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Intersectionality at the Centre to Achieve Gender Justice

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Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, from various temporal horizons and diverse coexisting phrases, presents us with a multi-temporality that enters into constellation with each other and with the present, generating a very particular dialectic. The Aymara aphorism states: “*Qhip nayr uñtasis sarnaqapxañani*”, which can be translated as “looking to the past to walk through the present and the future.” She points out that we are in the present; the future is not ahead but behind us, on our backs as a burden, while the past, having already occurred, is in front of us as a guide because we can see what has already happened; the future is always yet to come.

From this perspective, we can say that we have before us the nearly 30 years of Beijing and the past Commissions on the Status of Women. We have in front of us what was done well, what could have been done better, and what did not work; this allows us to establish a dialogue about accountability that involves a critical look at the agenda arising from Beijing.

In Latin America, we have made significant progress in gender equality policies; however, we have an agenda from civil society that was conceived for a progressive context that no longer exists. From the women’s movement, political dialogue spaces are being created to think of new strategies that will allow us to halt attempts to roll back what has been achieved. Currently, we face a context of weakening and dismantling of accountability, where increasing obstacles are put in place for civil society participation, closing civic space, while anti-democratic postulates gain ground and resonate in society.

The popularization of intersectionality as an important approach to achieve equality has brought with it a series of challenges. This approach is fundamental for articulating populations to think about who is included in the formulation of public policies, to recover patterns of invisibility and break with the excluding universality. The current approach to intersectionality distances it from the reason for its creation. Often, intersectionality is presented as a checklist of diversity or as a summation of oppressions, but rarely are reflections generated on how oppressions operate in combination, marking the reality of certain populations. A superficial and functional approach to intersectionality as a framework leads to merely naming diversities but not understanding the problems, much less thinking of solutions. A true intersectional approach must be applied from an ethical standpoint.

Regarding Afro-descendant women, an intersectional approach must start from the recognition that the main feature of racism is that it is institutional and structural; as the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions result in higher rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, diseases, and mortality for certain populations. Racism, being structural, will not end with its legal prohibition; rather, institutions must be created with the objective of eliminating all racist practices that lead to strong democracies, with programs that recognize the effects of the intertwining of patriarchy and racism, proposing responses that will address the causes. When the oppressions of race, class, gender, and gender identity are mentioned, the need to avoid hierarchizing oppressions is understood, to not create a primacy of one oppression over others.

The accountability of intersectionality cannot be understood solely as laws and programs that claim to promote coexistence in tolerance with diversity. The intersectional approach demands an ethical stance, and this relates to how much historically excluded populations are considered when developing programs, reaching agreements, allocating resources, and evaluating the effectiveness of programs. We must generate a culture of accountability that transcends money; of course, we need funding, the allocation of resources is a matter of economic justice, but we require accountability to address the difference between results and impacts. We must hold accountable for the impact of intersectional policies.

During the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, while the central debates about technology focused on building the future by placing girls and women in careers on science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the conversations in parallel events, which had significant civil society participation, always centred on violence in the digital sphere, accessibility especially for women who have been excluded, how the pandemic highlighted the huge gap in access to technology, and the urgent need to create safe spaces. Latin America accounts for more than 60 per cent of killings of environmental defenders; there is the use of technology to intimidate, stalk, and locate them physically, putting their lives at risk, which cannot be overlooked in commitments, protection measures, and accountability. This must be viewed through the lens of intersectionality because these concerns are concentrated among Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural women. Failing to see this, and not seeking to reflect it in agreements, would constitute an act of omission.

In this context, we must keep in mind the new challenges posed by technologies, such as population control through artificial intelligence, where issues like racial profiling are facilitated.

Thirty years after Beijing, feminisms cannot overlook the racial dimension; if they do, they would be accepting and reproducing the infantilization of that system, and this is alienation. From feminisms, we must challenge the asymmetrical notion of a universal subject woman; something cannot be considered universal if it is exclusionary. The only possible universality is where we are all included, addressing the differentiated impacts even when it becomes an uncomfortable conversation, for only then can effective measures be adopted. It is a matter of human rights.

When Afro-descendants speak of the right to dignified existence and the right to voice, we are speaking of the right to exercise rights and citizenship; therefore, it is imperative to discuss access to social justice, gender justice, reproductive justice, economic justice, and racial justice. What is at stake is the right to exercise rights.

Working on an intersectional approach from an ethical standpoint is an invitation to decolonize the human rights agenda; this is the only way to achieve substantive equality.