Dissidence and Communitarian Feminism

Julieta Paredes Carvajal | Comunidad Mujeres Creando Comunidad [Community of Women Creating Community] – Asambleas del Feminismo Comunitario [Assemblies of Communitarian Feminism], Bolivia

Inspired in a joint action with Adriana Guzmán Arroyo – Communitarian Feminist

We, Communitarian Feminists, speak from Bolivia, a territory undergoing a historic process of change. This process is ours. Indigenous men and women gave birth to it and it represents, today, our main source of hope. This piece of territory we currently call Bolivia is the subject of texts which have previously glided from the beautiful lips of each one of my sisters, flowing from this copious orality we inherited from our grandmothers. Today, they are words written in a journal.

We, Communitarian Feminists, continue raising our left fists because the system has not been defeated, because the system continues to hurt our bodies, and the bodies of our brothers and nature. This system of oppressions has been permanently recycled since it was first erected, and it is not a natural system, it was historically constructed and it is bound to fall by the historic revolutionary action of the people. That is why we do not let our left fists fall. That is why, among those of us who believe in Utopia, we will continue to communicate in this way—it is a struggle that continues striding forward swinging back and forth between a passionate love for utopia.
and the stubbornness of our struggles to attain it.

The System is Patriarchal

Colonialism is only one of the instruments of patriarchy, as are slavery, liberalism, and neoliberalism. In our view, the system of death denominated patriarchy consists not only in the oppression of women at the hands of men—that would be too simple, not to say a simplification. Summing up, what we would like to say is that patriarchy, for communitarian feminists, is the system of ALL oppressions that oppresses everything that lives on the planet and thus, all humanity (men, women, and intersexual persons) as well as nature.

Why do we define the system as a patriarchy and not as something else?
Because these different oppressions unfold within a model, what we could call a patriarchal *patrix*, characterized by its oppression of women. This oppressive system constitutes the basis upon which oppressive relations of gender, class, race, culture etc. are established. This is the way in which we, communitarian feminists, represent, update, and deepen the meaning of patriarchy.

Since 1492, the glance towards our continent has been a colonial one; we are defined according to Western parameters. How “civilized,” “developed,” and “beautiful” are we? Our peoples have existed since before 1492, and we arrange our experience of time from the standpoint of a parallel present and not a subordinated present. The parallel experience of time allows us, as feminists, to assemble our own history and to position ourselves in relation to colonial domination and racism in order to construct our *political* identity.

Feminism is Disobedient

It is impossible for those of us who live in the city of La Paz to elude our bodies as feminist women. This history of contemporary Latin America, which surrounds us, once sought to evade what we are and what we have constructed, but our bodies have historically insisted. The first uprising organized against monarchy was not the French Revolution of 1789. It erupted in 1781 in La Paz, where our grandmothers Gregoria Apaza and Bartolina Sisa, fought side by side with our grandfathers Tupac Katari and Tupac Amaru. They were in charge of taking political, economic, and logistical decisions, as well as having military responsibilities. We as women have always participated in popular struggles, although we have remained mostly unseen.

We have traveled with our hopes tied up in a bundle through roads banned to women, and we have occupied spaces destined for “respectable people” (as if there were people unworthy of respect). We have transited through exclusive spaces without having been invited, but with the conviction that all the roads and spaces that the Pachamama opened up on her skin are part of the earth, for all of us, her daughters and sons to traverse through freely, without borders that
censure or discriminate us, or borders that detain, incarcerate, and deport us.

Gender

The communitarian feminism of the Mujeres Creando Comunidad [Women Creating Community] and of the Asambleas del Feminismo Comunitario [Assemblies of Communitarian Feminism] is a space to render our Utopias a reality in the here and now. Disillusioned by promises of a promised land, we do not believe in proposals that do not start from the premise of building a reality in the present; we only believe in the proposals of people who put their body on the line every day to struggle for their thoughts and dreams.

It is from this starting point that we position ourselves before those who depoliticize the concept of gender, a concept that feminism constructed in order to denounce a relationship of power between men and women. Gender is not only a descriptive, but also a performative category; its conceptual force lies in the denunciation of the oppressive existence within which women’s bodies live. The de-politicization of gender originated in the clear needs of neoliberal patriarchy: to dilute the anti-dictatorial political accumulation of Latin American feminist women.

We Theorize on the Basis of our Bodies

To name our collective practice is indispensable. Even if the experience of struggle passes through each woman’s individual body, it is also true that there is a palpable collective feeling, living, and dreaming; a social movement as a body in which we take turns fulfilling different roles so as not to repeat the caudillista vices of popular movements. Here some of us direct and other are directed, some think and others do. We do not want obedient bodies.

We do not tell stories, nor do we bear witness. We name what we do, and that, for us, is to theorize; there is no practice without theory, but there are theories without practice. We are the tongue that enunciates the thought that moves the body towards its wishes and pleasures.

Work Does Not Guarantee Life

This patriarchal system abuses our bodies, only to satisfy the necrophiliac pleasure of accumulating little scraps of paper called money. There is no sense in neoliberal capitalism’s current accumulation, which lashes out at bodies with 12 and even 16-hour work days. The permanent threat of dismissal keeps bodies continuously hanging from a thread, tugged and pulled bodies with few spaces available for orgasm, love, creativity, happiness. In what time are we to love? And capitalist marketing responds: use Viagra or hormones and bombards you with offers of 7 orgasms in 5 minutes stamped on the local news.
As workers—all of us women are bodies that work—we have always worked and we have also fallen in love during working hours. It is paradoxical and ironic that these same bodies, born for happiness and pleasure, at this stage of humankind’s history of struggle, are forced to implore for an enslaving job, to beg patriarchy to bind them with the chain of super-exploitation driven by the fear of being unemployed bodies and losing the credit card.

**Patriarchy Recycles Itself**

Throughout history, we see how some oppressed men achieve improvements in their conditions and in their oppressive situations, such as the slaves or the feudal serfs. We also see how some colonies achieve their freedom and independence. The proletarians of the large companies in developed countries do not live and work in the same conditions as the proletarians in so-called third world countries. These are some of the examples of the ways in which men have sought to improve the conditions of the their lives. But we can also see a common thread running through all these cases, and it is that women continue to be subordinated as slaves, as feudal serfs, as proletarians of the proletarians, as the colonized Indians of the indigenous people. Some men have rights, but there a few women who enjoy them, even today, in the early twenty-first century, in the year 2013.

Patriarchy recycles itself and feeds on the social and revolutionary changes of this same humanity. It hones its tentacles, corrects its brutal forms of operating, and re-launches its forms of oppression as new instruments—ever more subtle, difficult to detect, and respond to. For example, the so-called empowerment of women, part of a larger category of discourses that tend to construct theories, publish reports, and formulate arguments such as those drafted in the government reports for CEDAW, which tend to demonstrate that women’s conditions “improve” on a yearly basis. This technical/theoretical apparatus (CEDAW) has deployed communicational strategies in which large sums of money, partly from international cooperation and partly from public funds, have been invested to create a perception and a discourse of improvements in the lives of women. Thanks to these “advances” we should be superwomen: independent, liberated, self-assured etc.

From our perspective, all of these discourses are in reality nothing more than siren songs destined to occlude that it is us women who are called forth—the DUTY TO BE FEMINIST (again)—to solve economic crises, recessions and all the other ways in which capitalism names its troubles. Again, we bear the weight of resolving these conflicts: those of us who have been incorporated in the job market in unequal conditions, those of us who save the economy from its different crises, and sustain the survival of life, of people’s and family’s lives as much as the life of our planet.

**The Processes Belongs to the People, Not the Caudillos**
We, Communitarian Feminists, wager on this process of change in Bolivia, but it is important that we understand that revolutionary processes are made by the people. There are emblematic figures, but they are not the process. Of course it is significant and highly symbolic to see an Aymara brother, Evo Morales, as the president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, but his figure’s strength is based on the strength of our people. Evo is not only an indigenous person; Evo is Evo because he is an indigenous person who is part of this Bolivian process.

Making Utopias Operative

They ask us, as some sort of taunt, why we believe in this process of change. In the decolonization of the State, why have no measures and legal dispositions been enacted tending towards a dismantling of patriarchy [despatriarcalización]? What are the difficulties or obstacles impeding the enactment of public policies and legal dispositions to dismantle the patriarchal and colonial character of the State?

State of Power or State of Society

The State as we understand it from the standpoint of communitarian feminism, is a social construct that seeks to materialize itself historically on the basis of the fear and vulnerability of humanity. Through loneliness and fear, feelings produced by the defeat of the earliest community, the State is constructed day in and day out. On the basis of this vulnerability, the sectors of humanity who crave privileges have constructed the State on the foundations of people’s minds, a State that is supposedly neutral and protects all women and men. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The State is a patriarchal instrument, which due to its patriarchal articulation, takes on additional characteristics which are much more predatory of women, especially our indigenous grandmothers. This is the State that we denominate State of Power.

What I gather from different conceptions of the State is that the State is an entity, an institution established in the collective imagination of society, created by society itself, when it has reached a point in which the contradictions between people become irresolvable, as a way of guaranteeing the order of privilege in a society that has historically ruptured the reciprocity, equilibrium and equality of community.

I would add that this constructed entity is established to better administer the oppression of women, as a model to oppress the rest of humanity—different peoples, and society—throughout history.

Are we to trust that the restoration of the rights of our bodies as women in a community will be
undertaken by or from the State? Absolutely not! That is why we have proposed in many different forums that the Plurinational State is but a Transitory State of Power, which has to be followed by a Communitarian State of Society, or what we call, the Community of Communities.

Notwithstanding this, it is also necessary that we assign tasks to this State of Transition to Utopias, and it is here that we inscribe this process aiming to dismantle patriarchy [proceso despatriarcalizador]. We have already contributed to this process with the PNIO (National Plan for Equal Opportunities), in which we have proposed concrete plans backed by a coherent conceptual framework. Within the Transitory State of Power, proposals are the most important element, as well as having people in government who listen to them, and hopefully support them, but at the very least, don’t disrupt them, so that it is we, the people, who are empowered to shape reality. This is the current struggle of Communitarian Feminism in the process of change unfolding in Bolivia.

*Translated by Miguel Winograd*

**Julia Paredes Carvajal** was born in La Paz, Bolivia, 50 years ago. She is an urban Aymara woman, daughter of Cruz, granddaughter of Natividad, sister of Enriqueta, aunt of Danielita and Juan Pablo, and co-mother of Julia and Diana. She writes poetry, is a song-writer, author, graffiti-artist and fighter against dictatorship since the days of her youth in the university left, and also for the last 23 years, a feminist. She was co-founder of Mujeres Creando [Women Creating] and, after the division of that emblematic Bolivian group, she is part of the communitarian structure of the collective, in what today is called comunidad Mujeres Creando comunidad [community of Women Creating community]. Together with her comrades in the Asamblea de Feminismo Comunitario [Assembly of Communitarian Feminism], and in the context of the revolutionary transformation of Bolivia, they created a current of thought and action called Communitarian Feminism, which currently brings together, on the basis of their own experience, other women throughout the continent. Contact: asambleafeminista@gmail.com

**Notes**

1 This text was originally published in *spanish* in the "Dissidence" issue of *e-misférica*. For this issue on the "Decolonial Gesture", we have decided to translate it into English and Portuguese.