

The Exclusions of Gender in Neoliberal Policies and Institutionalized Feminisms

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piensan el cambio a partir de la transformación desde estructuras estatales o partidarias.

La especialización académica sobre las luchas políticas indígenas. El acto de especialización produce un efecto de eclipse, porque devalúan los nombres y las significaciones de la dominación y el pensamiento emancipatorio propio.

“1992 ni una hacienda más en el Ecuador”. Esa frase tuvo uno de los efectos más movilizadores y provocó un sismo al interior del sistema político ecuatoriano. Condensaba tiempo y luchas por la recuperación de la tierra y la desarticulación de las haciendas. Esas formas de inteligencia colectiva son las que en la academia se fueron erosionando y quedaron relegadas para dar salida a una serie de codificaciones académicas. ■

In light of the precarious conditions most women continue to face in urban and rural Latin America and increasingly visible and multivocal feminist challenges, what assessment do we draw about the gender justice achievements of institutionalized, “pragmatic” feminism in neoliberal times? This question has preoccupied me for some time.

There is a growing concern among critical feminists in Latin America and elsewhere about the convergence between institutionalized feminism and neoliberal capitalism. Nancy Fraser has recently suggested that there is a “subterranean affinity” between second-wave feminism—firmly rooted in the United States and with a subsequent transnational reach—and neoliberal capitalism (Fraser 2013). Other critics have claimed that the affinities are explicit and structural and involve a liberal variant, rather than a generalized homogenous feminism (Sangster and Luxton 2013; Eisenstein 2010). I have argued for some time that there are distinctly Latin American features of the convergence between pragmatic feminism and neoliberal projects (Schild 2003, 2013). My own position is that while the institutionalized feminist agenda has resulted in some important legal gains for women, it has failed to challenge the increasing class- and race-based divide among women which is a key outcome of capitalism. Furthermore, this pragmatic adaptation and transformation of a feminist justice agenda lies at the heart of the conscription of some contemporary feminist ideals and practices to the service of legitimizing the transition to neoliberal capitalism in the region. With its emancipatory focus on the pursuit of empowerment as autonomy in the market, pragmatic feminism has become a key element in the regulation of women and of gender normalization, and more broadly of

the management of individuals and communities in an exclusionary, dispossessive capitalist economy.

Pragmatic feminism refers to the choice made by some—but not all—in the feminist and women’s movements to work within the project of political democratization. Gender experts from the academy, from the world of nongovernmental organizations and research centers, and from government agencies and ministries have made undeniably significant contributions to policy-related knowledge and practice. It is also clear, however, that they have generated their own exclusions. Hitching pragmatic feminist politics to the broader project of political democratization shaped by local and geopolitical forces, while ignoring its capitalist underpinnings, has come at a cost. This privileging of “democratization” as a political form by some sectors of the feminist movement and their abandonment of the critique of capitalism in favor of a defense of a “politics of the possible” have had a price. Who, for instance, became the interlocutors of UN-based efforts to knit together a transnational agenda of women’s equality premised increasingly on the deployment of gender as a technical concept and framed in the language of liberal human rights? Who are the winners and who the losers of the processes that have institutionalized contemporary feminisms in Latin America, and with what effects?

For the past 25 years, the advancement of some women has been accompanied by the marginalization of others, a trend that is not unique to Latin America. A report drawing up an assessment of gender justice achievements in Britain, for example, asks whether or not feminism has till now been a “middle class story of progress” with “gender justice gains at the top and indifference to the plight of the majority of

women” (Institute for Public Policy Research 2013). Recent capitalist developments in Latin America, especially the increased presence of extractive industries and agribusiness and their devastating effects on rural communities and environments, have broadened the gulf between winners and losers in neoliberal capitalism (Robinson 2008; Olivera 2005; Hernández Castillo 2010a). Increasingly, institutionalized feminist agendas have been incapable of challenging the widening class- and race-based differences among women, which are a key outcome of this “dispossessive” capitalism. Indeed, while feminist institutional inroads have opened up opportunities for advancement for some women, namely those with the proper level of education or professional accreditation, it has also marginalized those who lack resources, often turning them from erstwhile “sisters” into clients.

The trends of the last two or three decades show that women’s entry into the workforce has intensified. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), more than half of women of working age in Latin America are in the labor force, or an estimated 100 million, and a significant percentage, 53.7 percent, has attained ten or more years of formal education, compared with 40.4 percent for men. Women’s labor force participation has increased from 49.2 percent to 52.9 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Tinoco 2014). However, in a context where labor flexibilization predominates as a modality of work in the private sector and increasingly in the public sector, women are the lowest paid, most vulnerable workers. The overwhelming majority of women are employed in precarious, poorly paid jobs, typically with limited contracts or no contracts at all. It bears remembering that those who are out of the formal workforce are not simply unemployed homemakers.

Instead, they are engaged in income generating activities that are not formally registered and that are, therefore, not measured. Increasingly, these include participation in the parallel drug economy, where they typically engage in *narcomenudeo* (small-scale drug dealing). According to a report of the International Drug Policy Consortium, growing numbers of women who are sole income providers, not just for their children but often for elderly relatives, too, engage in the drug economy to either generate or supplement their incomes (Giacomello 2013). Furthermore, household structures have been significantly transformed. Nuclear, male-breadwinner households, never a dominant form to begin with, are now even less common. According to estimates, only one-fifth of households in the region followed this traditional model by the mid-2000s (Gerhard and Staab 2010, 12). Whatever the household form, those women living in low-income areas and toiling in insecure and poorly paid jobs are, in any case, already burdened by the effects on their households and communities of persistently underfunded social services, eroded infrastructure, and precarious work with minimal wages. Recognizing this means coming face to face with the question of the persistent invisibility of women’s care activities. Women’s invisible but critical work—work without which society would not be able to survive and reproduce itself—is being stretched to include those responsibilities that then appear in the ledgers as Latin America’s policy achievements in the areas of poverty and crime prevention.

Women and above all “gender” occupy a central place in Latin American social policy agendas today and in the ostensible gains made in tackling historically intractable problems like poverty and inequality. In fact, women are now visible

as preferential targets of a panoply of social programs, including novel poverty alleviation strategies. These novel social programs have caught the world’s imagination as a Latin American policy success and an exportable good that is promoted by multilateral agencies and governments alike as the current fix for breaking the cycle of poverty, and even that of violence. While it is true that these policies and programs are made possible by the contributions of pragmatic feminists invested in making changes at the institutional level, their success depends on the largely invisible work of women in their capacity as preferential clients, frontline workers, and experts. This success should be taken, then, as a warning about the potential traps for women through their recruitment as “empowered” citizens and as “natural” caregivers for the tasks of lifting households and communities out of poverty, of ensuring the success of future generations, and of underwriting their communities’ right to security (García Castro 2001; Sorj and Gomes 2011; Schild 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

In such contexts, some of us have argued, therefore, that these novel programs premised on emancipating women through institutional means are themselves mechanisms of exclusion (Schild 2013). By now a network of feminist experts, practitioners, and scholars extends nationally and transnationally and includes the multilateral aid agencies and the United Nations. These programs include the much vaunted panoply of conditional cash transfer programs and more recent initiatives linked with crime prevention and the broader projects of rendering societies “secure.” Yet few who celebrate these policies are willing to consider the implications of a politics of the possible in the present context of restructured neoliberal capitalism. The reconfiguration

of the social state during the past 30 years, or its neoliberalization, is the clue for understanding why efforts in different regions of the world to advance women's civil and political rights have made important gains, while those linked to social inclusion through the pursuit of social-economic rights for the majority of women have not. Recent studies have begun to address this, although attention to the restructuring state is scant, much less to the question of the relation between gender politics and state reconfiguration.

Overall poverty levels in Latin America have been reduced significantly—a fall of 15.7 percent of the poverty rate and 8 percent of the indigence rate since 2002, according to the latest ECLAC report—and inequality, as measured by the GINI coefficient, appears to have gone down slightly (ECLAC 2013; World Bank 2014). At the same time, the region remains the most unequal in the world, and levels of violence have increased exponentially, earning Latin America a reputation as the most violent region in the world (United Nations 2013; Arias and Goldstein 2010). Of course, there are important subregional variations in the forms and intensity of violence and in the specific conditions that give rise to them and help perpetuate them. There are also distinctive forms of violence experienced by women, with serious consequences for their well-being (UN Women 2013). Most Latin Americans, or roughly 80 percent, live in urban centers, and an estimated 111 million (out of the 588 urban million) live in poor neighborhoods or shantytowns (UN-Habitat 2012). Latin America “has become the continent in which in most of its countries a significant segment of the population is at once, poor, informal and excluded” (Koonings and Kruijt 2007, 9). Paradoxically, then, as governments and multilateral agencies highlight the social

gains made in places like Brazil, Mexico, or Chile, millions of Latin Americans live in everyday contexts marked by violence, precariousness, and marginalization associated with exclusions based on class, gender, race, age, and sexual identity. Most prominent today is the overt use of state violence to control the marginalizations and exclusions generated by globalized economies and the effects of crisis-driven neoliberalism. What is noteworthy is that—as justified in the name of equality and inclusion—women are increasingly recruited at the local level to manage insecurity and prevent crime (Sorj and Gomes 2011; Schild 2014b). Moreover, although males constitute the great majority of those in prison throughout the region, women are the fastest growing incarcerated group, among them single mothers. The proportion of women among those incarcerated for drug crimes is very high throughout the region, ranging, for example, from 75 to 80 percent in Ecuador, 70 percent in Argentina and Venezuela, and 89 percent in Nicaragua (International Centre for Prison Studies 2014). In Mexico, where the number of women in prisons increased by nearly 20 percent between 2000 and 2010, compared with a 5 percent increase in the male prison population, between 30 and 60 percent of these women are incarcerated for drug crimes (Hernández Castillo 2010b, 11). This figure rises to 75 to 80 percent in the U.S. border region (Parkinson 2013). Women who end up behind bars are usually there because of their participation in *narcomenudeo*. Typically, most of them are poor, many of them are single mothers, and in areas with significant indigenous and Afro populations many also belong to these marginalized groups.

In summary, violent, arbitrary, and also illegal forms of neoliberal government of marginality coexist with novel antipoverty

programs and a modest expansion of social programs. The disciplining and self-disciplining of the market is supplemented with the actions of an “enabling” or “investing” state that relies on women's labor and “caring” capacities for the regulation of social insecurity, including crime prevention, and uses punitive regulation for those whose lives are rendered precarious, and this includes not only that segment of the working class that is a marginalized (mostly male) “surplus population” but also those many others whose lives are rendered vulnerable.

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