in the Body of a Black and Marginalized Woman Is Incommunicable.

Therefore, it is not enough to have representatives who claim to defend or represent these individuals; they must actually be there. But how can something of this magnitude be achieved within a structure forged and refined to keep white men in power? How can a political landscape that seemed set in stone be transformed? Once again, collective action emerges as the answer.

A tangible example of this is the emergence of collective candidacies that bring together politically excluded bodies: Black women, trans people, mothers, lesbians. This type of candidacy challenges an extremely personalized and exclusionary political system by asserting: we represent a collective; we are not an individual project of power. Although this may seem like an obvious premise in a democracy, Brazil's fragile and relatively recent democracy is still far from making it a reality. In 2020, collective candidacies began, not without facing countless challenges, to win election and establish collective mandates. This development is highly significant, as it allows people who previously did not feel entitled to occupy these institutional spaces to gain the legitimacy to be there and to participate in the distribution of power. As Robeyoncé Lima, the first travesti co-state legislator elected in Pernambuco, aptly stated, collective mandates are instruments for hacking politics.

The Consolidation of a Social and Political Technology

Following the results of the first election in 2020, *A Tenda das Candidatas* began to organize itself as a collective political strategy structured around three areas of action: the political education of women leaders and human rights defenders; political and legislative advocacy; and the production of research and data aimed at raising awareness and promoting social change. These areas emerged intuitively, in dialogue with practice itself. There was no pre-existing theory or predetermined plan; rather, it was a theory forged through practice. In what follows, I will examine each of these areas in turn and show how, taken together, they constitute a political and social technology oriented toward transforming the *status quo*.

Political Education

Brazil's political-electoral system requires that candidates can only run for office if they are affiliated with a political party. This is where the first obstacle for women in politics lies: political parties in Brazil have historically been built to ensure that white men occupy and retain power. Although women make up a significant portion of party membership, accounting for nearly half of all party affiliates across the political spectrum, this proportion is reflected neither in the number of women candidates nor, even less so, in the number of women elected. Moreover, the circulation of information and informal rules governing political participation is tightly controlled and restricted to those who have long mastered these practices. This means that political education for women candidates does not

begin from the assumption that women are ignorant or unprepared; rather, it recognizes their historical exclusion from access to certain forms of knowledge, most of them informal, that are essential to playing the political-electoral game.

That, however, is not the first barrier faced by women who wish to run for office. We have found that the most profound obstacle lies precisely there: in the desire to run or, better yet, in the very possibility of seeing oneself as a candidate. Many women who are clearly leaders, who mobilize communities, engage in political action, and possess all the qualities necessary to occupy positions of power, often do not perceive themselves in that way. This is because they are embedded in a social and political structure that tells them that such positions belong to men and, more than that, that occupying them may be dangerous for them.

Thus, political education for women candidates does not consist solely of classes on the political-electoral system or on how to run campaigns, although it certainly includes those topics as well. Rather, it is a process that addresses the multiple dimensions that have historically shaped the political exclusion of women in Brazil. For this reason, it extends over more than a year and encompasses areas ranging from organization and financial planning to the construction of self-image, agenda development, and negotiations with political parties to secure funding. In short, it incorporates all the tools we consider necessary for a woman to recognize herself as a candidate, affirm herself as one, and obtain the means to enter that contest and, ultimately, to win.

However, perhaps the greatest benefit of this process is the opportunity to provide political education remotely to women

leaders from across Brazil, thereby enabling the participation of women from every region of the country and, from that foundation, to build a network. Socially, women are encouraged to compete with one another and to believe that there is never enough room for all of them. Yet what the experience of working in networks and collaborating with women from different political parties revealed was that the real contest is not among women, who are already drastically underrepresented in elected political spaces, but with those who are systematically overrepresented within the same system: men, most of them white and from the highest social classes. This may seem like a minor detail, but I believe it is the key to collective action among women: understanding that the way of doing politics that we know today, exclusionary and oppressive, is not the only possible one, and that there are alternatives, distinct from the dominant masculinity that structures these spaces.

This new kind of politics is expressed through the collective and solidaristic action of these leaders in what came to be known as the *A Tenda* Network. It is a form of collaborative political engagement among women leaders and human rights defenders from across Brazil who share the conviction that, for politics as we know it today to change structurally and become more equal and just, a different way of doing politics is needed, one that we call the “politics of the future.” This concept derives from a politics inspired by Afrofuturism, or from the radical idea that Black people will exist in the future and will occupy positions of power and decision-making. It is no coincidence that the visual identity of *A Tenda*, awarded both silver and bronze medals at the *Brasil Design Awards*, was developed from this perspective. The collective action of women united

to build a politics of the future is not only about electing more women, especially Black women, but also about directly influencing the Brazilian political system, which remains deeply unequal and unjust today.

Political and Legislative Advocacy

It is at this point that the second area of action of A Tenda comes into play, one that is fully intertwined with the first: political and legislative advocacy. To understand this, it is necessary to provide some brief context regarding Brazil's electoral system. Brazilian politics, as I have already mentioned, is extremely unequal and exclusionary, and this is reflected in its formal electoral rules as well. For this reason, women's political engagement, since the achievement of women's suffrage, has developed through political and legislative advocacy aimed at applying pressure and opening spaces for women's participation. Women won the right to vote in Brazil only because they organized to pressure legislators, write articles, build national and international alliances, and organize demonstrations around this demand. To this day, that strategy remains remarkably similar.

Women have been able to vote and run for office in Brazil since the promulgation of the Electoral Code of 1932. Nevertheless, more than ninety years later, and despite the progress that has been made, women's participation as political representatives remains far from achieving gender and racial equity. For this reason, and thanks to the tireless efforts of women's movements, Brazil has had a minimum quota of 30 percent women candidates since 1997. However, this law was systematically disregarded by political parties, which only began

complying with the required percentage in 2014, when they faced the risk of having to reduce the number of male candidates. Even then, compliance was far from effective, as many parties resorted to what became known as *laranja* candidacies (candidaturas laranja), that is, women's candidacies registered solely to satisfy the legal quota but that received neither funding nor political support from their parties. In other words, candidates who were not truly candidates.

Throughout these years, we have witnessed electoral reforms almost every two years, along with constant threats of rollbacks to rights that women in politics have already won, including candidate quotas themselves. In this context, A Tenda das Candidatas and its network of women leaders have been organizing since 2021 to resist these setbacks and promote potential advances, as I noted at the beginning of this text. What I wish to emphasize here is that this work is only possible because of collective action through networks, which makes it possible to amplify these agendas at both the national and local levels, in every municipality, community, and state. Political and legislative advocacy depends to a large extent on ensuring that technical briefs, speeches, and articles on these issues circulate and reach civil society. To achieve this, a collective effort to raise public awareness, grounded in data and research, is essential.

Public Awareness and Research Production

It is at this point that the third area becomes intertwined with the other two. In order to engage in political advocacy, reliable data is indispensable, both for informing civil society and for supporting legislators willing to advance and defend

the political rights of women and Black people in the political-electoral arena. It may seem self-evident to say that Brazilian politics is unjust and unrepresentative; one need only look at who occupies positions of political representation. Yet that observation alone is not sufficient to substantiate legislative proposals, mobilize the public, or influence public policy.

This became evident to me when I worked as a researcher on the Elections and Democracy project at the Getulio Vargas Foundation between 2018 and 2020. Part of the research was devoted to demonstrating that public campaign financing was distributed unequally not only in terms of gender but, above all, in racial terms. The findings of this study were used to support the opinion of a justice of the Federal Supreme Court regarding the rule requiring the proportional distribution of electoral resources between Black and white candidates.

With this in mind, *A Tenda das Candidatas* has devoted, and continues to devote, a significant share of its efforts to producing research that provides robust data on gender and racial inequalities in Brazilian politics, so that such evidence can be used in political and legislative advocacy. One example is the study *Combating Gender and Racial Underrepresentation in Politics (2020-2022): The Impact of the A Tenda das Candidatas Project* (Aflalo and Astrolabio, 2023), which drew on data collected from the experiences of 700 women in politics and yielded important findings. One of the most striking results was that nearly 100 percent of the women interviewed reported having experienced political violence.

Another study, this time focused on women who ran for office but were not elected, shows that many of them tend to withdraw from electoral competition after a defeat. Even more

significant is the finding that the training provided by *A Tenda* and its supportive network of women in politics were essential in preventing that withdrawal and in strengthening these women's determination to remain engaged in political competition. In interviews conducted with these women, the results of which were published in my article *Challenging the Status Quo: Feminist Leadership and Political Transformation in Brazil* (Aflalo, 2025), participants emphasized that having the support of other women and understanding that they were not competing against one another was crucial for developing more cooperative ways of doing politics, in contrast to the approach encouraged by their party leaders.

The *A Tenda* Network once again emerges as a central element in this area of work. It is thanks to the coordination of women leaders across the country that our advocacy efforts have achieved greater reach and effectiveness. A clear example of this is the bill establishing Setembro Neon¹. As a significant initiative in political and legislative advocacy, *A Tenda das Candidatas*, through its then co-directors, Laura Astrolabio, who remains in the organization's leadership, and myself, who served in that role until 2024, worked together with Congresswoman Sâmia Bomfim to develop a bill establishing a month dedicated to raising awareness of and combating political violence based on gender and race in Brazil. The bill

¹ Translator's note: *Setembro Neon* ("Neon September") is a campaign created by *A Tenda das Candidatas* in 2023 to raise public awareness of and combat political violence based on gender and race in Brazil. It dedicates the month of September to highlighting the violence and barriers women candidates face within political parties and throughout their electoral campaigns. The original Portuguese name is retained because it is the campaign's official title.

was formally introduced by the congresswoman and is currently moving through the legislative process, having already been approved by the Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CMULHER).

What is even more significant is not merely the real possibility that this bill may become law, but the way it has activated political coordination among the women of the *A Tenda* Network. Indigenous councilwoman Ingrid Sateré-Mawé, who was mentored by *A Tenda* and elected in 2024 in Florianópolis, introduced a bill, based on the legislation mentioned above, establishing Setembro Neon in her municipality. Likewise, Councilwoman Keit Lima, who also participated in *A Tenda's* political education program, advanced a similar initiative in the municipality of São Paulo, the largest city in the country, making direct reference to our proposal.

A Technology for Taking Power

What I seek to show here is that political engagement can take countless forms and can be effective in many different ways. Nevertheless, based on practical experience, I believe that

There is no technology more powerful than the coming together of women who are leaders and recognize themselves as such.

Hacking politics, building coordination at both the national and local levels, and reclaiming a power that was wrested away and monopolized for centuries is only possible through

collective action in networks. Building a network is not a simple task; we learn as we do it. For that reason, the production of materials and guides that document this work is one of the most important legacies we can offer. In addition to the guides and research discussed here, I would also highlight a guide that I developed in partnership with the NGO VoteLGBT, in which I designed a political advocacy strategy for LGBT+ mandates, inspired by years of intuitive practice and by the wish that such a resource had existed when I needed it myself. It did not. For this reason, I believe that these materials, offered free of charge, can enable many leaders, not only in Brazil but throughout Latin America, to appropriate what I consider a cutting-edge political technology for taking power.²

By sharing my journey, from academic research to the co-founding of *A Tenda das Candidatas*, I seek not only to make explicit a profoundly unequal political landscape, but also to contribute to the construction of a roadmap for transforming it. The social technology we have built is the method I propose for doing so:

A web of solidarity that replaces competition; a political experience that informs research and legislation; and the conviction that the struggle for power is ongoing and necessarily involves those who have been historically excluded.

² Other content and materials produced by *A Tenda das Candidatas* can be found at the following link: <https://atendadascandidatas.org/conteudos/>

Documenting this work and making these strategies available is crucial for transforming a local struggle into a broader project of regional transformation. The path toward a just democracy is still being forged, but power will only be effectively reclaimed if we keep this network active, continually expanding the boundaries of politics for all those who possess the perspective and the determination to change the unequal state of affairs.

REFERENCES

- Aflalo, H. M. y Astrolabio, L. (2023). *Combatiendo la subrepresentación de género y raza en la política (2020-2022): el impacto del proyecto A Tenda das Candidatas* [PDF]. Recuperado de https://atendadascandidatas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Versao-Digital_2023.pdf
- Aflalo, H. M. (2025). Challenging the *status quo*: feminist leadership and political transformation in Brazil. *Gender & Development*, 33(2), 379–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2025.2503655>
- Chamber of Deputies of Brazil. (2024). *Bill No. 3397 of 2024. Establishing the National Campaign to Combat Gender- and Race-Based Political Violence Against Women, Known as Setembro Neon* [PL 3397/2024]. Chamber of Deputies of Brazil. <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2456237>

COLECTIVA was printed in Bogotá in October 2026.

The book closes. The crack remains open.



Through the voices of those at its heart, *COLECTIVA* explores feminisms in Latin America and the Caribbean from an antiracist, anticolonial and situated perspective. Its pages weave together reflection and practice around gender and access to power, abortion, migration, masculinities, the defense of territory, economic justice and LGBTIQ+ rights.

To read *COLECTIVA* is to enter an open conversation that offers tools for action and questions capable of unsettling our certainties.

