

# CRITICAL PROPOSALS IN SOCIAL WORK



PROPUESTAS  
CRÍTICAS  
EN TRABAJO SOCIAL

2



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## Editorial

### Feminisms, intersectional perspectives and social intervention

We live in convulsive, challenging times, of fundamental disputes regarding the horizons of meaning and the conditions to develop fully and with dignity. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown, once again, how inequalities and oppressions are crudely expressed, together with the accumulation and enrichment of a few social sectors.

With regard to the struggles for the recognition of differences and diversities in today's societies, we find a complex and contradictory panorama. On the one hand, it is possible to identify advances in public policies and legislation aimed at eliminating inequalities and promoting the human rights of traditionally marginalized social sectors. On the other hand, we simultaneously identify obstacles, stagnation, threats and setbacks in relation to historical demands of women, migratory rights and LGBTI+ rights, among others, in the context of a violent resurgence of conservative discourses and practices linked to a revitalization of the conservative right and certain religious groups.

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At the same time, we are witnessing new forms of organization, agency and resistance of various subalternized collectives. Particularly in Chile, and after the social revolt of October 2019, the plebiscite to decide the constitutional change, and the election of constituents and the formation of the Constitutional Convention itself, have been marked by a transversal demand to value differences, dismantle the mechanisms that generate inequalities, redistribute power and build forms of government that challenge traditional politics and its exclusive and exclusionary configuration: exclusive of the political-economic elite, and exclusive of traditionally marginalized sectors such as women, youth and children, older adults, sexual dissidents, people with disabilities and indigenous peoples. The configuration of the Constitutional Convention - the first gender-parity convention in the world, with seats reserved for representatives of native peoples, and finally, presided over by a Mapuche woman - suggests that something very profound is happening.

These transformations are not spontaneous, but the result of years of feminist, indigenist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, non-hetero(cis)normative struggles, among others, which



have been challenging and permeating discourses, practices and “common sense”. In May 2018, these struggles came to crystallize in a major historical milestone for the feminist and dissidence movement, enabling some visibility, recognition and questioning of the articulation of structural inequalities.

Precisely in the R&D Cluster “Diversity and Gender: Intersectional Feminist Approaches” of the University of Chile, we want to put into practice a critical view that invites us to be suspicious of the uses of certain concepts that have contributed to their depoliticization, putting them at the service of a liberal, hierarchical and meritocratic tolerance. That is why we always wonder what is being understood by notions such as “diversity”, “minorities”, “gender”, “equality” and “freedom” when they are invoked in specific contexts and situations for specific purposes. In turn, we want to contribute to the deconstruction of dichotomous, essentialist and homogenizing thinking in order to venture to participate in the construction of new forms of recognition/redistribution. Intersectional and feminist approaches propose other ways of considering the processes of subjectivation and construction of identities. In turn, they invite us to rethink social struggles, solidarities, alliances and political coalitions, in order to build social sciences committed to transformations and social justice.

Intersectional feminist approaches allow us to visualize social inequalities and the articulation between devices and structures of oppression and power in their complexity, urging us to avoid reductionist and unidimensional views that focus solely on the effects of patriarchy, capitalism or colonialism as independent structures of domination, or that focus on a single axis of social differentiation such as gender, class, “race”, ethnicity, sexuality, functional diversity, nationality, religion, among others. A key challenge of intersectional perspectives “is to recognize the articulation of these power structures, avoiding treating them as ahistorical and pre-existing, with the aim of constantly updating the question about the modes and processes of their articulation, and the situated effects as social materialization of relations, subjectivities and experiences of privilege, domination, exclusion and inclusion” (Troncoso et al., 2019: 5).

Therefore, we have devoted this second issue of our journal to addressing discussions on feminisms and intersectional perspectives and their link with the processes of social intervention, with the purpose of translating feminist values into ways of thinking and orienting intervention and public policies, in addition to the ways of understanding and addressing intersectionally (not as the sum of aggregate attributes) the social phenomena that constitute the “object” of public intervention and professional action. In

this issue you will find analyses on the dynamics of power and relations of privilege/oppression, inclusion/exclusion, power/resistance in force and reified by systems of public intervention, reflections on collective actions, alliances and feminist social movements that day by day forge counter-hegemonic understandings in the face of sexism, heteronormativity, classism, adultcentrism, racism, among others, and their effects on the configuration of life in these times of transformation that we live in. These issues are central to debates in the social sciences today, and especially for Social Work, which, as indicated by its international definitions, is a profession and discipline based on a critical consciousness that is expressed in reflection on the structural sources of oppression and/or privilege - the fruit of race, class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation - and in the development of emancipatory interventions for the liberation of people (FITS, 2014).

Following this critical impulse, we open the ARTICLES section with two papers that offer a conceptual mapping of feminist and intersectional perspectives. First, the article by **Javiera Cubillos and Carlo Zarallo**, entitled “*Feminist counterpoints in the ethical debate and its possibilities for Social Work*”, begins by questioning the confinement of feminism - as a critical perspective - in the traditional intellectual developments of social work. From this premise, they review the proposals of feminist ethics, raise criticisms of deontological ethics, and propose, from there, a situated ethics that puts in tension the professional interventions of social workers and that questions the dichotomies inherited from modern/colonial thought -including the dichotomy “who intervenes”/“who is intervened”. This is followed by the work of **Paulina de los Reyes**, who analyzes the operations of power in the context of the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. From an intersectional perspective, and making a genealogy of the notion of intersectionality, the author argues that these perspectives allow us not only to understand the impact of health policies on the structural inequalities that shape the social order, but also to identify the ways in which this order can be transgressed, contested and negotiated in the midst of the crisis. Her article provides us with important clues to understand and situate the intervention that thousands of professionals are carrying out in diverse political-institutional frameworks in times of pandemic, from feminist reflections that place the notion of intersectional resistances at the center.

Bringing into play these feminist contributions and recovering contributions from decolonial thought to analyze the disputes over the decriminalization of abortion in Argen-

tina, **María Eugenia Hermida** presents “*Pregnancy Interruption, Coloniality and Patriarchy*”. Here the author hypothesizes that the expropriation of the ability to decide on pregnancy is configured as one of the central devices for the establishment and reproduction of racially structured patriarchal capitalism. Based on these analyses, the text offers interesting contributions to social work debates and interventions. Also exploring from feminist perspectives, in this case, the notion of “maternity”, **Karina Guerra and Rocío Gallardo** in their article “*Transgressive maternities: political-affective resignifications of women activists in post-dictatorship Chile*”, propose a sharp analysis of memory practices from women’s activism that allows for complexifying the understanding of historically subalternized political agencies - the political agency constructed from an androcentric logic - and thus rethinking motherhood in complex and dynamic socio-political contexts, highlighting its possibilities of agency in a context of permanent vindication of essentialist readings.

Contributing to a critical understanding of the shaping of subjectivities in the context of the dynamics of integration/exclusion, and questioning the supposedly favorable character of the policies of social, educational and labor inclusion of young children of immigrants, **Josselyn Urdiales and Rosa Lázaro’s** article “*Labor and educational trajectories of racialized youth in Catalonia. Reflections from an intersectional perspective*” analyzes the restrictions that class, gender and origin have on the promotion of young professionals in an increasingly competitive and precarious labor market that punishes difference and reinforces oppression. Her work questions public policies aimed at youth in terms of labor inclusion and discusses their contributions in terms of intervention. In the same line of critical analysis of public intervention, in this case directed to LGTB+ people, the work of **Caterine Galaz and Lelya Troncoso** “*Possibilities and limits of public intervention aimed at LGTB+ people in Chile*”, shows their reactive character, where binary and hetero-cis-normative logics are still reproduced, which are manifested in the conceptions of “sexual diversity” present in the intervention with these groups. These conceptions, the authors warn, could conceal new inequalities and reify new positions of subordination of non-normative sexualities; a key issue to consider in the debates of social work committed to these struggles. Our articles section closes with the work of **Ana Marcela Bueno, Mari-bel Florián and Diana Chinchilla**, who in their paper “*Feminist reflections on social work intervention with women who experience violence in Bogotá*”, emphasize the analysis of the perspectives underlying public intervention in this area. They propose

an understanding of violence against women from a feminist perspective that highlights the effects of patriarchy on feminized bodies, allowing social workers to observe their own intervention and visualize challenges in this field of professional practice.

In our TRANSLATIONS section we present a classic text of post-structural feminist analysis of public policy. It is with great joy that we share in this issue **Carol Bacchi's** work, "*Introducing the 'What's the Problem Represented to be?'*" originally published in 2012 in the book "*Engaging with Carol Bacchi: Strategic Interventions and Exchanges*" edited by A. Bletsas and C. Beasley and published by University of Adelaide Press. This material will undoubtedly be a contribution for those who are dedicated to the analysis of the discourses that underlie - more or less explicitly - the design of public policies and social interventions, their definitions, methodologies and instruments, and that reinforce the oppressive nature of the sexist, cisheteronormative, patriarchal, empowering, ageist and racist social order, among others.

**Catalina Fernandez** contributes in this issue a comprehensive and thought-provoking review of the book "*Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*" by trans activist and lawyer Dean Spade. It could not be more pertinent to the discussions that underlie the work previously presented. It analyzes the trans movement and its political-legal struggles, putting key questions at the center of the discussion: what do we want to be part of, and assimilate into, the neoliberal model? The tensions and debates regarding the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and power/resistance are strongly present in this work, which are extremely relevant considering the role that social movements play today in the construction of the social order that we long for and that is manifested in - although not only there - the constituent process that is taking place in Chile. This is precisely the call for attention that Spade makes: we cannot rest on legal change, we need to "articulate new tools to dream ways of life that allow us to coexist in freedom, especially for those who have been vulnerable, marginalized and criminalized by the exercise of power," as Catalina reflects.

Finally, in our INTERVIEW section, we share conversations with two great figures of feminist and intersectional struggles: Natalia Corrales Cordero, social worker, candidate to the constituent convention and Chilean feminist union leader; who shares her analysis of the current political situation in a story that generously articulates her private and public, personal and professional, academic and activist trajectory. In the same vein, and sharing her knowledge, experiences and insights on intersectional proposals in academia and social intervention, Marisela Montenegro challenges us to think



about how our own interventions can reproduce relations of oppression, highlighting the importance of maintaining critical attention in our own understandings and daily approaches.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and we are deeply grateful to those who collaborated with us and participated in its construction. As a whole, this issue speaks to us of the importance of generating alliances between the academy and different social collectives that are not neutral or innocent, but strategic and cooperative, and that seek social transformations that have a positive impact on collective life. As Butler points out, thinking of these alliances enables us to have a “plural and performative right to appearance, a right that affirms and installs the body in the middle of the political field, and that, sheltering in its expressive and signifying function, claim for the body economic, social and political conditions that make life more dignified, more livable, so that it is no longer affected by the imposed precarious forms” (Butler, 2017: 13).

**Gianinna Muñoz Arce**

Editor-in-Chief

Propuestas Críticas en Trabajo Social  
*Critical Proposals in Social Work*



**Caterine Galaz Valderrama**

**Lelya Troncoso Pérez**

Guest Editors

Diversity and Gender:  
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ARTICLE

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## Feminist counterpoints in the ethical debate and its possibilities for social work

### Contrapuntos feministas en el debate ético y sus posibilidades para el Trabajo Social

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#### Abstract

Since Lena Dominelli and Eileen McLeod published the book *Feminist Social Work* (1999), the question of the confinement of feminism - as a critical perspective - to the professional practice of social work has opened the door for professional reflection. This discussion is still in the process of exploration and develo-

**Keywords:**  
feminist ethics;  
situated ethics;  
deontological  
ethics; social  
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intervention

ment. The intention of this article is to explore the theoretical reflections of the so-called feminist ethics and some of the contributions for the practice of social work. Specifically, we propose to address three critiques from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories, which derive from three proposals that underpin a "situated ethics". Based on the aspects addressed, we propose some reflections on how we could approach social workers' interventions to conceive emancipating professional and disciplinary practices, which allow us to question the dichotomies that have characterized modern thought, including the dichotomy "who intervenes"/"who is intervened".

## Resumen

Desde que Lena Dominelli y Eileen McLeod publicaron el libro *Trabajo social feminista* (1999), se abre una puerta de reflexión disciplinar que cuestiona el confinamiento del feminismo - como perspectiva crítica - de la práctica profesional del trabajo social. Dicha discusión aún se encuentra en proceso de exploración y desarrollo. En este contexto, la intención del artículo es explorar en las reflexiones teóricas de la llamada ética feminista y algunas de sus contribuciones al ejercicio de la profesión. Específicamente, nos proponemos abordar tres críticas desde la teoría feminista a las teorías éticas deontológicas, las que derivan en tres propuestas para avanzar en una ética situada. A partir de los aspectos abordados proponemos algunas reflexiones sobre cómo podríamos tensionar la práctica de trabajadoras/es sociales, en miras a concebir prácticas profesionales y disciplinares emancipadoras, que nos permitan cuestionar las dicotomías que han caracterizado el pensamiento moderno, incluida la dicotomía "interventor/a-intervenida/o".

**Palabras clave:**  
 ética feminista;  
 ética situada;  
 ética deontológica;  
 justicia social;  
 intervención social



## Introduction

*“A feminist ethic is, obviously, something different from an ethic for women. Much less does it occur to us the nonsense of thinking that a feminist ethic is one whose statements would be an expression of feminine values. While one can speak of feminine values in a sociological sense, it would be completely meaningless to speak of feminine values in an ethical sense”*

(C. Amorós)

The disciplinary discussion on the confinement of feminism - as a critical perspective - in different areas of social life, and particularly in the professional practice of social work, is still ongoing and is still in the process of exploration and development. Feminist interpellations within the discipline are diverse, and there is interest in situating the conceptual apparatus developed by feminist theory<sup>2</sup> in the debate around professional practice, with the intention of nurturing the praxis of social work (Agrela and Morales, 2018; Dominelli, 2002; Dominelli and McLeod, 1999; Fernández-Montaña, 2015; Oliveira and de Almeida, 2015).

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In this line, we particularly intend to reflect on the contributions from feminist ethics, with the purpose of questioning the applied ethics with which we proceed in our professional and research work. Specifically, we address three critiques from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories<sup>3</sup> - considered hegemonic ethical referents in the “West” -, which will derive from the commitment to a situated ethics, which we hope to link with some reflections on how we could approach the practice of social workers, in order to conceive emancipatory professional and disciplinary practices (Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019).

More than presenting a conceptual device that allows us to nurture the understanding of the contexts and social subjects with whom we work, we would like to venture into outlining reflections of an ethical nature that allow us to approach the doing, to make decisions that are directed towards fair actions and the promotion of social justice, given the centrality of the latter in the Codes of Ethics of the profession.

<sup>2</sup>We talk in the singular, of feminist theory, only to facilitate the reading. In doing so, we do not wish to ignore the diversity of theoretical currents and political actions within feminism.

<sup>3</sup>We will mainly present criticisms from feminist theorists of three great referents of deontological ethics: Immanuel Kant (1994), John Rawls (1971) and Jürgen Habermas (1994).

We understand that social intervention - as a complex, constructed and situated process (Muñoz-Arce, 2018) -, demands from us an attentive and critical look in order to make the best possible decisions in light of social justice, where many times universalist/standardized prescriptions and patterns of action are insufficient. In view of this, feminist ethics can provide us with interesting clues to advance in this direction. Although professional actions are circumscribed in certain institutions and/or social programs, often operating under centralized and homogenized designs, we are called to flexibilize, dialogue and assume a critical role in the contexts in which we are inserted.

With these purposes in mind, the article is structured in three sections. The first presents the main criticisms from feminist theory of deontological theories. The second section presents some of the proposals that allow us to outline a feminist ethics, understood as a situated ethics. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the usefulness of the contributions of feminist ethics to social work.

## **Feminist critiques of deontological ethics**

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Feminist criticisms of deontological ethics are triggered by the postulates of psychologist Carol Gilligan (1985) on the ethics of care, who questions Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) proposal regarding the model based on stages of development of moral conscience. Gilligan discusses formalism, cognitivism and the pretensions of the universality of Kantian theories, questioning the separation between form and content in the evaluation of moral judgment<sup>4</sup>, given the difficulties women have in accounting for their judgments and their own sense of "I" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 39).

Based on Kohlberg's assertions that women reach a lower stage of development than men, Gilligan compares the experience of women with the Kohlbergian model, in order to show that the exclusion of women and their experiences in the main evolutionary theories of psychology, generated models and hypotheses that were neither universal nor neutral. The author questioned the ideals of an "autonomous self" (presupposed in Kohlberg's model), in light of the experiences of women and children, who tended toward another type of moral reasoning: more contextual and based on relations of

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<sup>4</sup>We talk in the singular, of feminist theory, only to facilitate the reading. In doing so, we do not wish to ignore the diversity of theoretical currents and political actions within feminism.



solidarity, what Gilligan calls the ethics of care. With this, the author also proposes to listen to the voice of different subjects who are excluded from studies such as those of Kohlberg.

What Kohlberg ignored is that subjects are not detached (“autonomous self”), but rather - as Gilligan argues - embedded in networks of interdependence, have ties that bind them together, that shape their moral needs, their identity and their conceptions of the good life (“embodied self”). This poses a challenge to universalist philosophies in terms of how to sustain the centrality of justice and care in people’s lives; and how to broaden the scope of morality to include considerations derived from “care”, without ignoring moral universalism (Benhabib, 1992; 2006).

The ethics of care has raised a gender subtext, although Gilligan does not integrate this perspective of analysis into her study (Benhabib, 1992). As Seyla Benhabib (1992) argues, Gilligan - drawing on the postulates of Nancy Chodorow (1999) - proposes that the psychosocial development of girls and boys results in certain personality patterns among adults of the species. Boys - given their socialization - would have a more rigid sense of the limits of the “I”; girls, on the other hand, would be more predisposed to show feelings of empathy and sympathy in relation to others, since the boundaries between their “I” and the others would be more fluid. Thus, the author concludes that the results of Kohlberg’s study - in which women did not reach post-conventional stages - are due to the limitations of the instrument used and not, as the author believed, to a kind of “moral inferiority (or immaturity)” of women. This happens to the extent that any ethical consideration of the values on which women would configure their “moral self” is excluded.

Despite the criticisms of Gilligan’s postulates<sup>5</sup>, her contributions have opened ways to destabilize the postulates that aspire to universality and have inspired different authors to continue the debate on feminist ethics (Benhabib, 1992; 2006). Given the importance of this discussion, in the following sections we will develop in greater detail the main criticisms and some proposals emanating from feminist reflections on the ethics of justice<sup>6</sup>. Among the main criticisms are: i) Criticism of the *normative universality*

<sup>5</sup> Criticism of Gilligan’s work has come from both feminist theorists and justice theorists. Feminist critics point out that her study seems to infer that behavior according to gender is biologically determined, falling into essentialist postulates. Likewise, it is believed that the author has forgotten the consideration of historicity in the results of her work and the historical determinants of the differences between women (Benhabib, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> The ethics of justice are recognized as deontological ethics insofar as they are integrally linked to a Kantian universal “duty”. Rawls himself in his theory of justice points out: “the principles of justice are, moreover, categorical imperatives in the Kantian sense ... a principle of conduct that applies to a person by virtue of his nature as a free, equal, and rational being. The validity of the principle does not presuppose that one has a particular desire or end” (Rawls, 1971, p. 253). Under the Kantian influence, Rawls designs a theory of justice whose maximum claim is to be impartial.

and impartiality defended by such ethical theories; ii) Criticism of the dichotomies that such theories presuppose and reinforce, among them *the divorce between the public and private spheres*, and the *supposed confrontation between principles of good life and principles of justice*; and iii) Questioning of *the presupposition of an autonomous moral subject*.

### ***Problematic: normative universality and impartiality***

For feminism, normative universalism with deontological roots, inherited from Enlightenment thought, is problematic. From this perspective, normative universality - profiled as the north of the moral project of modernity - constitutes one of the most important critiques of contemporary ethical and political theories. The conceptions of *universality and impartiality* recognize concrete relations of domination that remain hidden, including those of gender. The latter privilege the figure of the autonomous adult male (stripped of his interpersonal relationships), which necessarily excludes women and other subjects for not complying with the parameter: a masculine subject, assumed as endowed with reason; a subject defined in partial terms that is understood as representative of the human (Benhabib, 1987; 2006; Fraser, 1997).

For Esperanza Guisán (1988), Kantian ethics - which drives and gives rise to the debate on the ethics of justice - is presumably masculine in comparison with the proposals of other philosophers. Kant assumes the roles socioculturally attributed to women and men in an uncritical way, understanding the masculine as necessarily linked to the idea of abstract rationality ("the universal") and the feminine to the realm of feelings and the concrete world ("the particular")<sup>7</sup>. The unilateral and partial formulation of deontological ethics is rightly noted and criticized.

The bet on a universal-abstract individual defines the human being necessarily as male, and not only as male, but more often than not as Western (or Westernized), white-mestizo, heterosexual and ascribed to a certain social class, excluding anyone who escapes this canon (Brah, 2011; Fraser, 2006; Young, 1987). Universalism (or claims of universality), then, would implicitly establish the male norm under the veil of impartiality<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the universal-particular duality, Kant does not consider that women are capable of universality, attributing to them a "beautiful intelligence" (whose object is feeling) as opposed to the "deep intelligence" of men (whose object is abstract speculation). "That is why the education of women will not consist of reasoning but of the cultivation of sensitivity and moral sentiments" (Kant, 1997, p. 148). Thus, having denied them the possibility of access to principles, nature has endowed women "with a tender heart" (Guisán, 1988, p. 149).

<sup>8</sup> This can be linked to the so-called veil of ignorance, a concept used by John Rawls to arrive at the two principles of justice. This perspective requires that all participants in the agreement abstract from their actual situation in society and adopt an original position, where there is no prior knowledge of particular persons or interests.



Such abstraction evades the recognition of the concrete moral subject, in all its particularity, context and history, exerting a negative and destructive effect on a highly differentiated world.

Faced with this, feminism has taken on the task of showing that, in a patriarchal society such as ours, the male subject assumed as universal is the constituent subject of ethical reflection and practice, which must be destabilized because it does not represent human diversity and excludes the plurality of women from this imaginary. The ideals of universality rather than integrating have marginalized, since abstracting the subjects from their particularities has implied leaving “in parenthesis” the social inequalities that shape their experiences and moral decisions, offering “advantages for the dominant groups in society and disadvantages for the subordinates” (Fraser, 1997, p. 110). Thus:

*establishing a set of norms that [are assumed] to be beyond power or force is itself a practice of power and force that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to rhetorical figures of normative universality.*

(Butler, 2001, p.15)

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In this line, Seyla Benhabib (1987) argues that universalist moral theories - such as that of John Rawls - ignore the starting point of the concrete (situated) “other”, which would lead to epistemic incoherence. In the “original position” proposed by Rawls, the other (as different from the self) disappears, which evades the moral obligation to confront otherness (Benhabib, 1987; 2006), since differences are irrelevant. The idea of “an abstract other” points to an empty mask that would correspond, at the same time, to everyone and no one (Benhabib, 1987). The “original position” would hide central aspects of inequality that Rawls himself intends to overcome. The problem would not be in the fictional character of the “original position”, but in the affirmation that it is desirable that this fiction normatively orients the theories of justice. Thus, we see how Rawlsian normative presuppositions would impose serious limits to the understanding of power relations and the various forms of oppression.

By questioning both normative universality and impartiality, feminist theorists invite us to distrust all those discourses, conceptions and practices that claim to be universal -including the conceptions of Democracy, Citizenship and Equality-, since they would conceal, reproduce and reinforce relations of domination and oppression, which have resulted in the marginalisation of certain subjects and social groups on the basis of



their “difference” or “distance” from the “normative subject” assumed as universal (male-Western-white-heterosexual-bourgeois) (Alexander and Mohanty, 2004; Fraser, 1997; Young, 2000).

Such an approach to justice would be imperfect, among other things, because it takes shape in laws that standardize, so it does not reach everyone and does not take into account differences (Camps, 1990). Notions that are blind to differences and the resulting power relations - which could include the professional practice of social workers themselves - even if they recognize the equal moral value of all people, would reproduce and reinforce specific power relations, making it difficult to achieve justice. In this context, it is worth questioning the ideals of assimilation (Young, 2000) that conceal universalist and standardized practices, which - by promoting equal treatment as a fundamental principle - have devalued and seek to standardize difference (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.), constructing these differences as obstacles.

### ***Criticism of the reinforcement of (seemingly) irreconcilable dichotomies***

This second criticism follows from the previous one, because under the veil of impartiality, not only are specific power relations concealed (e.g., between men and women; between young people and adults), but also a dichotomous discourse, derived from the apparently opposing differentiation of masculine and feminine, is uncritically reproduced (culture/nature; reason/emotionality; public/private). This discourse has divided “human beings into heads and bodies, reasons and passions, rational and efficient communication, and intimate communication” (López, 2004, p.31 ).

Feminism has posed the challenge of destabilizing the reason/affection and public/private dichotomies in ethical reflection, since an ethics based only on ideals such as reason and the public - in opposition to and devaluation of affectivity and private space - would, on the one hand, relegate solidarity and the values of respect for “the other” in the public sphere to a second plane; and, on the other, would neglect the discussion on what is fair in the sphere recognized as private (family relations, marriage, sexuality, care practices) as it is represented as particular (non-universal) by bourgeois masculinist ideology (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1997; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). This dichotomous ethical discourse, among other things and as we will review below, validates a sharp division between the public and private spheres, and the incompatibility of principles of justice and good life.

### *The divorce between public and private*

One of the dichotomies most criticized by feminist theory corresponds to the divorce between the public and private spheres that deontological theories presuppose, where “the public sphere and the principles that govern it are considered separate or independent from relations in the private sphere” (Pateman, 1995, p. 2-3).

Among the criticisms that Habermas received<sup>9</sup>, starting with his book *Critical History of Public Opinion* (1962)<sup>10</sup>, feminist theory pointed to the arguments that traditionally justified the difference between the public and private spheres. This difference was historically based on institutions of civil society and sexist public culture in which the ideas of participation and citizenship were attributed exclusively to men (Fraser, 1997). The male figure is attributed rationality, property and citizenship, as if men “naturally” carried virtues linked to universality and justice.

Assemblies, parliaments and civil associations would be, then, exclusive spaces for men, while women - based on their sexual difference - are placed in the private/domestic sphere, assuming mainly the roles of mother and wife (Hierro, 2014a; Pateman, 2013). Thus, the “natural/civil” binomial is reproduced, where the private world is circumscribed to “the family based on the ties [assumed to be] natural of feeling and blood”, while the public sphere “is governed by universal criteria, interests, rights, equality and property, criteria applicable only to men” (Pateman, 2013, p. 59).

Civil society - its origin, sustenance and subjects of interest - is understood separately from the private/domestic sphere. Theories of justice -and the liberal political theory that these insume- have striven to strengthen the barriers that separate the public -which presume relations of equality- from spaces and processes assumed as pre-political (or non-political), such as the family, everyday life and the economy, founded on systemic relations of inequality (Fraser, 1997). The terms “public” and “private” are not only designations of social spheres, they can be powerful cultural classifications and rhetorical labels, “often used to delegitimize certain interests, ideas and topics, and to valorize others” (Fraser, 1997, p. 126).

<sup>9</sup> The criticisms point mainly to insufficient historical presuppositions, since Habermas would have reduced the concept of the reality of bourgeois civil society to a very limited period of time. Thus, many would be excluded from the reconstruction of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1994). This would not be, for example, the history of the proletariat in the same period (Kluge and Negt, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Book about the historical trends of the public sphere as a bourgeois category from the 17th to the mid-20th century in England, France and Germany.

The dissociation of the private sphere from the public sphere, therefore, has collateral and harmful effects for society. On the one hand, women are circumscribed to certain private activities (caring for children, looking after the house, satisfying their husbands, etc.); and, on the other hand, the fact that these activities are part of the private sphere makes it impossible for this social space to be rationally questioned on the basis of criteria of equality and justice.

Thus, widespread practices such as assuming that the domestic sphere (care of dependents and/or children) is mainly the responsibility of women can lead us to over-demand them and make invisible the responsibilities that correspond to men or other actors and institutions. This, in addition to being counterproductive in the light of feminist criticisms of justice, can violate the fundamental rights of women themselves and the exercise of their moral autonomy.

### ***Counterposition of the principles of justice and good living***

On the basis of the feminine/masculine opposition, deontological ethics have reproduced the public/private dichotomy - as we have just seen - and, with it, the opposition between justice and the good life. Thus, for example, Kant will argue:

*The virtue of women is a beautiful virtue (...) They will avoid evil not because it is unjust, but because it is ugly, and virtuous acts are for them the morally beautiful ones. No duty, no necessity, no obligation. Women find unbearable any order and any morose construction (...). It seems difficult to me the fair sex to be capable of principles. (1997, p. 155)*

For Kant, not only are women incapable of acting according to principles<sup>11</sup> (or post-conventional morality in Kolbergian language) since they lack moral autonomy, but also virtue (the beautiful, inclination, interest) would be incompatible with “the just” (duty). These Kantian demands of universality and autonomy - where the authentic moral conduct is to follow what is just and not the interest - found continuation during the 20th century through authors such as Rawls, Apel and Habermas. Impartiality, defined from the idea of universal reason (understood as masculine), is the result of the opposition between “reason” and “desires”, situated from an ideal perspective that could hardly be applied to empirical reality, since it appeals to a situation of reasoning that removes people from the context in which they make decisions.

<sup>11</sup> Starting from the universal maxim, i.e., “work in such a way that you use humanity, both in your person and in the person of any other, always as an end at the same time and never only as a means” (Kant, 1994, p. 84).

Reinforcing the above, we see how the moral sphere, in which the criteria of justice operate, would be delimited by the public space; while the values belonging to the domestic space -understood as part of the particular options of a good life- are considered to be outside the strictly moral sphere. Based on this evidence, the emancipatory telos of feminism proposes to dismantle the dichotomies (“false antitheses” or “false oppositions”) that are presented as irreconcilable and oppressive, both in deontological ethical theories and in liberal political theory (Benhabib, 2006; Carosio, 2007; Fraser, 1997). We will return to this purpose in the third section.

### *The presumption of autonomy of the moral subject*

Finally, the third criticism that we will address alludes to the presumption of autonomy of the moral subject on the part of the theories of justice. By questioning the impartiality approach, the impossibility of a “neutral point of view” - capable of deciding what is pertinent a priori - where the subject is capable of totally abstracting from his conditions of existence, including the ties that bind him to other people (affective relationships, care, loyalty, etc.), is positioned.

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For authors such as Benhabib (2006), the assumption of a rootless autonomous male ego responds to a fiction, which makes theories of justice indifferent and insensitive to the context and contextual reasoning of subjects. The abstraction of the subject extracts it from the social and affective relations that constitute it, obviating the fact that subjects are not detached, but that we are inserted in networks of interdependence that shape our moral needs, identities and conceptions of both justice and the good life (Benhabib, 1992; 2006; Gilligan, 1985). In doing so, the recognition of a concrete subject is evaded. At the same time, it ignores the place we occupy in the social fabric: the relations of reciprocity and power that shape our particular situations. In this context, it is reasonable to think of an embodied, situated, interdependent subject, who is determined in historical terms and who has a specific location in the social fabric.

Having commented on the main feminist criticisms of deontological ethics, in the following section we will present some elements that allow us to outline a feminist ethics, characterized by the proposal of a situated ethics.



## A situated ethics

On the basis of the criticisms discussed, feminist theory has put forward different approaches that allow us to outline a situated and dynamic ethics centered on subjects and their networks of interdependence, which points to a different relational order. In this context, we will present some elements that shape a feminist ethics<sup>12</sup>. First, it is understood that the moral subject does not respond to an abstraction, but is embodied and that, at the moment of making ethical decisions, she cannot totally abstract from her context and the social relations that shape her behavior. Secondly, feminist ethics seeks to destabilize the dichotomies naturalized by deontological ethics, proposing to integrate the ideals of justice and the good life into ethical thinking, as well as to bring the principles of justice to spaces recognized as private. Finally, the promotion of the principles of solidarity and co-responsibility in moral decisions, which are often relegated to being assumed as “feminine” values, is highlighted. Each of these aspects will be discussed below.

### *The embodied moral subject*

As an alternative to the subject proposed by the ethics of duty - abstract, autonomous and rational -, feminist ethics proposes thinking of the subject as positionality: incarnated, contextual and socially and affectively interdependent. The moral subject is understood, on the one hand, as a diverse/plural subject in terms of identity; and, on the other hand, as a relational subject that becomes from its location (its positions and functions) in the social framework, being especially relevant the power relations in which people are inserted (Benhabib, 1992; Carosio, 2007). It alludes, then, to an experience that is neither essential nor innate, but rather historically and contextually signified.

The proposal of a situated subject - among other things - is fundamental for the approach of intersectionality by feminist theory, a perspective that allows us to understand the mutual constitution of social structures and the effects - in terms of inequalities and privileges- that this matrix of power has on the lives of individuals and groups (Collins, 2000; Cubillos, 2015; Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019). Intersectionality invites us to understand the complex interactions between different structures of inequality (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, social class), to make them explicit and discuss them open-

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<sup>12</sup>We do not wish to homogenize the proposals of various feminist authors in the field of ethics. There are different proposals and different emphases; however, some common elements can be distinguished, such as those presented in this section.

ly. This is to understand how they influence the life circumstances of individuals and groups and their conditions of speech. In the line of a communicative ethics, the intention is to prevent inequalities from contaminating discursive interaction and to reach fair agreements for all people involved (Benhabib, 2006; Fraser, 1997).

From this point of view, social interventions that uncritically assume standardized repertoires should be reviewed, aiming at an informed examination of the situations to be worked on: recognizing the power relations that cross it and any other relevant background that may eventually limit horizontal dialogues (both among the parties involved and between professionals and intervention subjects). This aims at recognizing the hierarchical social relations in the situation addressed and the moral autonomy - capacity of speech and action - of all participants, avoiding silencing, re-victimization, reproduction of stereotypes and impositions in the intervention process.

Thinking of the subject as positionality does not imply renouncing universality, but rather rethinking it in a non-totalizing way: a metaphorized universality in a field of permanent dispute, constantly questioning its foundations, recognizing what it authorizes and what it excludes (Butler, 2007). There is a transition from a rational universalism -recognized as oppressive, for trying to position itself as a unique, representative and normative concept- towards a dialogic universalism, in constant construction based on the experiences of diverse subjects (Guirao, 2010). In particular, Benhabib proposes an interactive (non-legislative) universalism, which reformulates the principle of universalization in the model of moral dialogue proposed by authors such as Apel and Habermas. A universalism “aware of the differences between genders, not blind to them, sensitive to the context and not indifferent to the situations” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 16), where “the willingness to reason from the point of view of the other, and the sensitivity to listen to their voices” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 21) are essential.

Benhabib bets on visualizing the moral subject, at the same time, as a generalized other and a concrete other. On the one hand, to recognize him/her as a moral person with the same rights as ourselves; respecting him/her, recognizing his/her agency, voice and capacity for a sense of justice. And, on the other hand, to understand him/her “as a unique individual with a vital history, disposition and determined capacities, as well as with needs and limitations” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 22). The author bets on the cultivation of the qualities of friendship and civic solidarity, capable of mediating between the points of view of the generalized others and the concrete others. For Benhabib, civic solidarity -which implies a willingness to understand and a willingness to reach agreements in an





open dialogue- would teach us to reason and understand. It can also help to bridge the gaps between relations of justice (principles of moral right) and those of virtue (which defines our relations with ourselves and others); and “force the boundaries between private needs and public claims, individual misfortunes and collectively representable grievances” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 22). This approach points to two issues that will be fundamental to feminist ethics: i) The promotion of cooperation and solidarity; ii) the recognition of the interdependencies between public and private interests, and the principles of justice and good life.

### ***Solidarity and co-responsibility***

A claim from feminist theory to the ethics of justice is to give too much centrality to reason (assumed as an eminently masculine attribute and proper to the public space), to the detriment of values such as solidarity and care (assumed as feminine and proper to the private space). Thus, feminism has posed the challenge of destabilizing the reason/affect dichotomy in ethical reflection, demanding the universalization of values constructed as feminine in order to integrate them into the ethical debate and discussion in the public sphere. An ethics based only on ideals such as reason - in contrast to and devaluation of affectivity - would lack solidarity and values of respect for “the other” relevant to humanize society (Benhabib, 1992; Camps, 1990; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). Care -for oneself, for others and for nature- is positioned as a fundamental human activity to sustain society and the public, recognizing the vulnerability of the human condition (Butler, 2006; Carosio, 2007; Puleo, 2011).

Victòria Camps (1990) states that justice is not perfect in itself (it does not reach everyone) nor does it constitute the totality of ethical demands; therefore, it needs to be compensated with feelings of help, friendship and recognition of the other. Thus:

*it is necessary to take care of and attend to another neighboring value of justice, the value that consists in showing oneself united to other persons or groups, sharing their interests and their needs, in feeling solidarity with the pain and suffering of others. Solidarity is, therefore, a virtue, which must be understood as a condition of justice, and as that measure which, in turn, comes to compensate for the inadequacies of this fundamental virtue (...). Solidarity is a practice that is beyond but also goes beyond justice. (1990, p. 36)*

The relevance of articulating justice with solidarity has been evidenced in the context of the current socio-health crisis caused by COVID-19 at the national level, since, where



justice provided by the State has not arrived (in health, education, subsistence), various manifestations associated with care have been developed by civil society (common pots, support campaigns to cover basic needs, etc.). All of which leads to questioning the ethics of justice from the ethics of care, not positioning them as separate ethics, but seeking their integration and recognition.

### *Destabilizing and integrating dichotomies: public/private and justice/good life*

As mentioned above, the emancipatory telos of feminism proposes to dismantle dichotomies that become oppressive and irreconcilable (Carosio, 2007). In this scenario, it is assumed that there are no static or aprioristic boundaries between the public and the private, as proposed by deontological ethics. That is, what should be considered of common interest will be decided through discursive confrontation (Benhabib, 2006; Fraser, 1997).

An appeal is made to a redefinition of the public and the private that recognizes their interrelationships, since the domestic sphere is also political and of public interest, while the public space cannot ignore the particularities and relations of interdependence between subjects (Benhabib, 2006; Pateman, 1995). Feminist ethics has expanded the sphere of ethics by claiming that the private is also political and by not leaving out of its reasoning any element of the human (Gargallo, 2004). The sharp division between public/private and reason/emotion has allowed the exclusion of relations of solidarity from the public sphere. A coexistence based on reciprocity implies observing the private sphere from the prism of justice: family norms and those that sustain the social and sexual division of labor, allowing issues and values inherent to daily interactions to circulate between the public and private domains.

In this line, and with the purpose of tensioning, destabilizing and integrating “false antitheses” (Fraser, 1997), feminist theory proposes that thinking of a horizon of social justice does not necessarily imply forgetting that there are conceptions of “good life”, making visible the power relations that cross moral precepts and that have limited free and self-determined female existence, by defining a duty to be for women (“being-for-others”) that promotes their inferiorization, use and control within the family and society (Hierro, 2014a; 2014b; López, 2004; Pisano, 2004). Feminism has sought to vindicate the “feminine subjectivity” that has been denied, in particular, tracing the imperative of recognizing the “human capacity to respect ourselves and design our own lives and the society we want” (Pisano, 2004, p. 6). This reintegrates the debates on the good life into the ethical sphere without counterposing them to the ideals of justice.

In this regard, Graciela Hierro (2014b) proposes the so-called ethics of pleasure, defined as a feminist ethic committed to everyday life, where neither the pursuit of pleasure nor personal or collective satisfactions, mainly of women, are sacrificed. The right thing for women would be to become “beings-for-itself”, which implies self-determination and self-interest, assuming pleasure as the meaning of existence and determinant of a good life. From (self-)interest it would be possible to reposition women -and other subjects- in society and with themselves, becoming aware of the responsibility of overcoming their oppressive situation, by opening themselves to the possibility of pleasure and happiness. As Margarita Pisano states, “feminism, by claiming the right to enjoyment, pleasure and the body as legitimate, not guilty, is counterposing to the morality of suffering a desire for the good life” (2004, p. 9). An ethics “that reflects both the dignity of justice and the promise of happiness” (Benhabib, 2006, p. 16) that is not only concerned with rules (duty, justice), but with anything that is valued as moral (Carosio, 2007).

Such ethics (“for-itself”) does not aim at a self-referential and selfish ethics, it recognizes

*the free action of a person in solidarity with others and the whole, both against the injustice of the domination of a person, sex, class, culture or race in the name of its supposed universality, both against the subjugation of the nature of which we are part based on a supposed human superiority over all living things. (Gargallo, 2004, p. 24).*

This ethical commitment goes beyond particularistic intentions, promoting responsibility not only with oneself, but also with the human and non-human environment.

In this sense, it would be necessary to assume, as social workers, reciprocal relationships with people, where we not only act recognizing the generalized other - worthy of respect, with rights and capacity for speech and action - but also integrating the concrete other, in his/her particularity, history, limitations and possibilities (Benhabib, 2006). Likewise, responsibility and solidarity among the participants of a given intervention should be recognized and strengthened, where, on the one hand, space is provided for self-determination and the responsibility of each person or group with their own processes; and, on the other hand, obligations of collective well-being are assumed by the different people involved, based on reciprocal relationships.

## Conclusions

On the basis of this article, we have been able to review the main criticisms from feminist theory to deontological ethical theories -to the normative universality, the dichotomies linked to the public and private spheres, to the principles of justice and good life, and the figure of an autonomous moral subject-, which derive from the proposal of a feminist ethics. This proposal, nourished by various postulates, aims at a situated ethics that conceives a different relational order: one that contemplates the impacts of an intertwined power matrix and visualizes an autonomous but interdependent moral subject, endowed with reason but also sensitivity. A subject capable of becoming aware of its conditions of existence and the place it occupies in society, capable of taking responsibility for its processes and establishing reciprocal relationships to build better projections of its future, in terms of justice and self-determination.

These debates allow us to reposition reflections, perhaps not so new, but which we face on a daily basis. This discussion draws attention to knots and disjunctions that are important to attend to. We know that reflections and proposals emerge from professional practices that eventually dialogue with the arguments presented. We also understand that these concerns are not exclusive to feminism; we have only tried to make them available as a conceptual apparatus that dialogues with the practices, with the purpose of continuing to mobilize critical views in the praxis of social work, from feminist ethical reflections that aspire to the transformation of structures that become unjust, both in objective and subjective terms.

We consider that feminist counterpoints to the ethical debate would allow us to advance in the development of emancipatory practices that allow us to complexly understand the contexts of intervention, moving away from standardized discourses and their uncritical applications; moving away from fixed and prescriptive discourses (Muñoz-Arce and Larraín-Salas, 2019). We hope that these reflections will be channeled towards critical views, which will, above all, stress those “false opposites” (public/private; justice/good life; reason/emotion) in the framework of social intervention, including the dichotomy “who intervenes/who is intervened”.



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ARTICLE

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## (De)confined notes. On the contributions of intersectionality to the challenges of Covid-19

### Apuntes (des)confinados. Sobre las contribuciones de la interseccionalidad a los desafíos del Covid-19

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#### Abstract

This article examines how intersectional perspectives can contribute to a deeper understanding of the operations of power in a context of sanitary crisis while delivering a reflection on the theoretical premises and political potential of these perspectives in the historic situation we are experiencing. The central argument is that intersectional approaches not only help us understand the differentiating impact of sanitary measures on the structural inequalities that construct the social order, but they also allow us to identify how this order can be transgressed, resisted and negotiated in a crisis situation.

**Keywords:**  
*Intersectionality,  
Covid-19,  
precariousness of  
life, feminisms*



## Resumen

Este artículo examina de qué manera las perspectivas interseccionales contribuyen a profundizar el análisis de las operaciones del poder, en un contexto de crisis sanitaria, entregando también una reflexión sobre las premisas teóricas y potencialidad política de estas perspectivas en la situación histórica que estamos viviendo. El argumento central es que los enfoques interseccionales no solamente nos ayudan a entender el impacto diferenciador de las políticas sanitarias sobre las desigualdades estructurales que conforman el orden social, sino que también nos permiten identificar de qué forma(s) este orden puede ser transgredido, resistido y negociado en una situación de crisis.

**Palabras Clave:**  
Interseccionalidad; covid-19; precariedad de la vida; feminismos

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze how intersectional perspectives can contribute to understanding the operations of power in the context of a health crisis and to reflect on the theoretical premises and political potential of these perspectives in the historic situation we are currently experiencing. Empirical evidence shows that the pandemic is a global phenomenon that affects populations in a differentiated way, deepening already existing gaps between countries, regions and social groups (Oxford Committee on Aid Against Hunger, Oxfam, 2021). The central argument of this article is that intersectional approaches not only help us to understand the differentiating impact of the pandemic, but also allow us to identify in what way(s) the social order can be transgressed, resisted and negotiated in a crisis situation. From this perspective, the article seeks to contribute to a reflection on the theoretical and conceptual development of intersectional perspectives in a critical moment of social transformations in Chile after the 18/10 revolt.

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The article is structured as follows. The first section analyzes the genealogies of intersectional feminisms in the global north, emphasizing the geopolitical conditions that have (un)(en)abled the generation of spaces of transformative knowledge. The following section asks how intersectional perspectives allow us to address both the deepening inequalities and the transformations of the social order that emerge in a context of social and health crisis. A central aspect is the development of a perspective that, beyond the recognition of differentiated subjectivities, also attempts to formulate an analysis of the power devices that construct and normalize these subjectivities as unequal. In a third section, the article incorporates a reflection on the theoretical impact of the proposals



formulated from feminist mobilizations and their importance for the development of intersectional perspectives in a pandemic context.

Before continuing, it is necessary to make it clear that writing from a position in the academic diaspora in Sweden, my analysis does not escape the condition of partiality inherent to the globalized production and distribution of knowledge. These notes are also marked by the political commitment that led me into exile and that runs through my relationship with southern feminisms. This position of counterpoint, to use Edward Said's words (2000, p. 140), implies not only uprooting, but also some advantages; for example, the possibility of perceiving the simultaneity of everyday life experiences in different cultural contexts, as well as the distance from established norms and established common senses. Honoring this definition is of course a challenge met with humility in this text, understanding also that epistemological limitations can contribute to dialogue and the search for common views.

## **Genealogies of Intersectional Feminisms**

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Just as diasporic processes generate new spaces of knowledge, the trajectories followed by concepts and theoretical perspectives are also permeated by the contexts in which they are received and assumed as new ways of interpreting reality. The genealogy of intersectionality appears intimately linked to the debates on female emancipation and to the political strategies developed since the 1970s in the USA. At the same time, the reception of intersectionality in academia and its installation in the feminist canon has also followed the logic of knowledge dissemination implanted by the intensification, at a global level, of neoliberal practices in universities. Practices that, as is well known, sustain the hegemony of the global north with respect to the dissemination, recognition and valuation of knowledge and subjects of knowledge functional to the world economic order.

The rapid circulation of intersectional approaches during the last decades suggests the relevance of a theoretical perspective that responds to fundamental issues in different spaces of knowledge production. However, we must bear in mind that it took more than a decade for the notion of intersectionality to become established in the academic spaces of the global North, and from there it has not yet finished its journey. Until the beginning of the new millennium, the contribution of the African-American jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) was fundamentally linked to a feminist historiography



that located the so-called “third wave” in the persistence of the racist legacy of slavery in the United States. In Crenshaw’s work, intersectionality is conceived as a metaphor to make visible the position of African-American women, based on specific forms of oppression, generated by the simultaneous operation of different systems of subordination. In the author’s opinion, both feminist and anti-racist discourses had until then systematically ignored the ways in which patriarchy, capitalism and racism operate simultaneously in situations of discrimination and violence against women. From this perspective, Crenshaw also expresses a critique of the feminist movement, which, by marginalizing the experiences of African American women, refrains from problematizing how women’s subordination is marked by racism and class belonging (Crenshaw, 1991).

Although Crenshaw’s contribution has been widely celebrated, the articulation between politics and theory offered by the author has not always been considered by the followers of the concept. The lack of knowledge of the African-American theoretical tradition, from which the feminist anti-racist movement draws its inspiration, has also been a critical point in the reception of the concept in Europe. As feminist theorists Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004) point out, the construction of feminine subjectivity has historically been a matter of dispute. The authors remind us of the testimony of the anti-abolitionist fighter Sojourner Truth who, having suffered slavery, challenged the participants of the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 with the question “Am I not a woman?” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 76). Truth’s words question whether suffrage was considered a priority right for women in circumstances where many women were enslaved. This criticism is a clear illustration of the impossibility of taking up a struggle against the patriarchal order without taking into account other structures of oppression. Despite its invisibility in feminist historiography, Truth’s discourse reminds us that the questioning of the universalization of the feminine condition has historically been present in mobilizations for women’s rights.

While the idea of intersectionality is formulated in a context of mobilization of anti-racist feminism, focusing on issues of power, violence, inequality and discrimination in the United States (bell hooks, 1984; Davis, 1981; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016), the reception of this perspective in European countries has been crossed by the fear of fragmentation of the feminine (Bilge, 2013). The absence of a power perspective has been particularly problematic in countries such as Sweden which, despite widely recognized for being a welfare state promoting women’s rights, shows clear tendencies towards racialized and class exclusion (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). In this context, the



conceptualization of differences among women is based on identity (migrant women) or normative notions (LGBT groups) which, although they account for the different subjectivities contained in femininity, do not problematize the logics of exploitation linked to relations of class, race or sexuality domination.

By conceptualizing inequality as a problem of parity, Swedish feminism has subordinated class exploitation, processes of racialization and the imposition of binary sexuality to the goals of gender parity. Thus, demands for subsidized domestic service are formulated on the basis of a parity argument, which, obviating the racialized exploitation of domestic workers, raises the need for Swedish women to pursue a professional career without having to worry about housework (de los Reyes, 2016). Traditionally, the Swedish welfare model has defined caregiving tasks within public policies, particularly benefiting working or studying mothers as heads of household. But, at the same time that the commodification of reproductive labor intensifies its consumption in high-income families, gender parity goals are displaced from the public policies of the welfare state to the market sphere. The privatization of care consumption thus makes it possible to maintain a heteropatriarchal model, where household income is used to solve, in a differentiated manner, the conflicts between paid work and domestic demands.

The global circulation of intersectional perspectives has opened an urgent discussion on how to conceptualize inequalities in women's life experiences, as well as on the interrelation of different forms of subordination. However, debates within feminism in European countries have tended to focus on identifying and hierarchizing the power relations that would constitute the central cores of intersectionality, while defining which could be considered peripheral or marginal (Lewis, 2013). In this context, the marginalization of racism has been a source of increasing contestation within European feminism. As Barbara Tomlinson (2013) points out, as long as the hegemony of white, heterosexual and middle-class women in feminist discourses is not recognized, the theoretical tradition of African American and anti-racist feminism will continue to be particularized. At the same time, the author points out, intersectional perspectives risk being depoliticized and stripped of their transformative potential. Tomlinson provides important background to analyze how intersectionality is co-opted by perspectives that recognize the diversity of positions that inhabit feminism, but do not inquire into their causes. In this context, the absence of theorization of the global impact of the colonial project is also associated with the silence on racism that has long characterized feminist debates in Europe.



The particularization of racism, as a form of oppression whose historical antecedents are fundamentally associated with the legacy of slavery in the United States, has also been strongly questioned on the basis of the experiences of the diasporas of the global South in the metropolises of the global North. The elaboration of an intersectional reading of patterns of inequality from the domination of class, race, gender and sexuality, deployed under the protection of European welfare states, has had a correlate in the idea of colonization as a phenomenon that is reproduced in the global circuits of knowledge production (Bilge, 2013; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Lewis, 2013). The contribution of postcolonial feminism, by problematizing the ways in which migrants from countries of the global south are incorporated as racialized subjects in labor markets, welfare systems and citizenship models in the metropolises of global capitalism, has generated important theoretical elaborations on the nexus between colonialism, migration and global racism. The call of decolonial feminisms to (de)essentialize the categories imposed by the colonial project (Lugones, 2012), is also reflected in research that problematizes the (re)production of these categories from the transformations of the patterns of global accumulation of capital (Bhattacharyya, 2018; de los Reyes, 2016; Cavallero & Gago, 2021; Mezzadra, 2020). Thus, the intergenerational reproduction of racialized subalternities appears as a fundamental feature in processes where the (im)possibility of accessing the material and symbolic resources of the centers of power in high-income countries is reflected in nationalist discourses, discriminatory practices and institutional racism (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020; Erel et al., 2017; Lewis, 2013). At the same time, imaginaries of heteropatriarchal families and biological ties have also become the norm in increasingly restrictive processes of family reunification and recognition of migrants' social rights (Sagen & Mulinari, 2018).

Balancing the impact of intersectionality in the academia, feminist theorists Carvado, Crenshaw, Reys & Tomlinsson (2013) call for an examination of the trajectories of the concept in order to evaluate how it is received, interpreted and applied in different political and academic contexts. These trajectories indicate, according to the authors, that intersectionality is not cloistered in its initial postulates nor is it exhausted in its multiple interpretations. Rather, it could be said that it is a work in progress, where local challenges also imply the adaptation and reorientation of some of its original proposals. From this point of view, intersectional approaches are open to problematize new power relations and to cross disciplinary traditions. The authors thus open up the possibility of a dialogue in which the challenges associated with specific historical conditions are perceived as an opportunity to contribute to generating transformative proposals.

In this line of analysis, the conflicts raised by what Jennifer Nash (2018) defines as “the intersectional wars” tend to focus on corrective looks at the definition, origin and intellectual property of the concept, forgetting central questions regarding the meaning of the institutionalization of intersectionality and the possibility of generating new questions. Nash suggests turning our gaze towards issues that transcend the relations of ownership and domination that flourish in academic circles, opening up the imagination around bonds of affection, care, intimacy and vulnerability. Her proposal acquires special urgency in the current situation, where the precariousness of life -to use the concept coined by feminist movements in Latin America- is exacerbated not only by the structural characteristics of neoliberal capitalism, but also by the situation generated from the ways in which the health crisis is faced nationally and globally.

A review of the trajectories of intersectionality in recent years exposes the challenges of a perspective that analyzes the production of inequality based on the simultaneous operation of class, gender, sexuality and race relations and invites reflection on the logics that construct essentialized identities based on these relations. These debates also show the multiplicity of intersectional approaches and their adaptation to diverse theoretical, conceptual and empirical challenges at the global level. The existence of institutional and disciplinary barriers has been reflected in interpretations that seek to incorporate intersectionality into a narrative of feminist progress -expressed among other things in the idea of different feminist waves-, ignoring the theoretical and political legacy of Afro-American anti-racist feminism and the theoretical contribution developed from feminist mobilizations in the global South. When feminist movements in Chile and Latin America articulate around the formulation of cross-cutting strategies to overcome a situation of social, economic and health crisis, new paths are also opened to revitalize the transformative content of intersectional perspectives.

## **An intersectional view of Covid 19**

The pandemic represents a historic and exceptional situation in which health insecurity is combined with global economic, institutional and political destabilization. Confinement has meant a radical change in people’s daily lives, while health threats and increased economic and labor instability lead to high levels of stress for the vast majority of households. However, we know that levels of crisis and insecurity affect societies differently. The effects of the pandemic in the Global South have been particularly severe for LGBTQ communities, ethnic minorities, migrants, domestic workers and sex workers



(El-Ali, 2020). Social policies relate these gaps to the existence of so-called “vulnerable groups”, which, in the vast majority of cases, are directly linked to the structural inequality of capitalist societies and to the conditions of (dis)protection generated by the priorities established by governments. Thus, the Oxfam report defines Covid as “The inequality Virus” and points out that:

*The pandemic has hurt people living in poverty far harder than the rich, and has had particularly severe impacts on women, Black people, Afro-descendants, Indigenous Peoples, and historically marginalized and oppressed communities around the world. Women, and to a higher extent racialized women, are more at risk of losing their jobs because of the coronavirus than men. In Latin America, Afro-descendants and Indigenous Peoples, already marginalized, have been hit harder than the rest of society; they are more likely to die, and more likely to become destitute. (Oxfam, 2021, p. 14).*

In Oxfam’s analysis, those affected by the crisis are identified on the basis of their position in an unequal social order, originating in historical forms of exploitation and subordination. Vulnerability to Covid is here associated with bodies or communities defined on the basis of their status as wage earners, racialized or sexualized. Following the analysis developed above, it is worth asking whether the potential of intersectionality as an analytical tool is exhausted by making visible the bodies that inhabit the most vulnerable positions in society and confirming the simultaneity of the mechanisms of exploitation and social subordination. By not discussing the logics of power that construct these positions, we run the risk of essentializing the subjectivities that inhabit them. Therefore, it is necessary to remember that the potential of intersectionality is given not only in identifying the multiplicity of relations from which power is exercised, but also in questioning the logic(s) that operate through the construction of difference, especially in a situation of crisis that puts at stake the social order and the distribution of resources in society.

By referring to wage-earning women as racialized, Oxfam accounts for the conditions of vulnerability generated by the intersection of capitalist, patriarchal and racist relations of oppression. While the capitalist order appears as a central element in the analysis of the prevailing conditions in differentiated labor regimes, the division between wage labor and domestic work becomes critical in the context of a pandemic. The impact of the health crisis on the economy has forced new ways of organizing living spaces, altering the division between productive and domestic work, structured on the basis of the separation between private and public spaces, due to the demands of telecommuting.





Confinement forces the multiplication and intensification of the use of domestic spaces at the same time that the basic needs of food, care, hygiene and cleanliness require access to external monetary resources. In Chile, as in other countries, the proliferation of communal cooking pots in impoverished sectors is a sign not only of food vulnerability resulting from the crisis, but also of the extreme fragility of subsistence models (Silva, et al., 2020).

Following feminist geographer Doreen Massey's (1999) call to spatialize social theory, and understanding space as an organizing device of bodies and territories, de los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) incorporate the spatial dimension into intersectionality, inviting us to examine the power relations that construct differentiated spaces as an expression of diversity. According to the proposal, the construction of segregated spaces makes it possible to understand not only the exercise of power that establishes barriers, but also its normalization, by linking the existence of hierarchically differentiated bodies to segregated spaces. Thus, historically, the construction of the gender-sexual division has been intimately linked to the separation between public and private spaces. Confinement, by breaking the dichotomy between the world of work and the world of care, opens spaces for negotiation, transgression or repression that reconfigure the established social order. From this perspective, the intensification of violence against women and children cannot be considered a circumstantial element, but rather a latent component of patriarchal power relations in the home. In this line, the proliferation of borders, between countries, regions and bodies would be expressing the fragmentation necessary to perpetuate the regimes of accumulation and exploitation that operate at different levels of the social order (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Mezzadra, 2018).

At the same time that people face the pandemic in differentiated spaces, the resources associated with these spaces generate new inequalities in access to care and consumption. Common spaces for recreation (parks, squares and libraries) have been reduced to commodified places (shopping malls), while new and old forms of consumption demand the circulation of bodies exposed to the onslaught of the pandemic and to labor exploitation. This is the case, for example, with domestic workers or people employed in food distribution platforms. While it is true that the logic of capitalist exploitation is central to understanding the intensification of the forms of domination that emerge in a pandemic situation, spatiality allows us to identify some of the particularities of the operations of power, generated from the separation, confinement and circulation of differentiated bodies. In this context, the role of the State appears as a fundamental element in the analysis of the effects of the pandemic on diverse bodies.





State policies not only have a direct impact on health security, but also on household survival conditions. In trying to maintain the balance between economy and health security, states have deepened the existing gaps. A report by the United Nations (UN, 2020) indicated that state efforts have not been sufficient to counteract the effects of Covid on women, children and people belonging to LGTBTIQ+ communities. Oxfam's critique (2021), rather than pointing to conjunctural deficiencies, denounces the negative impact of the last decades of austerity policies on the capacity of public services to face the crisis. The absence of public policies aimed at counteracting the effects of the pandemic is not accidental, but corresponds to a political design in which the right to health is not recognized as such. However, beyond the macro-structural policies of the neoliberal state, which favors the commodification of health security, there is evidence that indicates that normative perceptions of gender, class and sexuality also influence the conditions of access to health services at the micro level. The discriminatory treatment of homeless people, ethnic minorities and LGTBTIQ+ communities in health services is another example of unequal access to health security (El-Ali, 2020).

Discriminatory practices in health care are therefore part of a political management that, by favoring the functioning of the market and the continuity of capital accumulation, is evidence of what the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (2003) has called necropolitics. Mbembe locates the origins of necropolitics in the colonial project and in the long history of violence, dispossession and genocide that accompanied European mercantile expansion. The persistence of this phenomenon in today's society, Mbembe points out, is fundamentally linked to the functioning of power in today's globalized capitalism. Necropolitics is interpreted by some as the hidden face of what the French philosopher Michael Foucault called biopolitics, that is, the sovereign power to control bodies and regulate the right to life and death (Foucault 2014). In speaking of necropolitics, Mbembe goes further. Letting die, more than the simple exercise of power, is also constitutive of a global order where both the (ir)rationality of politics and the everyday practices that construct other forms of life as subordinate, dispensable and ultimately also sacrificable to higher interests inhabit.

In Chile, as in other colonized territories, necropolitics has operated not only through the annihilation of bodies, communities and subaltern cosmologies, but also through the systematic and massive dispossession of the material conditions that sustain the existence of forms of life dispensable to capitalist accumulation. In the context of a pandemic, the prioritization of productive-mercantile activities linked to capital accumulation is no coincidence. Neither is the action of the State, which transfers common resources



to big business through tenders, tax exemptions and privatization of natural resources. The policy of letting people die is expressed both in the deepening of the mechanisms of exploitation and in the lack of safeguarding the survival conditions of households. In these times of pandemic we are witnessing the de-territorialization of the sacrifice zones and their installation in urban spaces where a growing percentage of workers seek daily sustenance, despite the risk of contagion. Rising unemployment, low pensions and growing indebtedness further stress structurally precarious living conditions. The structural violence of the social order is reflected not only in increased state repression of citizen protests, but also in the mistreatment of women and children in the family.

In the current crisis, where the precariousness of the present is combined with the (im) possibility of viable futures for the great majority, it is necessary to dwell on the historical continuity between the colonial project and the current modalities of capital accumulation, in order to understand how the construction of differentiated territories and bodies is associated with the parameters of global inequality that have become more acute in the context of a pandemic. Just as the proliferation of borders allows us to unveil the differentiating effects of global capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Mezzadra, 2020), intersectional perspectives open the possibility of conceptually articulating the fragmentation of spaces with the differentiation of bodies and territories. In this way, it is also possible to advance the understanding of the logics of power that construct the precariousness of life, as a transversal element of the social order. However, it should not be forgotten that the transversality of the precariousness of life is also what today makes possible the articulation of resistances and the emergence of intersectional mobilizations around the valorization of the economy of care, the defense of life and common goods, the respect for the sovereignty of bodies and the recovery of memories that make it possible to weave other futures.

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## Intersectional resistances

The contributions of intersectional perspectives to the analysis of the pandemic appear even more necessary in a context of social fragmentation exacerbated by decades of neoliberalism. The use of the language of intersectionality in Latin American feminist movements makes it possible not only to identify the divisions that construct the multiple practices of power, but also to question them and propose alternatives that can transgress the order established through these divisions. Feminist contributions to the analysis of violence as a systemic and transversal phenomenon are fundamental here.



Intersectional perspectives make it possible to understand the links that articulate the exercise of violence at the individual, institutional and structural levels, while making visible how violence acts on diverse bodies (Oyarzún Vaccaro, 2018; Troncoso and Follegatti, 2019). An example of this articulation is the much celebrated performance of the group Las Tesis “Un violador en tu camino”<sup>2</sup>, which was replicated in multiple places around the world, summoning women of different ages, nationalities and sexual orientation. The strength of Las Tesis’ interpellation can be understood both from the specific moment of state repression in Chile and the allegations of sexualized violence against protesters, but also in the context of the violent disciplining that has historically built the hegemony of binary bodies. The de-domestication of violence and the denunciation of its systemic character thus emerges as a site of resistance from feminist mobilizations.

As feminist theorists Luci Cavallero and Verónica Gago (2021) point out when analyzing the impact of indebtedness as an exercise of violence on feminized bodies, intersectional approaches make it possible to politicize the connections between apparently separate and/or marginalized demands and to construct a common language around social transformations. Intersectionality is, according to this perspective, not only what makes hierarchically differentiated positions visible, but also a tool for understanding the multiple ways in which capitalism operates on people’s lives. The feminist analysis of indebtedness leads us, according to Cavallero and Gago, to question the temporality of power devices and the different ways of resisting them. Just as indebtedness makes possible the satisfaction of an immediate need, it also entails the sacrifice of autonomy in the future. From an intersectional perspective, it is possible to problematize how temporality influences the normalization of inequality, under the promise of an unattainable future. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has pointed out, the idea of the not yet is deeply rooted in the (post)colonial imaginary, which, based on a linear perception of history, constructs the inequality of the present as different stages of a universal destiny. In this context, memory works from an intersectional perspective also open the door to the problematization of the impact of recent history(s) in the articulation of collective resistance to the violence of the neoliberal order.

The health crisis in Chile occurred in the context of a social revolt that highlighted the repressive nature of the neoliberal model and the government’s inability to implement measures that could effectively address the needs of the population. At the same time, it is necessary to point out that the challenge to the neoliberal order that exploded from

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: for more on Las Tesis’s performance “A rapist in your path”, we recommend Paula Serafini’s article “‘A rapist in your path’: Transnational feminist protest and why (and how) performance matters”, published in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* in 2020. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1367549420912748>



the revolt is also marked by the intensification of social mobilizations, which through different channels sought to articulate alternatives to this order. The Feminist May 2018 and the Plurinational Meetings of Women Who Struggle represent, among other initiatives, the creation of alternative platforms to the current institutionality from the collective. Deliberative practices, models of representation and the formulation of agglutinative agendas from the territories are signs of resistance to a model of society where conformism (as far as possible), corruption and individualism had made the common a space of dispossession (Elgueta & Marchant, 2020). In this context, the rearticulation of the social fabric, that was already underway before the pandemic, forms a mobilization platform that also allows for facing the health emergency. An example of this is the call of the Coordinadora 8M to organize territorially support to victims of family violence; the organization of common pots, food and water distribution in unprotected places are also examples of these community initiatives.

Intersectional resistances also appear in the questioning of the division between reproductive and productive work. This becomes especially relevant in a pandemic context, where the visibility of care work is given not only by health needs, but also due to the confinement and location of (some) salaried tasks within domestic spaces. The fundamental role of care work in the health sector, although recognized and celebrated, is barely compensated through salary. Nor is it known how the overload of work has affected the organization of domestic work. The concept of time poverty developed by researchers Andrea Sato and Francisca Barriga (2021) reveals the inequality generated by the distribution of domestic tasks within the home, which, due to gender stereotypes, mainly affects women. Confinement also places limitations on access to paid domestic work, which updates the importance of these tasks, which in most cases are made invisible and devalued.

The incorporation of the idea of sustainability of life, developed by feminist economist Cristina Carrasco Bengoa (2016), is a fundamental contribution to facing the challenges of reproduction in the pandemic context. The sustainability of life refers to a systemic vision that articulates the urgency of addressing sustainability at various levels; from nature, through communities and down to households. In contrast to the perspectives of orthodox economics, which considers production and reproduction as separate spheres, and deepening the alternatives raised by feminist economists who postulate the interdependence of both spheres, Carrasco Bengoa emphasizes the need to place the sustainability of life as the fundamental priority of political economy. In this way, the feminist voices that in recent years have identified the precariousness of life as a central problem



of contemporary capitalism, find an echo in the elaboration of conceptual alternatives that, from the academia dialogue with the demands raised by the feminist movement.

## Aiming to the future

What can be said about the relevance of intersectional perspectives in a pandemic context? What forms of resistance are generated in this context? These notes give an account of the genealogies of the concept and its circulation in different academic spheres, in order to dwell on the relevance of intersectionality in the analysis of post-pandemic Chile. Following the traces of these trajectories and taking into account the need to overcome the categorical fixation that has characterized much of the academic debates in the countries of the global North, it is possible to conclude that the recognition of the contingent nature of intersectionality is central. In this way, the readings of power exercised around the simultaneity of class, gender, sexuality and race relations, allow us to make visible the subjectivities constructed on the basis of the inequalities of the social order, but also indicate the need to question the constitutive logics of that order and the way in which they are expressed and challenged in specific contexts.

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Contributions to intersectionality from southern feminisms are intimately linked to a boom in feminist mobilizations. They are generated from a political moment in which spaces for deliberation, formulation of demands and collective organization constitute practices that overflow the traditional contents of the established political order. While it is true that intersectionality has contributed to creating a common language to address the inequality that inhabits diverse bodies, it is possible to note that the practices and reflections that emerge in the mobilizations also inscribe new meanings in the intersectional logs. Just as the incorporation of temporality and spatiality allow us to conceptually address -and politically transcend- the processes of differentiation on the basis of which power relations operate, the identification of the precariousness of life (and the defense of its sustainability) also show that intersectionality can be an effective instrument for articulating resistance and proposing new and better futures.

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ARTICLE

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## Pregnancy interruption, coloniality and patriarchy

### Interrupción del embarazo, colonialidad y patriarcado

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#### Abstract

This article proposes a contribution to critical social work by approaching pregnancy termination from a Latin American intersectional perspective. Focusing its analysis on the Argentinean case, it synthesizes the agenda of legal conquests in terms of women's rights and questions the resistance to the legalization of abortion. It recovers theoretical elements of the decolonial and feminist critique of relevance for the analysis of the interruption of pregnancy in Argentina. It sustains the hypothesis that the expropriation of the capacity to decide on gestation is one of the central dispositifs for the establishment and reproduction of racia-

**Keywords:**

*Pregnancy interruption; coloniality; patriarchy; intersectionality; situated critical social work*

lly structured patriarchal capitalism. It offers mediations that contribute to the debates and interventions of social work around the interruption of pregnancy, from a critical perspective both of patriarchal colonial conservatism and of the nor-eurocentric liberal gender positions.

## Resumen

El artículo propone un aporte al trabajo social crítico abordando la interrupción del embarazo desde una perspectiva interseccional nuestroamericana. Centrando su análisis en el caso argentino, recupera elementos del estado de la cuestión. Sintetiza la agenda de conquistas legales en materia de derechos de las mujeres y se pregunta por las resistencias a la legalización del aborto. Recupera elementos teóricos de la crítica descolonial y feminista de relevancia para el análisis de la interrupción del embarazo en la Argentina. Sostiene la hipótesis de que la expropiación de la capacidad de decidir sobre la gestación, se configura como uno de los dispositivos centrales de instauración y reproducción del capitalismo patriarcal racialmente estructurado. Ofrece mediaciones que aporten a los debates e intervenciones del trabajo social en torno de la interrupción del embarazo, desde una perspectiva crítica tanto del conservadurismo colonial patriarcal como de las posiciones de género liberales nor-eurocéntricas.

**Palabras Clave:**  
Interrupción del embarazo;  
colonialidad;  
patriarcado;  
interseccionalidad;  
trabajo social crítico situado

## Introduction

This text approaches the debates surrounding the interruption of pregnancy in Argentina, from a critique of coloniality and patriarchy. It explores the gender/race crossover and the appropriation of bodies with the capacity to gestate, as a nodal part of the colonial enterprise that persists even today. The interest is to contribute to critical social work, from evidence of elements of understanding and transformation from feminist and decolonial perspectives.

This implies navigating through a set of questions: What are the vectors that explain the deep resistance to legalize or implement processes to guarantee the right of women to decide about their bodies? How was and is coloniality articulated with patriarchy, on this specific point that involves gestation, as an achievement or interruption? What processes of textual and sexual cleansing have occurred in the stories still in force about the conquest of bodies and territories of our America? What tensions have been produ-

ced in the history of our country in relation to the politics of reproduction and the racial dimension? How can we rehearse a genealogy that explores the contradictions between the nineteenth-century eugenic hygienist mandates of whitening the population, the politics of (non) reproduction, the interruption of pregnancy as a feminist horizon, and the resistance of racialized women in our America to the intervention of liberal law and the nor-eurocentric gender approach?

Abortion is at the forefront of the debate. On 12/29/20, the bill that was finally sanctioned as Law 27.610, on access to the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (IVE, for *Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo*, in Spanish), was approved with a close vote in the Argentine Senate. In Chile, it will be a relevant issue in the current constituent processes.

In turn, the termination of pregnancy has been the subject of discussion in a wide range of disciplines for decades, which has led hundreds of intellectuals and activists to analyze the multiple facets that support (and resist) legislative progress in this area.

Finally, it is an issue that brings with it discomfort, and entails political costs insofar as it reorganizes the grids of support and confrontations, with logics that do not fit the traditional mappings of left and right. Let us consider that very few political parties have an official and unified position on the issue.

Why then write about this issue, and are there still some facets to be glimpsed? Is it the time to continue analyzing, or to devote ourselves fully to activism and dissemination of what has already been said, in theoretical, normative and statistical terms? And I say statistical because it is difficult to think of a more weighty argument than the number of women who die in clandestine abortions, in order to place the discussion on the level of public health policies. We are well aware that “illegality does not influence the decision to terminate a pregnancy, but rather the differential conditions of its clandestine practice” (Petracci et al., 2012, p. 165); which implies that “contrary to what its opponents say, decriminalization protects the health and saves the lives of women, who would have resorted to clandestine and unsafe abortions, risking their lives and health.” (Ortiz Millán, 2009, p. 10).

Although not without reservations, I believe that writing on the subject is still worthwhile. And as a gesture of resistance to the extractivist logics of the academy, I want to express that the materials circulating here come from fellow activists, militants, from



the territory and from the academy. My task was listening, questioning, reflecting, assembling. I also take up here debates that arose in the project that I integrate, “Feminismos del Sur e intervención social: genealogías, diálogos y debates” of the Research Group on Sociocultural Problematics of the National University of Mar del Plata, UNMDP. The successes are debts to others. Mistakes, of course, are our own. And the bets are collective.

In the following sections, I will give an account of various plots of the interruption of pregnancy-coloniality-patriarchy-social work articulation. The first deals with elements of the state of the question on abortion in the Argentinean academy. The second explains the conceptual warp that theoretically sustains the assumptions explored. The third presents a historiographic synthesis of the legal disputes and achievements of the feminist agenda in Argentina. The fourth section attempts a *genealogical approach* to the long colonial/postcolonial period in terms of appropriations of gestating bodies, succinctly recovering tensions and events that illustrate the complex nature of the problem I address. In the last section, I make explicit some challenges in terms of *intervention and research in social work, around the interruption of pregnancy*.

### **The discussion of abortion in the Argentinean academy: interweaving background and questions**

Approaching abortion from a critical and situated social work requires mentioning those contributions that have been made in Argentina from gender studies regarding the right to decide.

The path of feminism in our country is long, rich and complex. Texts such as Andújar, Grammatico and Rosa (2010) explore the processes of politicization of women, organizational experiences and agendas in the normative, social and cultural fields in the recent past on our continent. Barrancos (2020) synthesizes the processes of shaping feminisms in different Latin American countries from the beginning of the 20th century to date, characterizing current movements such as “ni una menos”.

Focusing on abortion, Tarducci (2018) offers a periodization relative to the actions deployed in Argentina for the right to decide, which begins in the seventies with the pioneers, returns with the recovery of democracy and the creation of the Commission for the Right to Abortion; continues in the nineties with the Mujeres Autoconvocadas



por el Derecho a Decidir, and the Asamblea por el Derecho al Aborto, until reaching the Campaña por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito, which achieved the entry of the bills to Congress in 2018 and in 2020, where it was finally approved. Femenías (2018) complements these historical readings by pointing out the great absentees of the debate: the women themselves. She thus denounces the hegemony of a patriarchal reason that makes us invisible as agent subjects, and hinders us from building a locus of enunciation-other with respect to hegemonic androcentric perspectives.

This agenda, which colleagues from different disciplines are recovering, is not alien to our profession. A good part of our disciplinary collective has accompanied these initiatives in programs, institutions and territories. From the first support mechanisms for women victims of violence, consultancies, sexual health programs, articulations with first aid workers, to the procedures to access the Legal Termination of Pregnancy (ILE) and now the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (IVE), many of these instances were and are promoted from social work. This rich experience of intervention has not always had its correlation with written production and publication. This can be explained, among other reasons, by the late entry of our professional cadres into the national science and technology system. However, we have recently seen the emergence of materials from Argentine social work that contribute to gender discussions from a feminist disciplinary perspective (Guzzetti et al., 2019; Hermida, 2020b, Martínez, 2019; Riveiro, 2019). This article attempts to approach what emerges as an area of vacancy within the debates of the feminism-social work crossover in Argentina: that of a disciplinary, critical and situated gaze on the termination of pregnancy.

And from this transdisciplinary and undisciplined perspective, we recover the contributions of Bellucci, who analyzes the place of abortion in the feminist agenda and agency as a history of disobedience. This position supports the arguments that I develop in this article. “Regardless of what the church, governments, parliament, the medical and legal corporation aim, women implant our own decision to abort as a gesture of disobedience in the face of the compulsive mandate of motherhood” (Bellucci, 2014, p. 24). The political mapping that the author traces clearly shows how institutions, which from my point of view are the heirs and perpetuators of the colonial mandate, stand as representatives of the pater against which disobedience emerges as a strategy of resistance.

Bellucci asks: “Against whom do we insubordinate ourselves? Basically, we disobey heterosexuality as a political regime, just as our beloved Monique Wittig taught us.” (2014,

p. 24). I take up this idea of heterosexuality as a political regime, as a device of subjectivization and disciplining, and not only as a sexual orientation. Maternity and heterosexuality are intertwined, generating the fiction of a natural adequacy that is actually historical. In this framework, I understand that the intervention from a critical and situated social work should aim at the meticulous effort of deconstruction of multiple oppressive mandates that bring installed the hegemonic way of understanding heterosexuality.

I think in this framework that disobeying the patriarchy should not be read linearly as a univocal option or a mandate to abort or disavow heterosexuality in toto. Ester Vivas' (2019) wager on a feminist motherhood returns to the notion of disobedience, but in this case not to disavow motherhood but to reinvent it. This is also another way of disarming schemes of domination over our bodies and enabling multiple repertoires of existence where desire and not obedience are the distinctive sign.

The study of images of campaigns for the right to decide is also a relevant line. Vaccarezza analyzes very pregnant communicational objects. Among them the parsley and needles (2018), as objects that synthesize the precariousness of clandestine practices of access to abortion in contexts of non-recognition of pregnancy termination as a sexual and (non-) reproductive health issue. And also the so-called “first transnational symbol of the struggles for abortion rights in the Southern Cone: the “voting hand” (Vaccarezza, 2020, p. 37). These contributions allow us to approach the dimension of affect in the visual production in favor of the legalization of abortion.

Finally, Ana de Miguel Álvarez (2018), converging with the hypotheses of this text, points out that the prohibition of abortion should be read in the key of appropriation by males of women's reproductive capacity. While in his text he looks to the present and the future, analyzing surrogacy and surrogate gestation as processes where a patriarchal symbolic framework is hidden, in this article I try to look at the present and the future from a past that is still alive, to analyze in colonial devices such as miscegenation, this operation of appropriation.

### **Coloniality, patriarchy and intersectionality: interweaving categories and problems.**

In this section I will synthesize contributions of theoretical categories coming from situated thinking to look at the IVE from the perspective of social work. I start by de-

fining the idea of coloniality as the “pattern of power (...) that endures, even once the relationship of (explicit) subjugation disappears. Therefore, coloniality is that which still survives today as the inscription effect of colonial power on bodies and narratives.” (De Oto, 2012, p. 53). I speak then of coloniality in the present tense, as a dimension of the current social order that is rooted in conquest and colonization, and endures.

For its part, the notion of patriarchy encompasses the issue of gender(s), sexual orientation and adultcentrism. The pater is the figure that condenses the power of the modern family, having the power to use force over women, children and the elderly. He is also the founder of violence against gender dissidence, since the pater is the first custodian of heterocentric morality, and the first beneficiary of mechanisms that distribute the territories of legality and illegality, of protected and unprotected work, of day and night, of the center and the periphery, of rights and their absence. These differential cartographies between the world of men and the world of women, the world of adulthood and the world of childhood, the cis world and the trans world, allow the pater (as a metaphor of a hegemonic order usufructuated by certain privileged sectors) to have bodies of women, children and dissidences, available for use, control and exploitation, in a discretionary manner. The figure of the pater is also that of the patron, which is why patriarchy is a nodal system for interpreting class oppressions.

Coloniality and patriarchy are inseparable processes, configuring “racially structured patriarchal capitalism” (Bhavani and Coulson, 2004, p. 60), the basis of the social question in which social work intervenes.

The normative corpus that governs our profession globally and in each country emphasizes Human and Social Rights as the legitimizing field of our profession. We can think of rights as conquests that we wrest from the system through the consistent and organized struggle of subalternized collectives. Or as concessions that the system grants once the capacity of agency or transformation that the exercise of these rights entails has been neutralized. In any case, it is reasonable to think that neither one nor the other premise can give a complete account of complex historical processes. That is why I am interested in reviewing the struggle for the conquest of the right to decide, in the context of the IVE, situating ourselves in our America, in Argentina, and in the processes of conquest, colonization and coloniality.

Anibal Quijano (2014) argues that the colonial matrix of power, structured from the invention of race, colonizes each of the structures of social existence: in the control of



labor, there is the capitalist enterprise; in the control of authority, the nation-state; in the control of intersubjectivity, Eurocentrism; and in the control of sex, the family. María Lugones (2008) makes these ideas more complex by incorporating the coloniality of gender. She disagrees with Quijano's idea of encapsulating the gender issue in the sphere of family, sex and reproduction. Gender, for Lugones, is transversal to all domains of coloniality, as is the invention of race. It is a mistake to place it as just another dimension. Following this author, I derive the premise that the conquest of women's bodies (and their reproductive capacity) does not impact only one dimension of the pattern of power, linked to the family, but is systemic in the effects it produces.

"Neither the land nor women are conquest territory", says the slogan that has been written all over our America, on walls, papers and banners, and which refers to a debate that we will not be able to address in its entirety, but at least mention: the knotting between women's bodies and the land. I will point out only two of the feminist currents that allude to this relationship.

On the one hand, Latin American ecofeminism, which, according to Ress (2006), emerged in the heat of the liberation theology debates, proposes a spirituality based on the earth, which would not imply an individual experience, but rather a collective one, questioning the androcentrism and anthropocentrism of patriarchal capitalism. Ecofeminism, linked to the feminism of difference, criticized for its (potential) biologist de-essentialist bias and for its perception of the sacredness of the female body, celebrated for its capacity to incorporate environmental issues into the political agenda, and to point out the mechanisms of inferiorization of differences in Westernism, is reinventing itself and is prolific along various lines.

For its part, community feminism has given an account of diverse indigenous cosmologies that explain the connection between women and territory in philosophical, political, social and cultural terms. Cabnal (2010) states that it arises from the experiences of Bolivian Aymara women, and the Xinka women of Guatemala, from the experiences of their body-earth territory, within the framework of their struggles against the ancestral native patriarchy and the modern western patriarchy. According to the author, the body-territory is crossed by the violence of the patriarchal connection, being the land territory violated by the neoliberal extractivist model. Paredes (2015) affirms that this current aims at the decolonization of feminism, betting on the autonomy of the long memory of the peoples of Abya Yala, of their bodies and sexualities.

What I want to emphasize regarding the connection of women's bodies with the territory, is not so much linked to the spiritual dimension that some feminisms address, but to material and historical aspects: the conquest of women's bodies was necessary to achieve the conquest of the "pre-intrusion world" (Segato, 2015). The systematic rape of women, but also the kidnapping, purchase or delivery for arranged marriages (Cattelli, 2020) has occupied a determining place in the processes of conquest, colonization and coloniality. Diversified strategies with a common point: the sexual reproductive dimension of women is co-opted by the colonial enterprise and put at its service. Therefore, I understand that each battle to expropriate and restore freedom and will to these bodies-territories, puts in check, or at least pierces, the architecture of racially structured patriarchal capitalism.

The intersectional perspective also contributes to thinking about the contours of the debate around the interruption of pregnancy in our America. As Hermida (2020a) points out, it was introduced in the academy by black feminism (Crenshaw, 1991) in the last two decades of the 20th century (taking the experience of African American women's activism), questioning the invisibility of the place of oppression of these bodies that were not contemplated either by the agenda of the struggle of white feminism (which pursued the concerns of white heterosexual middle-class women) or by the agenda of the rights of racialized subjects (which was subsumed centrally to the struggle for the rights of black men). The focus was on pointing out a set of categories (race and gender first, and then sexual orientation, disability and age) and how they intersect. Lugones (2008) points out the risk of the notion of "category", its essentialist character. It is that these marks of subalternity interpenetrate each other, to the point that they do not represent pre-existing categories that intersect, but open processes that cannot be conceived if not in and through their links.

In the history of our American history this point is nodal. We will see to what extent race/gender intersect in very different processes, such as the eugenic policies of the times of the first Argentine centenary, and the bets of feminisms situated in processes of autonomy and emancipation.



## **The agenda of the legal dispute of feminism in Argentina: interweaving history and politics.**

Since it is impossible to separate the analysis of theoretical categories from historical and political processes and their condensation in the legal sphere, I offer a very brief review of those struggles that tried to restore what was appropriated by the colonial patriarchy.

In Argentina, the legal fight for us to be able to dispose of our money and belongings was a long one. In 1926, law 11.357 was passed, which modified the civil code that declared women as incapable of administering our own property. This “advance” would only apply to married women.

In 1947, with Eva Perón, women’s suffrage was consecrated. Our political rights are still in dispute. Law 24.012 of 1991, known as the Quota Law, requires that 30% of the electoral lists be made up of women. However, in the political, legislative and executive scenario, we are still underrepresented. In 1985 and 1987, the discussion was no longer about the right to manage our assets, but about our ties; to be able to have parental authority over our children, and the Divorce Law.

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In 2006, Law 26.150 of Integral Sexual Education (ESI), advances on the right to know our bodies and make our own decisions. But to date it continues to receive setbacks from conservative sectors and their campaign #conmishijosnosemetan.

I do not want to leave aside the rights of dissidents, since I understand the feminist struggle from a non-essentialist perspective, where the axis is the dismantling of patriarchy and not the vindication of the signifier woman. I am talking about struggles against patriarchal violence that are centrally instrumented on women’s bodies, childhoods, sex-gender dissidence, and also on nature within the framework of the anthropocentric character of patriarchy (and even, although in a differentiated manner, on masculinities themselves, an aspect that our discipline has been addressing -Artiñano (2012). Law 26.618 on equal marriage, of 2010, and Law 26.743 on gender identity of 2012 are nodal achievements of a rights approach with a gender perspective(s).

In terms of social, economic and labor rights, in 2013, Law 24,844 on domestic workers remedied one of the most aberrant cases of legislative labor discrimination (previous regulations indicated that women working in the so-called “domestic service” could



not demand certain rights). Special mention must be made of the colloquially called “retirement of housewives”, which recognizes in the law that “what they call love is unpaid work”. Key here are the moratoriums that allowed the realization of these retirements through Decree 1454/2005, which reactivated Law 24.476 and Law 26.970 of 2014, which broadened the spectrum, achieving access to cover 96% of the population of retirement age.

If we were to peek into the parliamentary debates of those different laws, we would see with surprise (and indignation) how history repeats itself. There is a hard core of misogyny. But to what can we attribute this persistence in limiting the life and freedom of women? What materials is this hard core made of, silent, omnipresent, hidden under masks of multiple argumentative fallacies, which in the last century we see deployed every time we try to discuss the legal recognition of a right for us? What is this unsaid? And why does it come back? It is not enough to say that it is misogyny. It is necessary to try to understand the root of this hatred, and what powers are competing underneath these positions.

Let us dwell on the recently discussed bill on abortion. The discarding of embryos is not illegal in Argentina, when they are generated in vitro. But when those same embryos are in a uterus and not in a test tube, there a large group of political and religious referents are equipped for their crusade in defense of those embryos. What is being discussed, then, does not refer to the embryos but to the gestating body and its right to decide. Where is the root of these resistances? Moreover, why were these other struggles won in the 20th century and the right to decide on our gestating bodies was left pending for the 21st century? Why were we able to dispose of our goods before we were able to dispose of our bodies and our desire?

### **“Women are not conquest territory”: weaving genealogies of appropriations of pregnant bodies.**

Why has the legalization of abortion been the issue on the feminist agenda that has met with most resistance? Some of the edges of this problem have been unveiled by the contributions. But I am going to dwell on one facet of the problem, which is central to critical and situated social work. I refer to the device of miscegenation (Catelli, 2020), a nodal strategy of the conquest, first articulator of sexuality and race. The body of women, its appropriation and use by the conquest enterprise, was the first territory, the central gear through which various techniques of control, ordering and classification of



the colonized populations were implemented. It cannot be defined as the mere “mixing of races”, but rather as the privileged strategy of power, political without a doubt, and in the same movement, sexual and reproductive. Miscegenation implies “practices and discourses on love, gender and sex in situations of colonial domination” (Catelli, 2020, p. 85).

Reinserting that legal agenda of 20th and 21st century feminism in the long time of conquest and colonization, provides a deeper analysis of that power that resists giving us back what it extirpated from us: our bodies.

Mestizaje was implemented by means of an alliance device that according to Catelli (taking up Foucault) configures the system of marriage, kinship, and transmission of surnames and inheritance. I understand that this device is combated by a good part of the legal conquests of the 20th century, which I described in the previous section as rights to dispose of our goods and our ties.

This device of alliance lost relevance as the political structures were modified, with the emergence of the device of sexuality, which Foucault (2009) locates in the 18th century and Catelli from the 15th and 16th centuries. It does not totally eliminate that of alliance, but it is superimposed on it, determining the relationship of subalternity of women’s bodies. The control of the capacity to gestate is totally captured by the patriarchal colonial enterprise and its devices.

This genealogy of the intersection of coloniality, patriarchy, gestation, would be truncated without an outline of the complex historical plot that followed the times of conquest and the colonial era to which I alluded. If we advance in the historical line, we see that between the end of the 18th century and the mid-19th century, the different independence revolutions in Latin America will take place, discontinuing colonialism as a political system, leaving in force coloniality, internal colonialism and economic neocolonialisms. The colonial question goes beyond the “Spanish conquest of 1492”, and demands an archeological reading of the twists and turns of history in order to locate differential (and even opposite) uses and meanings of abortion in the past and present.

Reflecting on the interruption of pregnancy from a situated perspective places us in a variegated present where the civilization-barbarism tension continues to beat in Argentina. The racist maxims that Sarmiento wielded in his *Facundo* of 1845, endure and have a direct impact on the debate I raise here. The defeat in the Battle of Caseros



(1852), the War against Paraguay (1864-1870) and the Generation of Eighty, which implemented the “Conquest of the Desert”, express the consolidation of racial and gender oppression, impacting on the processes of construction of meaning and state intervention around the policies of reproduction.

Among the ingredients of this racist and misogynist ethos I point to nineteenth-century positivism. The influence of the doctrines of Cesare Lombroso, Italian physician and criminologist, regarding crime as the result of innate tendencies, of a genetic order, as well as the positions of Francis Galton, British polymath, founder of eugenics, a (pseudo)discipline that had such an impact in our country and in our profession, stand out (Basta, 2008). The “infamous decade” (1930-1943) was the scenario that saw the birth of two emblematic organizations of this crossroads: in 1930 the first School of Social Service was inaugurated, dependent on the Argentine Social Museum, and in 1932 the Argentine Association of Biotypology, Eugenics and Social Medicine, to which the Argentine Social Museum itself adhered along with other universities and organizations.

As Scelsio states, within the framework of eugenics and biopolitics “we locate the emergence of new professions such as the Social Hygiene Visitors, ‘destined’ to work from their origins, primarily with health policies aimed at children and pregnant mothers in situations of social vulnerability” (2020, p. 14). In turn, the normative tutelary framework in relation to childhood of the so-called “Agote Law” of 1919, is an expression of the impact of the Lombrosian perspective in our country.

In the health and social professions, a classist and racialized view is consolidated regarding which bodies can and should mother, how they should do it and what the State should do from a tutelary conception regarding childhood, fathers and mothers when those phenotypical and behavioral repertoires are not the normative ones.

I summarize this process of overlapping of racist policies and their impact on social intervention in the evocation of a place: Martín García Island, a scenario that illustrates in a stark way the colonial appropriation of the bodies of others. An indigenous concentration camp operated there (during the period 1871-1886), where the State implemented practices of control, physical exploitation and distribution of the subjected indigenous people (Nagy and Papazian, 2011). And on that same island, the physician and legislator Luis Agote proposed, in the first decades of the twentieth century, to confine some ten thousand minors whom he described as vagabonds to be regenerated through work and moral vigilance.

The concern for the “improvement of the race” of the eugenic perspectives extended to the immigrant masses. From the ships came down poor Spaniards, Italians and Jews, expelled by the war, without formal education, with union experiences linked to socialism and anarchism, who did not resemble the immigration that the generation of the eighties expected, those enlightened Saxons from Northern Europe of whom Sarmiento dreamed, and who would hypothetically promote industrial and cultural development in the country.

In this complex plot, abortion did not always operate as a slogan linked to the “right to decide” of women, but from the late eighteenth century and until the mid-twentieth century, it was largely part of the repertoire of eugenic perspectives in vogue worldwide, of race improvement. Miranda (2018) argues that unlike Anglo-Saxon eugenics, a proponent of mass sterilizations, Argentine eugenic hygienism, due to its conservative Catholic imprint, denied, at least in its official positions, this type of procedure. Nevertheless, it implemented very sophisticated devices to intervene on bodies with gestational and maternal capacity.

We see that reproductive policies were historically understood with divergent meanings. On the one hand, the strategies of control over gestation promoted by eugenics, operating as a racist device of appropriation of the body of certain women (supposedly pernicious in their genetic, racial, political or cultural charge), with the correlate of motherhood as the only and necessary destiny for the growth of the population in other women (white, civilized, propagators of the good genetic and moral inheritance of the nation). On the other hand, abortion, as wielded by situated feminisms, is configured as a device radically opposed to this initiative: that of restoring the power to decide (which was appropriated by the judicial, medical and political corporations) to pregnant bodies.

### **Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy: interweaving feminisms, decolonization and social work.**

I place myself unequivocally in the vindication of the right to decide about our bodies. And for this very reason, I insist on building mediations for a critical and situated approach to the processes of pregnancy termination from social work. That is why I





ask myself: How can we contribute to the achievement of this right and, in the same gesture, try to criticize the agenda of white institutional feminism?

Following Bidaseca (2011), I am concerned about the gesture of “white women trying to save brown women”. A good part of the so-called non-eurocentric liberal feminism has participated and participates in campaigns of “promotion and prevention” of sexual and reproductive health in “third world” women’s communities; programs orchestrated by international or state agencies, which seek to “raise awareness” or “educate”, through the intervention of middle or upper class literate professional women, women from popular sectors, indigenous or rural areas, and “guide” them in their “family planning” processes. Arias (2012) already alerted us to how problematic this model of promotion can be, which sometimes even requires subjects to participate in “training” in order to access “benefits”. I fall into this abuse of quotation marks, revealing that a good part of our concepts, associated with a certain citizenship approach, contain a problematic dimension when we look at them from a decolonial lens. Doing critical and situated social work involves locating the colonial bias that can represent the deployment of devices that, presented from a semantics of rights and promotion, conceal a logic of disciplining and control.

For this reason, when I speak of IVE, I want to tie the notion of “voluntary” to two dimensions: undoubtedly to that of decision, non-coercion and freedom, but also to that of desire, from a logic of restorative justice. The notion of decision is almost directly linked to cognitive capacity. The notion of desire allows us to visualize not only minds, but bodies, bodies that think but also feel, desire, enjoy, have illusions and the right to recognize them and act accordingly. This respect for this will, which is decision and desire, does not imply declining all intervention. Rather, it means promoting a non-violent intervention, of listening, of reweaving ties and supports, deconstructing both the biases of enlightened and messianic avant-garde interventionism, as well as the unimplicated bias that excuses its inaction in the supposed perversity inherent to everything that is state-run.

To affirm that bodies with the capacity to gestate cannot continue to be territory of conquest implies understanding that colonial relations are sexed, bodily relations, which acquire diverse contours in different historical moments. My hypothesis derived from these readings is simple: without the almost seamless power that the conqueror/colonizer had over women’s bodies (sexed bodies with the capacity to gestate) and that the legal/health/disciplinary parapet (as a present mediator of patriarchal coloniality)



continues to have, the (neo)colonial architecture falls. The device of sexuality operates by circulating racial and patriarchal power, because these biopolitical techniques, when it comes to reproduction, never have the final word on the gestating body. In effect, women have much less possibility of living our sexual desire freely, and almost no possibility of deciding on the final outcome of this meeting of bodies in reproductive terms. It is not necessary for me to dwell, for example, on the many situations in which contraceptive methods are not enough to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. Giving back to the gestating body the decision about gestation implies disarticulating the device of sexuality as it was instrumented by the patriarchal colonial order.

I believe that this is the reason why, even in the 21st century, we are still disputing these legal tools. Measures such as Comprehensive Sexual Education and the Interruption of Pregnancy, encounter these resistances because they offer a different cartography for the circulation of the power of this determinant device of control that is that of sexuality.

To maintain that neither the land nor women are territory of conquest supposes, as I have previously stated (Hermida, 2018), to encourage a problematization of the State, in the contradiction that inhabits it, as a constitutive element of Colonial Modernity, but also as a field of dispute to occupy (García Linera, 2010) and reinvent (De Sousa Santos, 2006). As Segato warns: “the role of the State will be, therefore, to restore to the peoples the material and legal means for them to recover their usurped capacity to weave the threads of their own history” (2015, p. 173). In this line, I understand that an intervention from the critical and situated social work will be to accompany and promote processes that restore the decision to gestate (or not to gestate) to the thread of desire and not to exogenous mandates of various kinds.

## Conclusions

This text placed the debate on abortion in the field of the problems of coloniality and patriarchy in our America. The hypothesis that I explored states that the establishment of the colonial capitalist system had as a condition that the capacity to gestate is decoupled from the will of the gestating body (either in terms of accessing a sexual relation or continuing a pregnancy). The devices of alliance and sexuality (Foucault, 2009)

and that of miscegenation (Catelli, 2020) operated in this sense. The conquest of the territory-land (Cabnal, 2010) would not have been possible without the conquest of the territory-body (Paredes, 2015) of women. The sexual and reproductive use of these bodies, and the annulment or control of the desire and decision that this same body could exercise, was and is a condition of the capitalist colonial enterprise. In response to these mechanisms of subalternization we saw how feminism invites us to different paths of disobedience, which implies in some cases insubordination to the heterosexual regime of obligatory motherhood (Bellucci, 2014) and in others the rehearsal of a motherhood disobedient to the hegemonic mandates (Vivas, 2019).

Motherhood in racially structured patriarchal capitalism operates as an assigned and distributed place with variations according to the historical moment and the gendered and racialized expressions of bodies. The decision of how many children to have, when and with whom, will be regulated according to the interests of the system, via diverse material and cultural devices. During the conquest and the colonial period, the mechanisms of control were the mestizaje and the devices of alliance and sexuality. The eugenic hygienist perspective that structured the country's project at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century operated by usurping women's decision on gestation, under racist ideas of population improvement. Institutional white feminism at the end of the 20th century also configured processes of intervention on the bodies of racialized women that we cannot fail to problematize from a critical and situated social work. The issue then is not abortion itself, but the legal, safe and free possibility of deciding and desiring, which I understand we must promote for the restitution of gestating bodies.

The right to decide on the capacity of gestating bodies is undoubtedly a public health issue. But, in its scope and genealogies, the problem is even deeper, and central premises of the current order are at stake. There is much debate on the right of the gestating body to decide, but it is not clear who has been exercising this right of decision for 500 years in our America. Thus, although it is true that in debating the IVE the parliament deliberates about us, our capacities, our desires, our rights, I believe that, perhaps without knowing it, they are deliberating about something else.

Analyzing the IVE from a feminist perspective from our American feminist perspective allows us to reinstate on the scene all the violence that was cleansed by the story of the "meeting of cultures". I make a small gesture of historical-epistemic justice, making visible with Bolaños (2002) and Catelli (2020) the perverse operation of textual/sexual cleansing. While what took place was war, rape and coercion, what prevails in the story

about the conquest and colonization is the idea of encounter and melting pot. The scene of the crime is cleaned up, the sexual and reproductive dimension of the crime is annulled, and the taking of women's bodies as the first territory of conquest and plunder. I propose to call things by their name, not only to make visible new violence (since these practices are still in force in expressions such as chineo, or institutional police violence that is reproduced with impunity on the bodies of racialized women) but also to have some chance of dismantling this system of inequalities that is disguised with euphemisms and non-eurocentric looks.

When I state that what is at stake is to restore the will to give birth to the gestating body, I am not placing this statement in a liberal individualistic perspective, but in a political, collective and situated perspective. Because the challenge is to denounce this capture, the function of which was to found a profoundly violent and unequal system. How can we think of critical social work without taking on the problematization of this dimension of the current order? I believe that our profession needs to place on its agenda the efforts to restore the emergence of life to the thread of desire and not to the interests of a patriarchal capitalist colonial system, which perversely appeals to life to maintain the uncoupling that allows it to continue to reproduce a death society.

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ARTICLE

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## Transgressive Maternities: political-affective resignifications of women activists in the Chilean post-dictatorship

### Maternidades Transgresoras: resignificaciones político-afectivas de mujeres activistas en la postdictadura chilena

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#### Abstract

In the post-dictatorship Chilean context there are certain memory practices that associate women's activism in anti-dictatorial struggles with an imaginary of motherhood that, from an androcentric logic, reduce the understanding of their political resistance to the relationship with a male other. However, these unders-

**Keywords:**  
gender; memory;  
activism;  
motherhood;  
affectivity;  
motherhood.

tandings are tensioned with other subaltern memories, which -from a feminist analysis- allow us to rethink motherhood by situating it in complex and dynamic socio-political contexts, highlighting its possibilities of agency. Drawing on the findings of research on gender, memory and activism, the following article aims to analyze political-affective resignifications of women's resistances that refer to motherhood and that mobilize against dictatorial violence, challenging the patriarchal structure. From here, we argue the relevance of observing memory practices on women's activisms that allow for complexifying the understanding of historically subalternized political agencies, and conclude by pointing out some challenges of this line of research around the current critical debates in Social Work.

## Resumen

En el contexto chileno de postdictadura existen ciertas prácticas de memoria que asocian los activismos de mujeres en luchas anti-dictatoriales con un imaginario de maternidad que, desde una lógica androcéntrica, reducen la comprensión de sus resistencias políticas a la relación con un otro masculino. Sin embargo, estos entendimientos se tensionan con otras memorias subalternas, las cuales -desde un análisis feminista- permiten repensar la maternidad situándola en contextos sociopolíticos complejos y dinámicos, relevando sus posibilidades de agencias. Analizando los hallazgos de una investigación sobre género, memoria y activismos, el siguiente artículo tiene por objetivo analizar resignificaciones político-afectivas de resistencias de mujeres que refieren a la maternidad y que se movilizaron en contra de las violencias dictatoriales, desafiando la estructura patriarcal. Desde aquí, sostenemos la relevancia de observar prácticas de memoria sobre activismos de mujeres que permiten complejizar el entendimiento de agencias políticas históricamente subalternizadas, para concluir señalando algunos desafíos de esta línea de investigación en torno a los debates críticos actuales en Trabajo Social.

### Palabras Clave:

Género;  
memoria;  
activismo;  
maternidades;  
afectividad

## Introduction

In this article we propose to problematize the ways in which women's activisms carried out in the post-dictatorial context in Chile are associated to a masculine other, highli-



ghting the figure of the “mother-activist”. From a feminist analysis, we are interested in questioning the assumptions from which the ideal of motherhood is constituted, in the multiple contexts in which this category makes sense. However, we emphasize the need to consider the resistances that are possible in these memories and that can mean escapes to androcentric memory practices, seeking to analyze the narratives of activists as complex, dynamic and situated experiences, which allow us to reread historically subalternized agencies.

During the civil-military dictatorship in Chile, between 1973 and 1990, the deployment of the authoritarian regime, socioeconomic reorganization, and state terrorism promoted conservative discourses and practices that reinforced the values of public order, homeland, family and religion (Maravall, 2012). Here the role of women was associated with reproductive frameworks in the private space, safeguarding housework and the positions of housewives, wives and mothers (Isla, 2017).

Despite the generalized forms of implementation of the repressive regime, opposition organizations articulated resistances where the feminine and feminist contribution would stand out, questioning the patriarchal subordination and challenging the occupation of public spaces (Palestro, 1991). Just as there was an active and important participation of women in political parties and revolutionary/armed organizations (Vidaurrázaga, 2015) and in human rights defense groups (Yáñez, 2008), various feminist groups sustained their demands articulating the struggle against the dictatorship and against patriarchy (Largo, 2014), highlighting agencies and resistances of settler, peasant, indigenous, lesbian or trans women who escaped the traditional frameworks of political participation and who are still in ignorance and invisible (Hiner, 2016).

With the end of the dictatorship in 1990, the beginning of the transitional process to democracy configured a type of political rationality that, through pacts and consensus, continued to administer the dictatorial legacy and deepened the installation of the neoliberal project (Follegati, 2011; 2013). In relation to gender issues, policies and programs focused on women were implemented, where the new administrations reconfigured a conservative discourse that linked the category of women with private space, family and motherhood (Richard, 2001). Institutionalizing the role of the welfare state and in articulation with the logic of democratic “reconciliation”, the association of women in victimizing and paternalistic figures was deepened, where the maintenance of the nuclear family continued to be a priority for the socioeconomic model (Hiner, 2013; Hiner and Azócar, 2015).



Within this historical period, the tensions between the role of many women activists with the normative gender system, administered both in dictatorship and transition, continue to be a relevant area of study and a fundamental space in addressing memories of the recent past, as we consider that hegemonic memory exercises have been marked by an androcentric and masculinizing character (Luongo, 2013; Troncoso, 2020).

Returning to some of the findings of recent research, we present a discursive analysis of interviews conducted with activists, participants of social organizations, and workers of public sites on human rights and memory, where we explore memory practices around women's activism and forms of invisibilization and recognition of these experiences. This project was carried out in collaboration with the Gender and Diversity Research Cluster of the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile, a space that is committed to the development of research from contemporary critical approaches to Social Work. In this sense, as social workers, we are especially interested in contributing to current critical debates, recognizing the historical legacy of our discipline in various areas of study and social intervention related to memories and human rights, disputing meanings and constituting work proposals with emancipatory horizons. From here, we would like to contribute to critical reflections of Social Work around collective memory studies, positioning ourselves disciplinarily from intersectional feminist approaches in dialogue with our profession.

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The following sections are structured as follows: first, a conceptual section presenting the main theoretical guidelines on the articulation of gender and memory, and the notions of affectivity and motherhood. Secondly, we point out methodological tools used in the research and a synthetic review of the main findings. Subsequently, we develop in depth the analytical discussion around the interview material, observing the possibilities of rethinking the role of "mother-activists" and the heterogeneity of experiences of this figure. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the central ideas reviewed, and some implications and challenges for Social Work.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Gender and memory: Resignifying affects as political practices***

For the purpose of our analysis, we understand memory as a contextually situated social process and product, where the understanding and re-signification of the past is carried



out as a function of the present (Halbwachs, 1995) and diverse forms of memory are in constant dispute (Jelin, 2001; Vásquez, 2001), framed in power relations whose world-views promote and reproduce a particular social order (Calveiro, 2006). We approach memory from its social and political character, as it allows us to problematize and destabilize totalizing versions of the past, paying attention to the space of conflict and subalternized narratives (Piper et al., 2013).

Returning to the contributions of feminist theories, we are especially interested in understanding memory in articulation with gender as an analytical category (Troncoso and Piper, 2015), betting on a critical gaze that reflects on the power relations that are instituted in the ways of remembering, asking about gendered ways in which subjects are understood in memory practices, and questioning heterosexist elements of narratives of the past (López, 2018; Reading, 2014; Troncoso, 2020).

Following Troncoso and Piper (2015), we understand memory as gendered, in that memories produce gender relations and subjects, but are also constituted from processual, dynamic, complex, and situated gender positions. Therefore, memory exercises establish positions that can (re)produce the dominant gendered social order, but can also enhance the denaturalization and destabilization of that heterosexist normative coercion (Galaz et al., 2019).

Positioning ourselves from feminist perspectives, we are interested in analyzing activist memory practices and their link to gender, paying attention to affective and experiential spheres, situated in historical and political contexts. From here, we emphasize the importance of reflecting on embodied locations to re-signify political-activist action frameworks, thinking of affects as contingent social practices (Ahmed, 2015; Macon, 2014) linked to the materiality of bodies and based on complex and contradictory frames of intelligibility (Butler, 2010).

To conceptualize these political-affective resignifications, we will take up the contributions of some feminist authors who have participated in the debates around the emotional/affective turn<sup>2</sup>, such as Sara Ahmed (2015; 2018; 2018; 2019), Lauren Berlant

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<sup>2</sup> Although several debates in this field of study have problematized the differentiated understanding between affects, emotions, sensations and feelings, for the purposes of this research we will not conceptually define a distinction between emotion and affect. This decision is related to the theoretical positions from which we are going to think of the affective and the emotional as categories of critical analysis, particularly based on the contributions of feminist thinkers in the so-called emotional turn. Theorists such as Helena López, Cecilia Macón and Sara Ahmed have referred to the distinction between affect and emotion, pointing out the ways in which this separation can reproduce dichotomies between the individual/social, the bodily/cognitive or culture and nature; while other authors to whom we will refer do not explicitly refer to this distinction either (such as the work of Eve Segdwick). Taking up these proposals, a more flexible understanding of both terms is advocated, in order to address the political effects of emotions and to question the way in which the affective circulates socially.

(2012), Eve Segdwick (2018), Clare Hemmings (2005; 2012), Cecilia Macón (2014; 2020) and Helena López (2014). Based on these proposals, we will not understand affectivity as an individual/psychological expression, but as a relational framework (López, 2014), where emotions are produced as effects of circulation and contact, framed in social ties and mediated by cultural and historical interpretations and meanings (Ahmed, 2015). In this sense, our position seeks to highlight the role of affect in the construction of meanings, without dichotomizing emotion and reason, dismantling the assumption that there are good and bad affects, and that certain feelings would be pre-determined to specific and normatively delimited objects (López, 2014; Macon, 2014; Segdwick, 2018).

We believe that thinking “the affective” as a category of analysis does not imply idealizing the place of emotions. Affects constitute values and symbolic representations according to the contexts in which they emerge, and emotional practices also operate in interrelation with political orders. This may involve the reproduction of hegemonic imaginaries, legitimizing and generating racial and patriarchal violences (Berlant, 2012), allowing the invisibilization of subaltern experiences under the overrepresentation of other stories (Butler, 2010) and operating as techniques of orientation towards sexist and heteronormative ways of life (Ahmed, 2018).

Now, challenging these social norms entails the possibility of relating affectively in other ways to these norms, thinking of their effects as collective harms (Ahmed, 2015). This is not to say that emotions should become the target of anti-oppressive struggles, but rather that: “they can question the assumed character of these frameworks and thereby supply affective conditions for social critique” (Butler, 2010, p. 59). Analyzing affect in activism potentially constitutes a political and epistemological engine (Lorde in Lopez, 2014), enabling a critical understanding of activist experiences as practices that are not oriented solely under the ends-means calculus (Berlant in Macon, 2014).

Given that emotions are not inherently a starting point for the political, nor are all affects inherently revolutionary (Ahmed, 2015), what conditions the political potential of affects is the possibility of moving from personal experience to collective capacity (Hemmings, 2012). These affects emerge as politically positioned practices, where



affective solidarities represent forms of mobilization as a gesture of political will and not as a natural condition that is shared identitarily (Hemmings, 2012); that is, the ability to be affected not only by what affects us individually, but also by that which points out our precariousness and claims our constant interdependence, highlighting the need for collective political action (Butler, 2020).

### *Motherhood as a category of critical and feminist analysis*

For our study, motherhood emerges as a relevant axis in the understanding of activists' gendered memories. Although in this article we will not delve into its various forms of theorization from feminist studies, we will take up some important elements to analyze motherhood as a social and political category.

We understand the concept of motherhood as a Western cultural institution closely linked to the construction of the feminine prototype restricted to the private space (Vidaurázaga, 2005). Historically, motherhood has been installed as a social prescription for many women, relating to being a mother with intrinsic and natural characteristics of femininity within a heteropatriarchal system (Rich, 2019). Motherhood as an economic, social and political category, operates according to its relationship with scientific, political and religious discourses and institutions, which promote a hegemonic figure of mother associated with a natural instinct of love, unconditionality and self-sacrifice (Esteban, 2011; Lagarde, 2005). This implies questioning the naturalization of the maternal function of all women, and observing it as a relational construction crossed by power relations, where the correct ways of being a mother are regulated and modes of subjectivation are regulated (Sánchez, 2016).

We observe motherhood in its forms of articulation with other institutions such as capitalist organization - highlighting the relationship between capitalist economic institutions and the invisibilization of domestic work and its corresponding feminization (Carrasco, 2001; Federici, 2018; Pérez-Orozco, 2019; Rodríguez, 2015) - and with racism, religion or heterosexuality (Yáñez, 2017).

However, and retaking the critical contributions of feminist studies, it is essential to understand its multiple, dynamic and contradictory character (Yáñez, 2017). In this sense, we opt for a feminist positioning that does not stagnate motherhood in an oppressive essentialism, but rather bets on complex and intersectional readings of motherhood as a



plural, contextual and relational practice, giving visibility and relevance to the diversity of experiences and implications of maternal care (Takševa, 2018).

In consideration of the above, we are interested in observing motherhood in contexts of activism, where the maternal role is transformed, adapted and resignified in various forms of resistance and transformation projects (Vidaurrázaga, 2005). Recently, several memory studies in Latin America have contributed to analyze the spaces of activism in dictatorship and transition, and their implications from the present, focusing on gender relations and women's experience, analyzing motherhood as a relevant factor to observe in contexts of political mobilization. From here, we are interested in questioning the understanding of essentialized hegemonic motherhood, and observing the disruption of the maternal stereotype in spaces of political activism (Ramírez, 2011), highlighting the questioning of activist-militant women who moved away from the ideal of motherhood (Sapriza, 2018; Vidaurrázaga, 2018), but also, emphasizing the forms of resignification of motherhood inscribed in other political horizons of companionship and solidarity (Sepúlveda, 2014).

## Methodology

We discuss part of a study that explored the articulations between the notions of gender, activism and social interventions of memory, aiming at understanding the ways in which state interventions in the Chilean post-dictatorship (re)produced hegemonic memories in relation to the category of gender, in connection with subalternized memories of political activism. As part of this study, we conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, in a sample that included people from public institutions working on memory issues, members of civil human rights organizations and activists who participated in anti-dictatorial struggles and who are still part of organizational spaces.

We carried out a discursive analysis, reflecting on forms of enunciation that allow for concrete patterns of relationality (Campos, 2012). We analyzed the discourses of the interviewees as social practices constitutive of social relations that have truth effects (Foucault, 1979; Hernández, 2010; Iñiguez, 2003), and we wondered about the political positions that defend the enunciations and the power relations that traverse them, obser-





ving the historical conditions of production that allow a discourse to be constituted as such (Emiliozzi, 2017). We study the discourses in their productive conditions, in order to understand the forms of normalization/regularization that these discourses institute, but also the possibilities of resistance around these practices of memory. Thus, the enunciations present dispersions and heterogeneities, which account for complex and contradictory speech positions among themselves (Deleuze, 1987).

## Results

We asked the interviewees about women's activism and the ways in which they were remembered, appealing to elements such as invisibilization and forms of oppression of women during the dictatorship and transition. The main findings were divided into three central axes: the tensions in the discourses on political transition in the post-dictatorship period; the overrepresentation and invisibilization present in discourses on human rights; and finally, the gender relations promoted in the narratives. Regarding this last point, we addressed elements such as androcentrism in the narratives, the understandings of the subject "activist woman" in the discourses and the articulations between memory practices and feminism.

The results show that many women activists occupy subaltern places in the memories of anti-dictatorial social struggles, and it is recognized that traditionally there has been a male overrepresentation in the narratives of the past. In several of the interviews, memory practices about activism during the dictatorship are associated with a prototypical male leftist militant, or women are included in a universal and apparently neutral political subject. However, these interpretations are in tension with gender-based experiences and inequalities that operated within political militancy, where women's participation was made invisible and sexist roles were reproduced among its members. Here, motherhood and family ties emerge as experiences portrayed through figurations of unconditionality and sacrifice. Nevertheless, many activist discourses manage to account for the complexity of gender-based relationships, on many occasions making memory from a present marked by the contingencies of the feminist tide of 2018.

We analyze these memory practices on women's activism during the dictatorship and the transition period, tensioning this recurrent discourse of association of the woman-activist category with that of mother, axes that we will deepen below based on the conceptual elements proposed in previous sections.

## Discussion

### *Rethinking the role of “mother-activist”: Critical readings and possibilities for resistance*

One of the most relevant findings that we analyzed from the interviews is the overrepresentation of a hegemonic male figure in memory practices, as an imaginary that made other experiences of anti-dictatorial activist struggles invisible. However, when we asked about women’s political participation in this historical context, the discourses highlighted that, in the demands for the defense of human rights, truth, justice and reparation, there was a scenario in which women were leading agents:

*There is, for example, in Concepción a movement of the mothers of the students, but you say how are the mothers of the university students going to form an organization, when the students by definition do not have guardians, they do not have mothers or fathers to speak for them? And this was done because of the enormous number of arrests, so, curiously, being mothers was something that gave them a certain legitimacy to go to the police stations and regiments to plead.*

*(Interview 4, Participant, Public Institution, Female).*

*The female comrade who was fighting at that time was also the mother, she was also someone’s companion and probably fulfilled three or four other roles apart from that, unlike the gentleman, right? So, in that sense I would say that it is even more remarkable, this ability to fight on different fronts. (Interview 3, Participant, Public Institution, Male)*

As illustrated in the excerpts, many of the responses recognize women’s activism only in their condition as relatives and mothers of disappeared detainees, prisoners or politically executed. The role of motherhood is reiterated and recognized as a socially permitted place of activism for women, which could be associated with a role inherent to their gendered position. In many cases, the legitimacy of these struggles is associated with the acceptable stereotype of motherhood, which enhances family values and thinks of the woman-mother as the caretaker par excellence of the home. Here, the value of women who transcended the private space to demand the restitution of their family nucleus fragmented by State terrorism is highlighted. In this sense, the experience of motherhood defines a naturalized political place, understood as a superior experience, where the bonds between mother and child become irrevocable even for the military-patriarchal regime.



These discourses can continue to reproduce androcentric logics by reinforcing the imaginary of women as subjects whose political motivations are particular and are always in function of a male other. These narratives present motherhood from a homogeneous vision that can make invisible the complexities of these activisms, as well as their collective capacity and the political convictions and anti-dictatorial ideals that emerged from them.

However, it is important to recognize that the activisms constituted from the place of mother also allowed them to strategically challenge the dictatorial discourse that promoted a social order that relegated women to the private sphere, by inserting themselves into the space of social mobilizations in a consistent manner. As can be seen in the following quote:

*The other time I was talking about it with a gentleman who is a father, and who has been participating for a long time, and he said that for him this destroyed him as a person and immobilized him, and he was not able to do anything. But not so the mother, because the mother... had to be at 6, 5 in the morning, outside the national stadium, she did it, but to him? he said in his own words 'I consider myself a coward, an emotional coward, because I thought and the only thing I did was to cry and not be able to move and not do anything, but my wife, my wife was the opposite, that is, she had to live that mourning but also to be permanently going to the places where they said my son could be, and asking and consulting and traveling and making all that effort, but not me'. So, it is as if the woman has played a very important role here.*

*(Interview 5, Participant Civil Organization, Male).*

A reading of the quote could be understanding the mother's pain as an emotion whose natural response would be mobilization, that is, the linking of the loss with a desire for the restitution of the family. The mother emerges as a subject whose response would be action-oriented thanks to supposedly feminine affective experiences that result in her constant inclination to protect her children unconditionally in any scenario. From this point of view, the willingness to sacrifice would be based on a biological condition inherent to women, a maternal instinct impossible to associate with the paternal figure.

Our analysis offers a critical reading of these discourses, although it also recognizes that many activists may have embraced the place of motherhood as a position through which to justify their activism. We highlight the political potential of these activist practices, overcoming notions where motherhood is understood as a naturalized and

identitarian place of being a woman, to think of it as a political, affective, and situated construction. As Ahmed (2015) argues, the emergence of affects responds to contingent social relations and bonds, and not to determined objects, and in this sense, feelings such as the bravery enunciated in the story do not intrinsically respond to motherhood, nor does dispossession naturally translate into political action. This means that the experience of that mother whose pain was the object of mobilization is contingent and is not determined by an essence, as it may have been based on an ethical reflection, a desire for transformation and a deliberate search for social justice in a scenario that could have been otherwise. The mobilizing affects have to be so only insofar as there are conditions for the construction of a political place that becomes agency.

Many of these women not only transcended the frameworks of the political sphere for a limited period of time and as a function of individual interests. They also occupied a transcendental place in the struggles and resistance to the dictatorship, making demands and making visible systematic human rights violations from ethical-political places committed to truth and justice:

*I mean, I believe that, for example, the women of the group of relatives of the disappeared, of the group of the executed, that is to say, they were key, they were key. They had, they could say, they could speak publicly about many things that others could not speak about. The hunger strikes, the first hunger strike in '77, in the middle of the dictatorship with all that it meant. Look, my mother did not participate in the hunger strike, but she was in the support team, because the first strike took place at CEPAL. My mother was not a political militant, that is, she was the wife of a communist. She worked outside the home, anyway. And when the comrades were on hunger strike and the CNI, which at that time was the DINA, came to our house and went to intimidate my mother and us, and they followed us and we went to the radio, we went to the newspaper to leave communiqués, the old women chained themselves, they went to the embassies (...) We did those things. Nowadays that is nothing, but at that time it meant exposing our lives. (Interview 8, Human Rights Activist, Female)*

This quotation takes up similar elements to those analyzed above: the sacrifice and struggle involved in political actions framed in the denunciation of human rights violations and the search for social justice. However, collectivity and political organization stand out as important elements in these memories, presenting a framework of action that does not have to do with personal objectives but with a horizon shared by the community.

In the face of this, the exposure of life, bravery and political impetus that are pointed out as affective characteristics of these organizations -even when the consequences with



which the forces of repression threatened were latent- are not necessarily reduced to the stereotype of heroism of the mothers. Courage in these scenarios can be understood inter-relationally as an ethical-political sense based on the construction of alliances. It is possible to fight even in the face of fear because one is part of something, because the relational ties that are instituted in collective frameworks can give meaning to loss, but also to transformation (Butler, 2020).

### ***Heterogeneous maternities: political positions and affective resignifications in the memories of the activists***

Under the questioning of the hegemonic figure of “the mother”, an important element that emerges in the interviews analyzed is the appearance of very diverse experiences of motherhood while fighting against the dictatorship. Some of the women interviewed recalled the complex material conditions they experienced as mothers and activists, and the difficulties they had to face:

*Especially the fear... because it seemed like a nightmare. I remember, I cried, I cried..... My classmates told me “why are you crying? you don’t have to cry, my girl, if they kill you, you have to replace your comrade”. I found it so atrocious, it was like a tunnel that you were never going to get out of, that dark black tunnel and years went by and it kept getting worse, it kept getting worse, then... when they wanted to they would come to the town and shoot, suddenly the bullets would go through the shelters and one would hide the kids. ... my daughter remembers, my daughter is 39 years old and she remembers that... she remembers everything, that she used to throw herself under the bed, little kids... so that the bullets wouldn’t reach them. So it was an atrocious nightmare... It was terrible what we experienced. And even though some people are not very critically aware of the reality we lived through, but if you make them remember... they can still say yes... yes, that’s what we all lived through, that’s what the violence was like.*

*(Interview 10, Human Rights Activist, Female)*

Based on this quote, it is essential to destabilize the idealized image of the mother-activist, where certain conditions of life are taken for granted when carrying out tasks of upbringing and care from a heroic motherhood. On the contrary, these experiences were heterogeneous, intersecting with territorial, gender and class inequalities. The testimony of the interviewee gives an account of the events that constantly put the lives of the inhabitants of an impoverished population at risk, emphasizing the fact that they had to protect their children from gunshots. Motherhood in this story is framed in the denunciation of a structurally unjust system that affected her experience in a specific



way, where the interviewee positions herself politically from a “critical conscience”, recognizing what she experienced as violence. Thus, she highlights the importance given to memory by pointing out that it is the practices of memory that allow us to recognize this violence in the present, observing the implications of these experiences in their trajectories.

In addition to this, the narrative emphasizes the affective spheres that crossed their experience. We highlight how the care of children is not only remembered from emotions such as love and happiness, but also refers to feelings of fear and sadness in a risky context. We do not interpret these emotions as good or bad a priori, but rather observe their complex forms of articulation in the memories, which also make agency possible. Along these lines, it is interesting to problematize the idea that one should not mourn for one’s lost comrade, reproducing the association of grief and pain with victimization and the limitation of political action. We reinterpret this framework by highlighting how fear and grief complexify the victim/agency dichotomy (Berlant, 2012; Macon, 2014), and do not turn out to be exclusionary elements of the interviewees’ activist experience, but rather constitutive of their political mobilizations.

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Just as some accounts denounce the difficulties experienced, there are also resignifications of the past that specifically problematize the patriarchal order, referring to the ways in which the traditional dichotomy between public/private space was challenged:

*So I had to put up with it, I was a militant, I was a mother, I was a worker because I had to go out to work, because none of my parents would give me any money and in that sense, I felt guilty, I felt that I deserved that, like I deserved that, society made me feel, or because it always happened within my family... Since my grandmother was too “machista”, my grandmother constantly told my mother, you have to put up with your husband and you have to listen to your husband and all the rest of it. And my mom somehow wanted to do that too, although she wasn’t as strict with me as my grandmother was with her. Because at the same time I was also rebellious, I was rebellious in that sense and I didn’t accept that they imposed on me that I had to go back to my husband, and I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to.*

*(Interview 1, HRD Activist, Female)*

This memory exercise recalls the nexus between women, domestic space, submission and motherhood, which was promoted in a deeply conservative era, where the female role associated with childcare is exalted, with recriminations for escaping from those



normative frameworks. The interviewee refers to guilt as the main feeling associated with her insertion into the labor and political world, however, she emphasizes that this was due to social demands, problematizing the understanding of her role as something natural and rather denouncing the sexist norms that forced her to live motherhood in a certain way.

Guilt is articulated with a critical reading of the established social order, emphasizing her political positioning at the moment of rebelling against what was demanded and deciding to carry out motherhood in a different way, taking charge of the economic support of the household and getting involved in militant spaces. The interviewee re-signifies this memory from the present, identifying in the lived experiences her forms of resistance, in the light of a political context marked by feminist mobilizations. These interpretations are key in the transformation of social relations, as they transgress the immediacy of the story and allow new understandings of the reproduction of gender norms in the present, transforming memory into a political tool that constitutes frameworks for action from the interrogation of the past. From here, affects allow us to think of mobilization as an active and contingent process, where emotions do not necessarily imply leaving the past behind, but rather mobilizing from the construction of different links with the world and with others (Ahmed, 2015).

## Conclusions

In this article we wanted to reflect on hegemonic memories that promote androcentric views of the past, thinking about the articulation between ways of remembering and our gendered ways of inhabiting the world (Troncoso and Piper, 2015). Positioning ourselves from feminist theories, we were interested in observing historically marginalized memory exercises, highlighting the need to destabilize hegemonic conceptions of the past, which have configured a masculinizing official truth (Faure, 2018; López, 2018; Reading, 2014).

We analyze discourses that may reproduce the idea that women activists in dictatorship were mobilized by the fact of being mothers, based on a biological and natural role of femininity. In the face of this, we seek to make visible the tensions and complexities in these narratives, seeking to de-essentialize motherhood as an intrinsically oppressive category, and observing the ways in which it operated in different contexts, highlighting the political-affective dimensions of memory practices as key elements for their critical



understanding. Likewise, it is possible to see that women activists re-signified their experiences in past mobilizations and militancy by critically observing the patriarchal/dictatorial normative context.

We consider that the proposed analysis can contribute to re-signify memory practices about women's activism in the Chilean dictatorship and post-dictatorship, questioning the reductionist ways in which these activism have been remembered, but also highlighting the critical exercises of memory that dispute androcentric and sexist narratives. With the intention of contributing to reread these memories from a feminist exercise, we are interested in rethinking these memory practices as collective exercises that make visible and name other subjectivities and struggles (Troncoso, 2020). Likewise, it seems relevant to us to emphasize that analyzing the effects of emotions on memories can allow us to interpret forms of mobilization and social bonding in different ways. Here the struggles narrated by the activists interviewed should not be understood as the individual expression of good or bad feelings, but rather as affective dimensions that mobilize a way of questioning the established and constituent processes of collective transformation (Ahmed, 2015).

Likewise, we highlight the importance of not relativizing the ethical and affective practices that many women develop around motherhood, and think of a feminist horizon that is not against affective family bonds, but rather resists the patriarchal power relations that materialize in these spaces (hooks, 2017). Therefore, this critique of motherhood as a sexist imperative does not imply discarding care and affective experiences, but rather resignifying them as a fundamental ethical model to rethink the organization of the societies we inhabit (Tronto, 2013).

We consider that research in this line presents challenges to revise the understandings around exercises of memory, opening new areas of research that continue to develop the potential of the affective turn in the analysis of these social phenomena, as a field of relevance for disciplinary studies in Social Work. Thus, it seems relevant to point out some theoretical and analytical possibilities that were not addressed in this article but that emerged as interesting points that could be explored in the future, such as: the resignifications of memory practices of activists who are questioned from feminism in the light of the present; the analysis of intergenerational links observed in these forms of memory as political-affective implications; and finally, some reflections situated around our position as researchers from the emotional turn, thinking of the research process as a complex field that institutes meanings and that is implied in the results and theoretical analyses.





From these reflections, we are interested in reiterating the relevance of carrying out research exercises within the framework of Social Work, contributing to current disciplinary debates. As social workers, the possibility of training ourselves through research constituted a key space to rethink our professional work and to carry out practices of situated reflexivity. From this point of view, we believe that positioning ourselves from intersectional feminist approaches is a potential way to develop lines of work committed to struggles and resistance movements, which take up legacies and horizons of social transformation. In this same line, this research project allowed us to approach these theoretical and ethical positions, in dialogue with the political perspectives that social memory studies can suggest to Social Work. Thinking about our work as social workers in a broader historical framework than the present, invites us to redefine the disciplinary horizons as intergenerational collective projects that emerge from past/present relationships.

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ARTICLE

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## Labor and educational trajectories of racialized youth in Catalonia. Reflections from an intersectional perspective

### Trayectorias laborales y educativas de jóvenes racializados en Catalunya desde una perspectiva interseccional

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#### Abstract

Spanish immigration in the 1990s brought with it social, educational and labor transformations for the population in general and, in particular, challenges for the children of immigrant families. After three decades, it is generally held that the social, educational and labor integration of the children of immigrants is favorable, although different from that of autochthonous young people. This ar-

**Keywords:**  
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trajectories*



ticle will address these distinctions, assuming an intersectional perspective to analyze the educational and labor trajectories of young people of immigrant and racialized origin in Barcelona. Drawing upon qualitative research focused on the labor trajectories of these young people, we will show the restrictions that class, gender and origin have on their professional promotion in an increasingly competitive and precarious labor market.

## Resumen

La inmigración española de la década de los noventa trajo consigo transformaciones sociales, educativas y laborales para la población en general y, en particular, retos para las y los hijos de familias inmigrantes. Después de tres décadas, se suele sostener que la integración social, educativa y laboral de los hijos de inmigrantes es favorable, aunque distinta a la de los jóvenes autóctonos. El presente artículo abordará estas distinciones, asumiendo una perspectiva interseccional para analizar las trayectorias educativas y laborales de jóvenes de origen inmigrante y racializados en Barcelona. A partir de una investigación cualitativa centrada en las trayectorias laborales de estos jóvenes mostraremos las restricciones que la clase, el género y el origen tienen en su promoción profesional dentro de un mercado laboral cada vez más competitivo y precario.

**Palabras Clave:**  
Interseccionalidad; jóvenes; racialización; trayectorias educativas; trayectorias laborales

## Introduction

The Spanish State has a population of foreign origin of 4.5 million, with Catalonia receiving the largest share. Of the total population, 30% is of Latin American origin (Mahía, 2018). It is a young profile, of working age and led by women (Pedone, 2010). In addition, in Spain, one in four young people under 18 years of age have non-EU parents (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, 2019).

Young people of immigrant and racialized origin are perceived as possible contributors to the economic and cultural advancement of destination countries, but also as generators of challenges. For families of immigrant origin, schooling also has an important weight; the social ascent of children born or raised in the host countries is projected on it (Portes et al., 2018, p. 150). Socially, the educational and labor insertion of young people is appealed to as a way towards positive integration.



Despite efforts, the educational and labor promotion of the children of immigrants is a pending task in most immigration-receiving countries. According to the Longitudinal Research on the “Second Generation” in Spain (Portes et al., 2018), the number of children of immigrants who reach university does not exceed 30%; in addition, a significant proportion of young people occupy precarious jobs. Therefore, successful educational and labor trajectories depend on a set of social, environmental or contextual structures, which can come to condition the trajectories.

We start from the assumption that immigrant and racialized youth, although they are nationals, share with their parents experiences of racism, discrimination and inequalities that are structural and historical. The purpose of this article is to learn about the perceptions of sexism, classism and racism identified by immigrant and racialized youth having completed higher education. In addition, we will identify the factors that limit or facilitate their educational and employment trajectories.

We will employ intersectionality as a perspective of analysis to make visible the inequalities and difficulties faced by migrant and racialized college-educated youth because it is a perspective that fosters an understanding of inequality based on interactions among diverse systems of oppression, recognizing that the factors that cause social exclusions rarely depend on a single factor (Hill and Bilge, 2019).

The article is divided into three sections. The first focuses on intersectionality as a useful tool to make visible the articulation of multiple oppressions and propitiate new reflexive frameworks that contribute to destabilizing power structures. The second section refers to the methodology employed in the research. A third section presents the results of the research; here we will see how the articulation of class, gender and racialization impair the labor and educational trajectories of migrant and racialized youth. And we end with some brief conclusions.

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept developed by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) to show that the articulation of class, gender and origin has material and subjective repercussions for black and Latina women. The author studies the case of General Motors, a company that was sued by a group of black women who claimed to be discriminated against by the company. However, the case was legally dismissed, since the company presumed



that there was no gender or racial discrimination because it had hired white women and black men. For Crenshaw (1989), there were two interrelated discriminations that were not experienced by black men and white women, i.e., it shows us concrete inequalities and violence experienced by black women, omitted by the legal norm. Therefore, intersectionality allows us to think of women as a heterogeneous group, to recognize the differences between women and the impact of different systems of oppression, difficult to observe for white middle-class feminists (Davis, 2005), whose class and racial privilege has led them to focus on gender oppression.

The imbrication of violence experienced by different individuals and collectives has been denounced since the 1970s by black feminists (Brah, 2011; Davis, 2005). They pointed out that the feminist struggle could not focus on a single axis of inequality, because it left out women excluded by different systems of oppression (Hill and Bilge, 2019), for example, black, impoverished class, indigenous, gypsy and immigrant women: women placed in a status of social, political and economic inferiority.

Therefore, the intertwined violence and discrimination experienced by women has been named in different contexts, without calling it intersectionality. For example, multiple oppressions appear in the Combahee-River-Collective statement; Hill (2012) calls it a matrix of domination; Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of Bordenlans to make explicit the interconnectedness of race, class, gender and sexuality as systems of power linked to social (in)justice.

Intersectionality as an analytical tool allows us to observe the multiple oppressions experienced by people and reproduced by state institutions, including laws. From this perspective, norms and customs produce power relations, discriminations, differences and inequalities between people. Therefore, intersectionality is key to identifying the specific needs of people in vulnerable situations, ethnic minorities and immigrants, because they are the most prone to unemployment, impoverishment and exclusion, especially migrant and racialized women and youth.

The transnational perspective (Portes and Böröcz, 1998), by focusing on the person of migrant origin, manages to show their heterogeneity and resistance, the way they connect spaces, act in power structures and develop transnational social networks (Pedone, 2010). However, transnationalism is not necessarily interested in the everyday dimension of people, their constraints or adaptations. For example, it does not explain why during the economic crisis and the deterioration of employment, rejection, stigmatiza-



tion and xenophobia against so-called ethnic minorities appear. This rejection is fertile ground for receiving states to promote anti-immigrant laws and legislation, produces segregation between people who are native and those who are foreign (Lazaro, 2018); it also generates social hierarchies and symbolic boundaries that institute new stigmatized and racialized communities, as may occur with the children of immigrants.

Although racism is a reality in Catalonia and Spain, it has received little attention. We believe that racism is difficult to name because the discourse has been constructed in such a way that racism belongs to another time, another space and is read as an individual act. Indeed, “race” has been replaced by ethnicity, and racial problems appear as a synonym of difference or a cultural problem, “discrimination”, stereotype or prejudice (Delgado, 1998).

Segato (2012) argues that there is a relationship between racism, prejudice and discrimination, since prejudice is an attitude of personal convictions and discrimination is the effect of those convictions in the public sphere. Both terms can be seen operating, for example, in the world of work, when white people are given access to certain professions, which happen to be the best paid. The example shows that exclusion is the other side of privilege. In this article, race is understood as a system of domination that distributes the global population in positions, places and social roles (Lugones, 2008). We seek to avoid thinking of racialization as a matter of “pigmentation”, expressed in skin tones or ethnic-racial traits.

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The rejection of non-EU immigration in Spain, on the part of the population, is found in language oriented towards the defense of the national and against those who put the welfare state at risk. These discourses generate processes of otherness and divide citizens and non-citizens. Examples of this are the basic rights denied to people of immigrant origin or the difficult access to education and formal jobs, as discussed below.

### **Racialized and/or immigrant-origin youths in Spain**

The children of non-EU immigrants are referred to as “second generations”. If an immigrant is a person who is the protagonist of a migration, then it is a term that does not always apply to young people of second generations, as they have not necessarily experienced international mobility.



Second generation also has a certain racist content, because it refers to the children of immigrants from “third world” or “ethnicized” countries. For Delgado (1988, p. 115), the social imaginary attributes ethnicity to the pre-modern, something that is inferior. Thus, when we speak of “ethnic minorities” we refer to “moros”, “negros”, “Filipinos”, “Peruvians”, that is, impoverished migrants or migrants of “gypsy” origin. Therefore, we use the expression racialized or immigrant to refer to those young people who were born or socialized in Spain.

Various studies (García, 2003; Labrador and Blanco, 2007; Montcusí, 2007) argue that the children of immigrants inherit their migratory status; they are classified as non-native, even though they have never lived outside Spain. In addition, they carry all the racist stereotypes of migration, as they are read as suspicious, threatening or bearers of “inappropriate cultural practices” and are placed in an inferior position. National states allude to early schooling as a device for assimilation (García, 2003, p. 9), and social integration. However, remaining in the educational system or successfully overcoming it will depend on the educational, family and contextual environment.

Although the family is often blamed for school failure, the truth is that there is a negative view of foreign students; they are read as undesirable (García and Olmos, 2012). School segregation policies disguised as residential ascription have been documented (Cutillas and Moraes, 2018), which produce educational disadvantages for racialized students (Cebolla and Garrido, 2011). Ballestín (2015), explains that teachers find it difficult to attend to student diversity.

Stereotypes and racist practices are also found in the labor market. It is usually pointed out that in the selection of hired personnel, the quality of the resumes takes precedence; however, the project “Growth, equal opportunities, migration & markets” (University of Essex, 2018) has shown that employment discrimination does exist. The results show that candidates from ethnic minority groups are discriminated against, despite having the same training and motivation as nationals. Group-based discrimination occurs mostly in the first phase of the recruitment process. Research shows that stigmatization can trigger discriminatory behavior and bias the evaluation of job candidates.

The above is a sign that racism, sexism and classism have been naturalized in the social body, which makes it difficult to identify them beyond discrimination. For this reason, an analysis from the perspective of intersectionality is necessary in order to see the impact on the educational and labor trajectories of racialized youth living in Barcelona. First, we will point out the methodology used.

## Methods

The results of the present work derive from the research entitled “Hesitant horizons: perceptions of discrimination in the educational trajectories of young children of immigrants with higher education”, developed between November 2019 and September 2020. With the objective of exploring the perceptions of discrimination in migrant and racialized youth, the study was based on a qualitative methodology. In order to approach the subjectivity of the young people, describing and understanding their everyday life, the in-depth interview technique was used (Parra and Briceño, 2013). This approach allowed the interviews to develop in a flexible and dynamic way, creating an atmosphere for the participants to express themselves freely (Taylor and Bogdan, 1990).

Although we initially planned to have as many young people as possible, due to the effects of Covid-19, we were only able to conduct nine interviews (six women and three men). The selection criteria for the participants were that they were young people between 22 and 35 years of age, residents of Barcelona, with completed university studies or higher and that they were the children of parents of immigrant origin. The young people interviewed are graduates in a variety of disciplines within the social sciences, Social Work, computer science, anatomy and technical vocational training.

The interviews were conducted through the Zoom virtual platform and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The virtual interview format, by eliminating the use of tape recorders, allows the interviewees to express their opinions with greater flexibility and freedom. However, this format has the disadvantage of not allowing the recording of non-verbal communication, spontaneity, gestures, emotions or reactions when dealing with sensitive topics such as discrimination and racism.

The information produced was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. This method recognizes the significant structures that define social complexity, in which a schematic ordering and a rigorous analysis of the results can be carried out (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once the transcription work was completed, the data were organized according to the following themes: family/migration trajectories, educational trajectories and labor trajectories. The analysis focused on the participants' lived experiences of discrimination through understanding and interpretation (Shutz, 1967). The software used to carry out this process was Atlas.ti.



The nine interviews make up a non-probabilistic sample sufficient to capture the perception young people hold about their social, educational and labor reality. The profile of the young people represents the described heterogeneity of the subject studied, maintaining the variables of class, gender and origin. The sample follows the criteria of qualitative research, intensive on a small scale, where the relevance is the cases studied rather than the number of informants (Ragin et al., 2004).

In this research, the ethical component is fundamental; therefore, each participant was given informed consent, validated by members of the Ethics Committee of the Hospital Sant Joan de Déu. The names of the informants that appear throughout the article have been changed to respect anonymity.

## Results and discussion

It was the processes of regularization and family reunification, initiated in the 1990s and 2000s, that led to the increase of foreign minors in Spanish schools and institutes (Mahía, 2018). Most of those interviewed were reunited by the father and only in two cases by the mother. The fathers first regrouped the mother and, years later, the children. The young people, who emigrated between the ages of three and ten, are from Morocco, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Argentina. In addition, we found two cases of young women of Moroccan descent born in Spain.

The weight of immigrant status, exclusion and stigmatization are factors that can limit the educational aspirations of migrant and racialized youth. The young participants point out that their parents' migratory dreams are linked to obtaining better employment, economic and educational opportunities for the benefit of the family. However, upon arrival, the parents will find a socioeconomic order that excludes them from occupations, housing, residence permits or citizenship. As Gil Araujo (2004) argues, Spanish immigration regulations produce classifying and qualifying effects among the different groups. Depending on the origin or provenance of the immigrant, they will face different requirements to obtain residence, nationality or access to social welfare.

The time it takes for the parents of the young people to regularize their stay or to obtain family reunification procedures, reformulates the migration project and alters family life. For example, half of those interviewed indicated that they had not grown up in two-parent families, either due to the dissolution of the couple, the death of one of the parents or the formation of new families, as shown below.



*When I arrived at the age of 12, my mother was here with another partner, with my little brother's father. (...) When I arrived she was already pregnant again.*

*(Marta, 29 years old, Dominican Republic)*

Another important factor that has an impact on children's education is the prolonged absence of parents due to long working hours. It is often pointed out that the lack of family support leads to school dropout, especially because the lack of attention is due to the hard working conditions of parents and family members (García, 2011). These conditions are not unrelated to the category of race. Racialization has an important weight for groups of human beings to be inserted into a social, labor and political hierarchy (García, 2003).

In the work experience of people of immigrant origin we can observe how gender, race and class are interrelated. The labor market makes use of categories to classify and distribute people according to work, origin and sex-gender. In the Spanish context we can see women of immigrant origin employed in domestic and care service, a job that, although regulated, does not have pension contributions or access to unemployment insurance.

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It is illustrative to observe how the parents of the young people interviewed in Spain have inserted themselves in occupations (pre)established for people of immigrant origin. The mothers of the interviewees have been employed in caregiving, house cleaning, factories or nursing; while the fathers have worked in construction, services, commerce, electricity and transportation. The occupations show a sexual and racial division of labor; they are temporary, precarious and with long working hours, conditions that sometimes prevent parents from having time to accompany their children's formal education.

Difficulties in obtaining residence and work permits and mastering the language are factors that lead people to think of immigrants as "uneducated" or unqualified, who "accept" all kinds of jobs (Labrador and Blanco, 2007, p. 79). But this is not the case. There is a social order where racism and patriarchy are indissoluble, and to maintain it it is necessary to use legal mechanisms to differentiate between nationals and non-nationals. The intertwining of categories, class, gender and origin are those that enclose people in the immigrant category to fulfill different functions such as labor, socio-economic or cohesion of the population.





In the case of the young people interviewed, the parents of three of them had work experience in skilled jobs, but their experience was not recognized at destination. For both qualified and unqualified parents, employment will be experienced as a “start from zero”, as they do not have support networks, making labor market insertion difficult and leading them to irregular, poorly paid and low-skilled occupations.

The reproduction of inequalities is carried out through a bureaucratic and legal labyrinth to exclude and cover up the structural racism with which institutions operate. In the case of Spain, the legal mechanisms will make the homologation of university or postgraduate degrees unfeasible. This is how the young people interviewed explain it.

*My mother was a primary school teacher, once in Spain she started working as a caregiver for the elderly and as a cleaner.*

*(Joana, 30 years old, Ecuador)*

The non-recognition of studies serves as a device to produce subordinate, disposable, exploitable bodies, thrown into precariousness. As expressed by one of the young people interviewed.

*For example, my parents when they came to Spain could not choose and say, well, I don't want to work in the fields or in the factory.*

*(Martin, 24 years old, Argentina)*

At their destination, the parents of the young people are faced with the difficulty of combining work, studies and care. This situation reduces their possibilities to dedicate time to supervising homework, which can demotivate young people and lead them to drop out of school, or to undertake vocational training (Cano et al., 2016). This is one of the reasons why the children of immigrant families interrupt their studies.

Social inequalities and inequalities of origin are reflected in the educational sphere, although the dream of families is social mobility through education, expressed as “being someone”. The truth is that the descendants of migrants are at an educational disadvantage, both due to socioeconomic conditions and to the segregation produced by the Spanish educational system itself.

Carrasco et al. (2011), explain that in the Catalan context, segregation concentrates infants and adolescents of non-EU origin in public schools, due to the difficulty for families to afford the costs and extracurricular courses. Therefore, inequalities of class or origin cannot be read as “cultural” or linguistic immersion problems.

In their educational trajectories, young people will constantly be read as foreigners and racialized. The interviewees, despite being born or socialized as Spanish/Catalan and speaking the language, will be read from the perspective of otherness. The interviewees constantly have to listen to the question “Where are you from?” or answer questions about their country of origin, which is sometimes a distant reference. As Fatima explains

*On many occasions, native people find it exotic or curious to have a foreign classmate or a classmate labeled as a foreigner. Even if they know that we have been educated and socialized here, they ask all kinds of questions about the country we come from.*

*(Fatima, 22 years old, Morocco)*

The insistence on continually asking about origin and “exoticizing”, as Fatima calls the act of racializing, and the surprise expressed by the students lead us to think that, for many local youth, it is not common to find immigrant or racialized people with an academic trajectory beyond the basic compulsory education.

### ***Perceptions of Discrimination in Educational Trajectories***

The young people who have managed to get to university find that other diplomas must be added to the university degree, thus lengthening the educational stage of the young people. The people interviewed are at different educational stages; although they all have completed higher education, most of them are pursuing master’s degrees or other studies.

Despite the fact that the young people interviewed are pursuing postgraduate studies, the results of this research show trajectories strongly marked by stigmatizations linked to their origin and immigrant status. The negative discourses, most repeated by the young people, are the low expectations that teachers usually have for their academic future, even when they have a good profile.

*I remember the orientation classes in the 4th year of ESO<sup>2</sup> in which we decided what to study in the following year. At that time, the guidance counselor “advised” me not to go to high school or to opt for a university degree, even though I had a good academic record.*

*(Fatima, 22 years old, Morocco)*

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<sup>2</sup> Obligatory Secondary Education.



Students of foreign origin coming from disadvantaged social sectors and cultural minorities are constantly projected with a supposed deficit in learning, motivation and work. This perception of the teacher constructs students of non-EU foreign origin as the “other”, as lacking, without taking into account their situation of vulnerability, as García (2003) points out, always alluding to the supposed deficit theory. Therefore, the relationship that the school establishes with students of immigrant origin is one of differentiation, in such a way that there is little incentive for non-EU students to study university careers.

The low expectations towards students of non-EU origin cause a minority to continue their education. In the case of the young people interviewed, who are part of the successful minority, they argue that they achieved their university degree because they found support and motivation in reference to their parents. Three young people mentioned teachers as elements that encouraged their educational trajectories. It should be noted that the Spanish educational system prioritizes the early schooling of immigrant children, so that their social integration is faster, as can be seen in the following account:

*When we arrived, I could not enter the school. Because at that time I had to attend the 2nd year of ESO. We arrived in May and classes ended in June. And since I was already going to ESO, at that time the director said that it was not necessary, that I could join the following year in September. On the other hand, my brother did go, because he was going to primary school and they said that it would be better for him to integrate.*

*(Marta, 29 years old, Dominican Republic)*

The insistent allusion made to young people about their “origins or culture”, which continually emphasizes their “otherness”, their non-belonging, produces in students the perception of being on the margins (Carrasco et al., 2011), since they almost always start from a position of socioeconomic disadvantage. Therefore, the supposed pretension of inclusion or equality cannot occur in such circumstances. Educational policies aimed at promoting or encouraging social inclusion do not address an essential part of the material, economic and legal problem that affects adolescents and their families, which consists of sentencing them to precariousness, exclusion and impoverishment.

Undoubtedly, we highlight the educational work as a tool that transmits critical thinking, employability skills and skills against adversity. However, the perception of young people regarding their educational trajectories is mostly negative. They identify school as



a means to obtain qualifications, but it does not always allow access to an increasingly competitive and exclusive labor market.

*And although I didn't know what I wanted at that moment, what I did know was that I didn't want to stay only in the ESO. Well, and in terms of employment, only with the ESO, many doors are closed to you, but I did want to have the option of having it there, even if I didn't work at it later on.*

*(Andrea, 23 years old, Ecuador)*

### ***Perceptions of discrimination and racism in labor market insertion***

The fact that the young people have completed higher education in the host country positions them with a higher social and educational capital compared to their parents. In this sense, the interviewees confirm what the literature points out (Heath et al., 2008), that they have a certain advantage over their parents due to their command of the language, academic itinerary and social immersion.

The young people interviewed present different labor market insertion problems. For example, they share with the natives the precariousness of employment, part-time work and the mismatch between studies and occupation. This situation derives from the labor reforms of 2012, aimed at eroding labor protection, establishing a permanent precariousness that particularly affects youth and impoverished groups (Moreno, 2015) and producing greater labor segmentation, hierarchized by gender, age, origin, educational level.

At the same time, they have two elements in common: having combined higher and/or university studies with salaried work, and the conviction to continue training. The young men and women indicate that since the age of 16 they have been employed in greengrocers, restaurants, hotels, clothing stores, cleaning and caring for the elderly. The fact that their parents are their first network of contacts leads the young people to be employed for the first time in unskilled jobs.

Once they have obtained a university or professional degree, the young people say that their main sources for finding employment are websites, job search applications (Infojobs or LinkedIn), social networks, official schools: a minority have turned to friends and relatives. The results of the research indicate that the “plug-in” resource disappears when looking for qualified employment.



Young people share with the native youth the precariousness of employment, but they do not compete on equal terms. Once again, the intertwining of sex, gender, race and origin can be observed in the experience of young people, in the division of labor, in access to qualified positions and in the selection of personnel.

The young people use the term “discrimination” to express everyday racism; they have all gone through job interviews where they have been asked about their origin. Therefore, origin or “culture” is a factor that companies take into account when selecting personnel. Even if some young people downplay its importance and consider it as a simple “curiosity” of the interviewer, the truth is that origin, racialization and gender are interrelated and are important filters in the selection of personnel, as Jasmine has experienced:

*I remember that at the Casa Tarradellas factory, a place where young people work in the summer and earn a lot of money, my sister sent her CV together with a friend of hers. The friend was taken and she wasn't. She was surprised, she didn't understand why. When her friend asked at work, she was told that as a pork company, they didn't want Muslim people. They assumed that since we don't eat it, we can't work with pork.*

*(Jasmine, 25 years old, Morocco)*

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To approach educational and labor trajectories from an intersectional perspective is to explore the way in which immigrant and racialized youth see, internalize, act and reproduce a set of values that contribute to perpetuating situations of inequality. Half of the people interviewed indicated that they had not felt discriminated against in the workplace. However, they describe differences in treatment and constant comparisons between people of the same origin. Differential treatment and racism in the social context is usually understood as something individual and not as a structural system:

*(Have you felt discrimination?) No, at least not in my case, I have seen it in other colleagues' experiences. And not long ago, recently, in a fellow countrywoman of mine. But I still think that everything is in the person because look, we are both from the same country, and my colleagues said 'Wow, what a difference there is between one person and the other, in the way of working'. It's all in the person.*

*(Marta, 29 years old, Dominican Republic)*

In the Spanish and Catalan context we find an egalitarian rhetoric that thinks of inequalities as “cultural” problems, and seeks to remove barriers to the interaction of people by dismantling stereotypes and discrimination. This declaration of intentions clashes



with the categorization of immigrants, who are considered problematic and dependent on social services.

On the other hand, young people are aware of their social disadvantages: they know they are read as foreigners; however, growing up or being born in Spain allows them to function as local people. This situation sometimes protects them from racist aggressions. For this reason, half of the young people are reluctant to acknowledge racial discrimination, although they recognize that they have felt inferiorized in the world of work.

*I don't think it's something from the company or the human resources team, I think it's more from experience. My company, before hiring me, had bad experiences with Moroccan girls, and they felt rejection when hiring someone from the same country. Yes, when I started working, I was the second choice, because another national rejected the position, and that's when they called me. When I started working, they told me that I had surprised them because they expected less from me.*

*(Jasmin, 25 years old, Morocco)*

Hierarchization and stigmatization have an impact on the subjectivity of young people, who try to flee from those negative elements with which they are identified. For this reason, the young people interviewed find it difficult to talk about racism; yes, they suffer from it and detect it, but they try to escape from it. But they cannot always escape from the countless looks, different treatment, inferiorization and daily expressions that place them in otherness.

Although associated with discrimination, what young people experience on a daily basis are expressions of racism, which is explicitly attributed to people based on the color, physical traits or ethnic group to which the person belongs (Segato, 2012). This set of attributes reduces young people's chances of finding employment.

*In telephone interviews in which I have been asked about my origin, I have been negatively affected, hanging up on me [the phone] from the moment they knew my origin, or continuing the interview with little interest.*

*(Fatima, 22 years old, Morocco)*

According to the results, the young people who have fewer employment opportunities are those who have physical traits associated with minorities, those who do not have Spanish nationality, those who do not speak the local language, and those who have a

religion other than Christianity. The interviewees also mentioned being less discriminated against compared to their parents. They handle the local language, they know the cultural codes or they are Catalan/Spanish; however, they are not recognized as Westerners.

Without the tool of intersectionality it would be difficult to detect discriminatory practices against these young people and their families. But the most relevant thing is that it allows us to see how, in the social body, there are perceptions and representations projected on people, which have an economic, political and legal impact (Crenshaw, 1989).

Racism operates from the State, because legislation identifies, defines and classifies subjects into citizens and non-citizens. In this classification, young people “inherit the immigrant condition”; for example, two young women interviewed mentioned the impossibility of accessing formal employment because they do not have a residence card. And those who do not have Spanish nationality face the limitation of not being able to become civil servants.

The racism experienced daily by young people in the work environment is usually negative comments towards people of immigrant origin, and is one of the examples most often repeated by those interviewed.

*In my first job I had, when I was 18 years old, my coworkers would always say racist comments towards me, or about other immigrants in front of me.*

*(Fatima, 22 years old, Morocco)*

Young women of Moroccan origin are evidence of the racialization of gender. The racist idea that Moroccan men are suspicious, criminal and macho is widely spread, and the proof of such oppression is the use of the hijab. The reality is that Muslim women often point out that if they are not in the labor market it is because they are not hired. As the following quote suggests

*Two of my closest friends, one of them a receptionist at ROCA where she got in through contacts, she does wear hijab, but she does not wear it to work. And I have another one, who studied a degree, she has two masters. In the interview they told her that if she had worn the hijab, they would not have taken her, but as she already knew it, she did not wear it and they took her.*

*(Jasmine, 25, Morocco)*





In addition to racism in the labor market, young people have to contend with the mistrust that associates youth with inexperience, and with the clichés linked to the immigrant condition. For example, some of the young people interviewed with positions in the social sector, indicated that they had been chosen for the position because of their knowledge of the Arabic language and culture in sectors where they work with a non-EU population. However, this demand is directly related to the scarcity of national profiles not possessing such knowledge. Therefore, these are niche markets for certain “ethnic” profiles.

*Yes, in hospitals it is good to have someone who speaks the language; in case there were misunderstandings or other obvious issues, they had to work with “Moors”.*  
(Hakim, 29 years old, Morocco)

## Conclusions

The use of intersectionality as a perspective of analysis allowed us to observe that although Catalonia and Spain have a heterogeneous population, there is a tendency to think of diversity as a “problem”, and as a problem associated only with non-EU populations. Although social institutions have incorporated the discourse of inclusion and interculturality, their policies on diversity tend to fail, precisely because the State implements a series of devices that limit, segregate, stigmatize and divide people into locals and non-EU citizens.

As the research shows, both in the educational system and in the labor market, far from facing the challenges of interculturality in terms of equality, students of immigrant and racialized origin are treated with otherness. Young people are classified, identified and ordered negatively, based on preconceived ideas that construct them in such a way that they find ways to justify discriminatory practices, both in educational centers and in the labor market.

The differentiating treatment that young people receive often fosters a negative identity construction, for example, about their abilities, damaging their expectations in terms of continuing and extending their studies beyond the compulsory ones. In the case of those who have managed to continue their university studies, like the young people in this study, they face different challenges.

In the labor market, young people in general face precarious and unstable working conditions, marked by temporary and part-time jobs. This reality is shared by young people





who are the children of immigrants, who are also affected by the negative effects of the labor market.

The results have shown that the labor trajectories of the young children of immigrants are conditioned by the social hierarchies of people, an issue that begins at an early age with the differentiated treatment they receive in the classroom, the low expectations that teachers have of them, which can lead them to drop out of school and to develop precarious and low-skilled jobs.

Despite the fact that young people are positioned with a higher educational capital than their parents, structural racism is strongly manifested in the Spanish labor market. Here they will encounter various adversities such as the impossibility of being hired because they do not have the nationality/residence permit; being discarded in the selection process for sharing cultural traits of “third world” countries; the attribution of job skills linked to the stigmas of origin; or the disqualification and inferiorization through racist words, looks and expressions.

Intersectionality warns us that the social divisions of class, gender and origin, determined by each society, do not function as separate entities, but are constructed and act together. In the case of the young people interviewed, we were able to see how origin, gender and racialization are filters used by companies when hiring, since all the young people mentioned that they were asked about their origin at the time of the interview. Having a foreign name and showing a photograph with non-white features can be exclusionary elements when it comes to being selected for a job.

We also found that some young people are aware of their disadvantages in the racial hierarchy, they know that they are read as foreigners; but the fact of having grown up or been born in Spain has allowed them to protect themselves, not to receive direct physical or verbal racist aggressions. Although they recognize that they have felt inferiorized in the labor market, half of the young people are reluctant to recognize structural racism. It is worth noting that despite the fact that the young people interviewed encounter difficulties when it comes to finding a job, they continue to invest in improving their professional curriculum. Therefore, they are young people who have high expectations regarding their future, highlighting in all cases their continuous training and search for better jobs.



Although the results of this study are not generalizable, they suggest the need to implement measures to prevent and combat business discrimination against these young people, reducing their risk of labor marginalization and social exclusion and the uncertainty about their personal situation and future in Catalonia.

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ARTICLE

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## Posibilidades y límites de la intervención pública dirigida a personas LGBT+ en Chile

### Possibilities and limits of public intervention aimed at LGBT+ people in Chile

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#### Abstract

In recent years in Chile, the demands of LGBT+ groups have intensified and the State has been responding reactively with some public policies and interventions, underpinned by an approach that continues to be binary and hetero-cis-normative. We present the results of qualitative research based on interviews with professionals from various public services and LGBT+ users of these services in three urban cities in Chile: Santiago, Concepción and Valparaíso. Among the main results are the conceptions of "sexual diversity" in the intervention with these groups, and the possibilities and limits that have been articulated in the areas of health

**Keywords:**  
Public  
intervention;  
LGBT+; sexual  
diversity; public  
policies;  
sexualities

and education, considering them as two relevant areas in social intervention. It is concluded that an ideal of “diversity” has been extended within the intervention that can cover up new inequalities and reify new positions of subordination of non-normative sexualities, which can contribute to shedding light on a social work more committed to these struggles.

## Resumen

En los últimos años en Chile se han intensificado las demandas de colectivos LGBT+ y el Estado ha ido respondiendo reactivamente con algunas políticas e intervenciones públicas, pero desde lógicas que continúan siendo binarias y hetero-cis-normativas. Se presentan resultados de una investigación cualitativa basada en entrevistas a profesionales de diversos servicios públicos y personas LGBT+ usuarias de estos servicios en tres centros urbanos en Chile: Santiago, Concepción y Valparaíso. Entre los principales resultados se encuentran las concepciones sobre “diversidad sexual” en la intervención con estos colectivos, y las posibilidades y límites que se han articulado en las áreas de salud y educación, considerándolos como dos ámbitos relevantes en la intervención social. Se concluye que se ha extendido un ideal de “diversidad” dentro de la intervención que puede encubrir nuevas desigualdades y reificar nuevas posiciones de subordinación de las sexualidades no normativas, lo que puede contribuir a dar luces a un trabajo social más comprometido con estas luchas.

**Palabras Clave:**  
Intervención pública; LGBT+; diversidad sexual; políticas públicas; sexualidades.

## Background

Since the end of the dictatorships in Latin America, the public debate regarding the rights of LGBT+ persons has reached a notorious visibility (Díez, 2013; Galaz et al., 2018), which has led to the creation of a series of legal-administrative devices, establishing a new category in the panorama of public management (Gauché, 2014)— sexual diversity. In Chile, public actions referring to non-normative sexualities have been given through technical indications, protocols, norms, some policies and laws (Galaz et al., 2018). These have not been established from political will, but thanks to the demand of different social movements (Movimiento de Integración y Liberación Homosexual, Movilh, 2016).

During the years of transition in Chile (1990-2005), the rhetoric of consensus and reconciliation, regarding the end of the dictatorship, had as one of its effects the neutra-

lization of difference, forcing diversity to be a “non-contradiction” (Richard, 2010). During the nineties, the demands of collectives with non-heterosexual sexual identities were postponed (Rivas, 2011). Thus, demands such as anti-discrimination laws, civil union or egalitarian marriage, gender identity, sexual and reproductive rights or decriminalization of abortion were not considered at the beginning of democracy.

On the other hand, the maintenance of sodomy as a crime through article 365 of the Penal Code, and the persecution and mistreatment of trans people under the protection of article 373, called Law of Pudor, Morals and Good Customs (Garrido, 2015) account for the criminalization of LGBT+ collectives during these years. The absence of political will to expand the possibilities of LGBT+ people to exercise their rights did not mean that sexualities were excluded from public intervention, but they were addressed as “problematic”. Thus, they were sanitary controlled due to the risk of HIV/AIDS, actions that rather than information or prevention, sought to protect the population of groups considered as “dangerous” for national health (Cabello, 2014).

This period is crossed by emblematic cases: in 2005, due to the trial of Karen Atala, lesbians were installed in the public debate within the framework of the family (Cabello, 2014), strongly crossed by heteronormativity and related to its recognition by the State as the basic unit of society. Since 2011, the demands for equal marriage have become stronger, installing itself as “a main demand of societies and cultures that seek to propose an image without discrimination and in favor of the rights of the excluded” (Cabello, 2014, p.19). On the other hand, the brutal murder of Daniel Zamudio shocked the country in 2012, which made possible the approval of the anti-discrimination bill that raises for the first time sanctions for crimes for reasons of discrimination. Finally, after an intense social mobilization, in 2019 the Gender Identity Law was approved, which still does not have the expected effects of recognition in trans collectives (Canales and Mallea, 2018).

During these years, the Chilean State has been pressured by the need to make itself visible as a modern nation respectful of Human Rights (Sabsay, 2011), seeking various strategies to address the “progressive agenda” of sexual diversity that in other parts of the world was already beginning to be installed (Sabsay, 2016).





## Theoretical elements: State, governmentality and LGBT+ people

In order to understand public intervention in the field of sexual diversity, the State should not be understood as a supreme, autonomous, homogeneous entity that generates certain social orders, but rather as an integral and changing part of the diverse historical social processes through which societies pass. This would imply thinking of the State as a process and not only understanding it from its institutional and structural variants. In the end, the focus is on the power exercised by the State through a series of mechanisms and institutions, rather than on the definition of the State itself. The task is to visualize the movement by which the State constitutes, through diverse mobile technologies, a field of truth with objects of knowledge; to analyze the technologies of power put into use and their effects, more than the functions that the state role fulfills (Bolívar, 2019).

The principle that sustains the field of state intervention is the need to ensure certain internal social cohesion and transform situations that are understood as problematic or of inequality among its members. This state intervention, materializing for example in various public policies and direct interventions, can no longer be thought of in the traditional hierarchical binomial way. It needs to be understood not only in terms of the practical measures to solve a specific problem, but in the tangle of meanings, actions and agents involved that it implements (Lascoumes and Le Galés, 2012).

We will consider that the social constructions that enable the emergence of certain social categories such as the so-called “sexual diversity” are framed in “semiotic-material matrices” (Estrada-Mesa, 2018; Hacking, 1999). These constitute classifications of subjects, establish what is and is not an addressable social problem, determine practices and limit the repertoires of nomination that have effects on materiality. Following Bacchi and Goodman (2016) we can affirm that the ways in which social problems are represented can themselves be addressed as political interventions that constitute political problems in different contexts. In a certain way, when analyzing public intervention we try to unravel, as Deleuze would say, the lines of a dispositif, its curves of visibility and its curves of enunciation. “What is certain is that devices... are machines to make one see and to make one speak” (Deleuze, 1990).

Thus, public intervention installs ways of understanding and acting that directly affect the trajectories of the subjects it considers as the center of its action. State action establishes procedures and mechanisms that determine which people are included or exclu-



ded from the systems. The device determines how people are named and what remains unnamed.

Therefore, in this article we focus precisely on analyzing public intervention to see how these regimes of light and enunciation of the device -on the construct of “sexual diversity”- are deployed and what is left in the shadows.

Such deployment is framed in power relations that are convenient for certain social orders, through the production of intelligibility regimes that legitimize certain truths against others and in which the practices of government and domination of populations are linked. This set of practices and operations of government make it possible to constitute, define and organize populations in such a way that it is not necessary to resort to the very exercise of force and coercion of the juridical paradigm in order to exercise power (Foucault, 1975).

### *Social subjects and identity policies*

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Generally, the articulation of public policies on an issue has, as a condition of possibility, the categorization based on specific social subjects - in our case LGBT+ people. Thus, access to rights is mediated by this identity belonging, and by the ways in which people are located in relation to certain discursive repertoires, temporal and geographical contexts (Ema-López, 2004). Therefore, many public policies and interventions respond to social actions that evidence a recognition of rights associated with determined identities, i.e., focused on identity categories (Romero and Montenegro, 2018).

In this sense, the so-called identity politics - in which many of the public policies, but also some LGBT+ struggles, are inscribed, give a certain centrality to the consideration of “social subject”. This leads, according to Ema, to public intervention being an expression of a certain prior nature that needs to be recognized, either through the accessibility of equal rights for all people, or by granting specific rights that are justified on the basis of a differential identity.

Some of the so-called politics of difference (or of identity) take as a starting point for their demands the recognition and valuation of a fixed and delimited identity (but now self-designated and assumed as their own, not imposed) as the ultimate legitimization of specific rights (Ema-López, 2004, p.9).



In most public policies with an identity-based approach, an essentialist view of subjects continues to prevail, as entities that give meaning to social processes by being considered the source and antecedent of action. As Butler argues, to think that subjects pre-exist politics, would imply

*a) that the capacity for action can only be established by recourse to a pre-discursive “I”, even when this is in the midst of a discursive convergence, and b) that to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by it, where determination cancels the possibility of action.*

*(Butler, 2001, p. 174)*

Therefore, the fact that public intervention is framed within this identity vision may affect the possibilities of agency of the social collective, to the extent that it establishes frameworks of possibility to make a “good subject” of that policy -even if it is positioned as resistance to those nominations. Ema López will say that the contradiction, therefore, “of this essentialist position lies in the fact that it fixes, determines and obliges the very subjects it pretends to represent and liberate” (2004, p. 9).

From intersectional feminist perspectives (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2019) the risk of essentialism in the development of collective projects and demands has also been problematized, paying attention to the potential invisibilization of intragroup differences, which needs to be countered with more complex and intersectional notions of community and politics. This translates into paying attention to the power relations that produce social inequalities, without ignoring the fact that it is particularly subordinate groups that need to make strategic use of identity politics to advance their particular demands, termed “strategic essentialism”.

## Methodological notes

The present research is ascribed to a sociocritical approach to social sciences (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Garay et al., 2005; Gergen, 1996). Therefore, it was carried out through a qualitative research methodology (Palumbo and Vacca, 2020) since social reality was considered as a set of interpretable relationships between subjects (subjects and objects), in a given sociohistorical context. It should be noted that qualitative research methods aim at understanding phenomena in terms of their meanings and refer both to ways of approaching knowledge and to the modalities of its analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994).

For this purpose, 40 in-depth interviews and 6 discussion groups were carried out, which allowed access to the dynamics of the relationship between the people involved and to the universe of meanings of these agents in their relations with the State, referring to past or present actions. The selection criteria for the social interveners interviewed and participants in the discussion groups were: a) that they had been working for more than one year on issues related to “sexual diversity”, b) that they worked in a public institution (education, health, municipality, etc.) and c) that they worked in the three urban centers of the research (Santiago, Valparaíso and Concepción). In the selection of users, it was considered that: a) they self-identified as LGBT+ (considering the variability of each identification in the three urban centers), b) that they had attended, at least once, a public service, and c) that they were of legal age and residents in the cities mentioned above. Each application of the instrument in the field had an informed consent form duly signed by the participants, and the identity and confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed (Villarroel, 2020).

We present below the main results of the research in three categories: a) the conceptions that are raised about the construct of “sexual diversity” in public intervention; b) actions in health, as one of the social spheres that emerges with more direct actions in relation to this group in Chile; and c) actions in education, as another area of special relevance in relation to LGBT+ experiences. It is important to note that the fieldwork of this research considered various areas of public intervention, however, the largest number of policies and devices consolidated over time since the post-dictatorship period to date on “sexual diversity” are concentrated in education and health. Therefore, in this article we wanted to focus on unveiling the logics of operation specifically in these fields.

### **Results: problematic construction of “sexual diversity”.**

First, in the different public interventions it is possible to visualize the persistence of a binary and heteronormative understanding around sexualities. That is, generally the problematic issues that are framed as “problems to intervene” (Galaz and Montenegro, 2015; Romero and Montenegro, 2018) linked to sexualities are understood under the dyad male/female or hetero/homosexual. This leads to priority consideration of actions referring to, for example, teenage pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections; violence in heterosexual couples, the defense of the right to civil union and/or marriage between homosexual persons, among other topics.



In the following account, the heterosexism (assuming that people are heterosexual) and heteronormativity experienced in the social intervention by LGBT+ people are precisely described:

*The intervention is generally marked by heteronorma. From the first treatment, it is taken for granted, you go to ask something and it is taken for granted that you are straight, that is to say that nobody thinks that maybe you are not. Unless it is something very marked, of physiognomy, people do not question it. The concept of diversity in this sense is one of abnormality. There is the concept of heteronorma as normal, so ah, they are different! you have to treat them differently and we are all different. That is, whether you are straight or not, everyone is different, when all straight people are different too. But this is invisible. They continue with a binary vision in terms of the fact that, in other words, the care files that arrive at the centers talk about people, that is, they talk about gender and they talk about gender identities, but they are not well disaggregated in our opinion... we reviewed these guidelines that arrived, we made observations at regional and national level, but they remained the same. So, there is a binary idea, as well as the identities because they make the separation in trans, that is, talking about transfeminine or transmasculine and not talking about non-binary trans, so there is also a lack of information and knowledge in professionals.*

*(Interview, practitioner- gender expert 7, Talcahuano).*

In recent years, the progress in the social recognition of transsexual and transgender people worldwide has also had its correlate in the daily public intervention, generating various actions in different areas - legal, health, education, for example. The binary and heteronormative approach makes intragroup differences invisible, homogenizes sexual diversity, and overemphasizes differences between heterosexual people and LGBT+ communities.

At the same time, in some cases, reductionist approaches to intervention are reproduced by focusing only on some aspects of the needs of trans people (social name recognition), leaving other needs that stress less visible structural areas (such as labor market insertion). This can also be linked to the fact that the demands of LGBT+ movements are often limited to social recognition and cultural visibility, neglecting structural aspects of redistribution (therefore, of the economic, social and political rights of these groups). This leads to the fact that many LGBT+ issues remain in the opacity of intervention, without sustained actions over time and with invisible themes. Only recently, in some areas, interventions focusing on trans people's problems have emerged, such as accompaniment in hormone treatment and identity transition processes, or legal support for the change of formal name.



In the following quote, a surgeon explains that in the care of trans people in recent years, little room is left for the autonomy of individuals, due to stereotypical views of trans people from the medical point of view, which are limited to the permanence of the male-female binary and the existence of fixed and static identities:

*There are people who make a bodily, hormonal transition, but they do not want to make their genital adaptation, because for them the gender condition is not linked to having a penis or a vagina. Here it is respected, but in other places, no, they are instructed to transit, to have a fixed identity. Western society gives too much importance to being a woman, being a man. From early childhood, from dressing children in pink, blue, light blue, from the way I have been educated since I was a child... I believe that the most important thing is the individual. And if that individual identifies herself as a woman, fine, and if she identifies herself as a man, great, and if she wants to do male things that society says are male and she is a woman and wants to do them, great too. To ask for a third sex for this type of patient is to give even more importance to the issue of binarism.*

*(Health professional, Santiago)*

The growth of dissident sexual collectives has allowed the establishment of strategic alliances in direct social intervention. The research showed how more and more NGOs and recognized activists are involved as “experts”. They are not only consulted on certain issues, but are also invited to projects or training programs in various areas, especially in health and education. In the following quote, the need for this articulation is precisely emphasized, especially in view of the lack of information and training of professionals:

*Of course, it is like an apostolate (slight laughter), it is more demanding because you have to get together, agree, transmit information, we are resisting and trying to maintain ourselves as a group and then get into spaces to raise awareness, generate agreements with schools, with medical centers .... disseminate, train? The fact is that, if we do not do it ourselves, even though we also work, nobody does it. It is a common but necessary effort. (Dissident sexualities discussion group, Santiago)*

Although we value positively the involvement of diversity or sexual dissidence groups in the training of social services, it is, at the same time, problematic that the responsibility is placed on LGBT+ people and groups themselves, and that, as they say, if they do not take charge “no one does it”.

At the same time, there are tensions and disputes among the mobilized collectives, particularly with respect to groups that have come to hegemonize the spaces of social intervention in LGBT+ issues. As seen in this quote:

*The problem is that they always reach agreements and they always appear those of the X, gay men's organization, leading, speaking and for the photo. In addition, they place their issues and our issues are often relegated. That is why we decided to set up these working groups because we want to make other issues visible and also so that the same people aren't always speaking and taking our voice. (Lesbian and bisexual discussion group, Talcahuano)*

Recurrent criticisms include how certain intervention spaces are appropriated by some groups and their particular interests linked to specific experiences and identities, to the detriment of other LGBT+ needs and demands. This allows us to problematize how intra-group differences, power relations, specificities and multiplicity of experiences and needs can be made invisible under the umbrella of "sexual diversity". As pointed out in this excerpt, the leadership of gay men operates in this case to the detriment of the visibility of the needs of other sexual and gender identities.

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### ***Health as an area of reception and/or reproduction of differences.***

The area of health emerges as one of the most demanded by LGBT+ populations in the country. Since the return to democracy, it is one of the areas where more public actions have been carried out for better care. Among the latest interventions, for example, is the creation of specific units focused on gender identity in various regions of the country (Valparaíso, Concepción, in some hospitals in Santiago and Copiapó) in which surgical needs and requests for hormone treatment, gynecological and endocrine support, psychological and psychiatric care referrals are mainly attended. It should be noted, however, that these recent units are not part of a ministerial public policy, but have been created under the protection of professionals sensitive to trans difficulties, who have developed in their hospital units pressures so that they can be installed as a service.

In many cases, these areas do not have specific budgets and depend on the donation of time from other units so that professionals can participate in their care. In this way, it is evident that the health of LGBT+ people, more than a public policy, is emerging as a matter of professional sensitivity. The professional interviewed in the following interview highlights precisely how difficult it has been to install the issue in certain public centers:





*It is a crossroads. It is that it is not a disease, so it is difficult to install the issue in the health services, considering that it is not a disease. But it is a right of the people to have the required benefits, and if the benefits they need are hormonal treatments that must have medical supervision, that must have controls, check-ups, examinations or some surgical intervention to be able to have a gender transition process as it should be, then it is an obligation of the hospital that they can have access to these benefits. It is complex but yes, it is a right of the people because they do not have a disease or something life-threatening or something like that does not mean that it is not important for that person. And it is also a vital risk in the sense that, as I was saying, suicide attempts are so common and so high that, if they are not given an opportunity, an access to health care, these people end up dying and they die without having any pathology. (Health professional interview, Santiago)*

In the three urban cities, there are articulations between the activist world and health centers, making possible some campaigns for the dissemination of rights at the local level. An example of this is a case in the Bío Bío region, where the link between trans, lesbian and bisexual people and a local hospital has made possible the design and development of policies for the promotion of rights. Thus, from the activism, with its pressure for greater recognition, public policies were established “from below”, constituting the “LB Activist Board” (lesbians and bisexuals) and the “Trans Activist Board” (transsexual, non-binary and intersex people). They negotiated the conformation as a health unit of the hospital, carrying out a series of internal and external campaigns to raise awareness about the health rights of LGBT+ people, but also a protocol of care transversalized within the hospital.

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*We saw that one of the problems we had was health care (...) and we even sued the hospital until we reached an agreement recently. We have designed posters that we have hung in the care boxes, we have used the hospital's facilities. When we hand out information leaflets on care for lesbians, bisexuals and transgender, people get angry and go out of their minds, because we are occupying a public space, spreading information that they do not like and that for them goes against nature... there you see and experience certain clashes, but still, you try to be as respectful as possible and if you do not want to receive the information that is fine, but it is not necessary to make a fuss... but we continue to occupy that public space. We managed to establish a protocol of care that is now mandatory, and we generated ongoing training courses for professionals and administrative staff of the hospital. (LGBT+ activist, Personal interview Concepción, August 30, 2018).*

Despite these openings through health intervention, within biomedical care a reification of sexual differences is also highlighted, in which LGBT+ people emerge in a position of subordination with respect to cissexuals. Arguments are traced regarding the priori-





tization of health needs in a public subsidiary system with a scarce budget, where it is emphasized that LGBT+ demands cannot have a privileged place since there are other needs of greater importance in terms of public health (terminal diseases are particularly emphasized). Sensitized professional sectors, but a minority within the system, refute this argument by pointing out that the health demands of the non-heterosexual population should be considered as a public health problem and not as an aesthetic issue, where it has been placed in order to minimize its importance and avoid positioning it as a programmatic axis, as condensed in the following quote:

*We rely on notions of respect and equity. If there is a patient who can be included as part of the diversity, he/she should be attended as a right, with respect, with a social name, and according to his/her own sexual orientation or gender identity; which sounds very simple, but it is not easy to work within, because there is resistance from professionals and they do not see it as a public health problem. (Interview with health professional, Concepción)*

Likewise, the resistance of some professionals when attending to the LGBT+ population due to prejudices and stereotypes is also highlighted. Some users interviewed emphasize that the first care is usually from a cisheterosexual perspective, which in many cases inhibits adherence to treatment or attendance to public medical centers; or else, they are treated based on existing stereotypes about dissident sexualities, which causes desertion and rejection of the health system. This leads people to seek solutions and advice from their own networks, outside the formal system.

In general, the prevalence of a binary and biologicist approach in the practice of direct care is highlighted, denouncing the lack of professional training in sexual variability and its specific needs. The use of stereotypical labels of sexualities is also related to moral objections present in health professionals, who from conservative logics consider these groups as deviant or outside the social norm.

*They treat you as heterosexual from the beginning, that inhibits lesbian, non-binary or bisexual women from coming, because they do not feel welcomed and go once and do not continue going... others do not continue going because when they say their orientation or identity, they only receive prejudice in response, or violence directly, because some are treated badly as weirdos, so they do not continue going... in the end people pass information informally or through the networks among us. (Focus group, Concepción)*

### *Possibilities and limits in education*

In Chile, there has been since 2012 the anti-discrimination law and from 2017 a circular with guidelines for the integration of trans children, but both normative bodies are not implemented in a transversal way in public and/or private schools<sup>2</sup>.

There is, however, a gap between the regulations and their implementation on a daily level: on the one hand, it is due to the principle of freedom of teaching, a justification that some establishments use to hinder the development of sex education to their students and attention to all sexualities. The lack of knowledge of management teams and teachers on how to methodologically translate regulations into concrete actions within the schools, without falling back on problematic stereotypes, is also highlighted, taking into account the training gap declared in their professional careers on sexuality issues.

A “we don’t know what to do” constantly emerges in schools, especially in the face of greater visibility, pressure and claims from the student body of dissident orientations and identities. The following quote highlights that it is difficult to reach sectors of the teaching staff that are more reluctant to open up on these issues, since the training is voluntary:

*The problem we had is that the ministry’s bet was to train teachers without any link to the school institutions. The teacher who wants to be trained is trained. It does not reach those who are not sensitized. But a teacher on their own, if they do not have the support or the interest of the school, of the community in general, what they manage to do is very little. So, there was a bet with little political will (...) then what Piñera did afterwards is one of the worst things: to commercialize sex education since each school, if it has money, hires and also hires what it wants. What he did was to give responsibility to the schools, it was the schools that were called to hire, to have a program, to make an ideological bet. They worked with the logic of the emerging curriculum, which is not only timorous in terms of the fact that they are not doing something minimum that you say “let’s make these definitions about sexuality!” but it is also overly optimistic as it is very difficult for the teacher to design learning units on their own. Because they don’t have time to do it, because they don’t have the competencies.”*

*(Education professional, Personal interview, Santiago)*

On the other hand, in the field of education, moral objections are once again raised by professionals. In this sense, the ideological character of the various ministerial guideli-

<sup>2</sup> The Gender Identity Law has been in force since 2019, but the fieldwork for this research was carried out when it was still under parliamentary discussion.

nes in accordance with the governments in power in democracy and their openness or rejection of sexual dissidence is also highlighted, as the following professional points out:

*We can also reach alliances with certain schools, and in others they do not allow us to enter. Last year, in some of the schools where we did workshops together with the health services, we received complaints from parents and they asked us to inform the schools beforehand, so that they would not send their children.*

*(Professional focus group, Santiago)*

Even so, since the 2000s, some actions have been designed and implemented regarding sex education and its link with LGBT+ experiences. However, these may be limited by structural factors, such as the possibility of accommodating this type of training to the school's own educational project, and the availability or lack of economic resources to access specific training services (especially in private education) or to access free services (in public schools). At the same time, it is noted that sexuality education is mostly weak and tangential and is not valued as an essential aspect to be incorporated into the school curriculum.

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When it is incorporated, a strongly biologicist and heteronormative approach persists in the training received by students and educators: that is, they focus on topics such as the prevention of teenage pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, with little reference to other sexualities, affectivity and desire in their multiple possibilities and experiences, as emphasized by the following expert:

*We have elements of sexuality in the curriculum, in two subjects, in guidance and in natural sciences. But it is very precarious in this subject, it has to do with how to handle affection in the case of orientation, it is a conservative curriculum. And in the natural sciences, fundamentally issues that have to do with sexual initiation, with anatomy, things like that, a quite heterocentric curriculum, because it has to do with how to avoid getting pregnant or transmitting diseases (...) Last year we did a curriculum review and a comparison with international standards of sex education. And what we found is that in Chile 34% of the international standards are addressed and that 34% were some things about affection, and then what has to do with sexual orientation in biology with the older children. But other elements, which has to do more with cultural elements on sexuality, are due (Professional Ministry of Education, Personal interview Santiago, May 17, 2018).*



In some educational centers it is emphasized that in recent years workshops have been held for the understanding of dissident sexualities and some actions have been incorporated towards LGBT+ populations, such as the availability of non-binary bathrooms, the possibility of modifying or selecting the school uniform according to the orientation/identity of the student body or the use of the social name. However, though these initiatives can be considered as signs of openness towards some non-heterosexual experiences, at the same time, there is little complex treatment regarding the structural inequalities in which these trajectories are framed, being reduced to specific material aspects that, although necessary, are positioned as if it were the only thing to be addressed, leaving in suspense other aspects such as the prevention and eradication of violence directed against the LGBT+ population, which is conveyed by the school dynamics at multiple levels.

*Almost nothing in terms of homo/lesbo/transphobia, I would say it is practically nothing... it is always the issue of care of sexually transmitted diseases or teenage pregnancy, the typical, but it is difficult even to distribute condoms as I was saying, resistance from schools and families, but some schools are beginning to open up, although also with a lot of stereotypes... they end up spreading the word that they put in bathrooms or especially the use of the name, but something more comprehensive, no, it is difficult. (Professional focus group, Santiago)*

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Thus, the measures adopted continue to be limited both in addressing forms of violence and discrimination that affect the LGBT+ population, and in developing broader and more complex perspectives that allow, for example, to make heteronormativity visible as a system of power that impacts the lives of all people, not only the “diverse” ones, but with differentiated effects. What is undoubtedly left unattended is the challenge of deheterosexualizing education and pedagogy (Flores, 2017). In the educational field, sexual dissident pedagogies have much to contribute, for example, having focused on “the production of heteronormativity from ignorance, through the ways in which the school restricts certain subjects, corporealities and ways of enunciating desires that are considered deviant and impossible” (Troncoso et al., 2019). In this sense, it is important to recognize that the LGBT+ community has contributed not only with demands and activism, but also with knowledge and pedagogical approaches that are often ignored in general pedagogical training and that could contribute a lot to the training of educators who insist on “not knowing what to do”, so that they have tools to recognize, question and confront the hetero- and cisnormativity in the educational system and policies.



## Conclusions

Despite numerous advances in the attention and recognition of the LGBT+ population in Chile, multiple problems and tensions remain, which illuminates critical ways to carry out a more relevant social work. On the one hand, we continue to intervene under a logic that positions the “problem” and the responsibility to solve problems in LGBT+ people and groups, without questioning the more structural and systemic dimensions of reproduction of cisheteronormativity. This entails an approach to diversity as a benign variation that invisibilizes power relations assuming a harmonious range of diverse subjects (McKinzie and Richards, 2019).

With this as a horizon, from a critical social work (González-Saibene, 2021; 2015) the design of highly identitarian policies and interventions can be tensed, problematizing their essentialist and homogenizing dimensions, to give a turn that allows for unraveling those structural and contextual conditions that hinder precisely the trajectories of more complex recognitions of these collectives. González-Saibene (2021) - by re-reading the rupture that reconceptualization meant for Social Work - emphasizes the importance of critical epistemic positions in the discipline in order to be able to accompany subalternized populations in their exercise of rights and citizenship from “grounded” interventions. More than 20 years ago, Dominelli and MacLeod even called for the promotion of a “feminist social work” that would work not only with individuals in isolation, but also from transformative approaches that would consider the matrices of inequality and contexts (Dominelli and MacLeod, 1999).

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As we pointed out above, the public intervention that many social workers reproduce is limiting when it is articulated as an identity device (Romero and Montenegro, 2018) that establishes what to see, what to attend and how to name, invisibilizing intragroup differences or reproducing stereotypical representations of lesbians, gays or trans people, losing sight of how differences are produced in the midst of power relations and hierarchies that produce inequalities. The practice of feminist social work, according to Wendt and Moulding (2016), allows for transforming the traditional ways in which social work has considered both gender and sexualities, to emphasize the power relations that sustain these notions.

That exercise of Social Work in the face of social policy, runs the risk of reifying and reproducing structural inequalities. This a priori construction of the subject that precedes the intervention itself - by agglutinating the needs in a nebulous whole called “sexual



diversity” - has the effect of homogenizing the particular needs and the violence that sexual diversity and dissidence may experience. A critical Social Work from intersectional perspectives can tension these configurations, taken for granted in the logic of intervention, bringing the questioning to structural conditions, to pay attention to how particular experiences of exclusion, marginalization and oppression materialize in the midst of articulated systems and structures of power (Troncoso et al., 2019). Destabilizing essentialist and reductionist identity approaches is necessary to enable other and multiple forms of life, experiences and promote a sharper and more complex reading of the contextual conditions in which the everyday experiences of LGTBI+ people are situated. In fact, this is consigned as part of the discipline’s mission: in the global definition of Social Work of the International Federation of Social Workers (2014) it is stated that reflections regarding the various sources of oppression and/or privilege, based on differences such as gender, sexual orientation, class among others, are fundamental, and to establish action strategies that address not only individual but structural problems.

At the same time, in the field of social intervention, personal will often prevails over programmatic political actions to ensure dignified and respectful attention to the LGBT+ population. In addition to the above, a recurrent criticism of the lack of updated and critical training in gender and sexuality issues for professionals in education, health, and other areas is visible, being the LGBT+ collectives themselves the ones who have to assume, often without remuneration, this training work as part of their activism. This reveals not only the need for a transversal public policy -absent until now- that guarantees rights to the LGBT+ population, but also the importance of this process being participatory and binding in direct relation to the social collectives (policies that are made from below), in order to ensure a process that is more relevant (Silva et al., 2020).

In relation to the aforementioned, it continues to be very difficult to advance to more integrated and intersectional approaches (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2019; Troncoso et al., 2019) in Social Work, which allow for making visible how various power structures (heteronorma, patriarchy, neoliberalism, etc.) are articulated among themselves, impacting in different ways on the experiences and material life conditions of LGBT+ people and collectives that are situated in turn in various historical, social and economic contexts. In this sense, a critical social work implies unraveling the mechanisms in which the different categories from which the subjects are understood are produced, the excluding logics and the power effects they entail, but without obviating these categories, but rather addressing the ways in which they establish a certain normalized social order through institutional practices. As Romero and Montenegro (2018) point out, an



intersectional analysis is required precisely to prevent these categories from being seen as neutral and aproblematic.

Finally, in order to advance the needs of the LGBT+ population in Chile, it is necessary to work in parallel in different areas to: incorporate and duly value knowledge about genders and sexualities in education (particularly knowledge built by LGBT+ people and communities); recognize sexual diversities and dissidence in all areas of human relations and public policies; advance in depathologization and avoid the fetishization of diverse sexualities and gender identities; and resist the depoliticization of diversity that makes it appear as a mere benign variation of differences, making invisible in its approach the relations and inequalities of power (in its structural, systemic and interpersonal dimensions), which are materialized in the experiences of exclusion, discrimination, oppression and violence that we need to eradicate.

As highlighted by María Eugenia Hermida (2020), we find ourselves in a third interruption of social work that implies decolonizing and depatriarchalizing it, but not only in terms of practices oriented towards the “outside”, but also by revisiting the discipline’s own ways of seeing and doing. The author concludes that it is necessary to “break into the categories that prevent us from thinking, in order to be able to see those other experiences that enable social justice and a dignified life” (p.116).

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ARTICLE

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## Feminist reflections on social work intervention with women experiencing violence in Bogota

### Reflexiones feministas sobre la intervención del trabajo social con mujeres que viven violencia en Bogotá

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#### Abstract

Social work intervention with women who have experienced gender violence is relatively recent. In Colombia, as well as in other Latin American countries, the issue has become visible thanks to citizen mobilizations that, on the one hand, repel and unmask patriarchy, and on the other, place on the public agenda the development of social policies aimed at addressing the problem. Even though the issue is visible, its analysis and approach must be carried out from a feminis-

**Keywords:**  
violence against women;  
social intervention;  
social work;  
patriarchy;  
feminism

perspective that highlights the effects of patriarchy on feminized bodies, which continues to be an urgent issue in different social spheres as the figures of violence have not been reduced. On the other hand, the institutions do not have sufficient clarity regarding the requirements of this type of attention, given the limits imposed in each case. Based on the results of a qualitative study with a narrative approach, in which social workers who work with victims of gender-based violence in state institutions in Bogotá participated, this article offers a reflection from a feminist perspective on the complexities of this phenomenon and the characteristics of its intervention, as well as the challenges posed by its attention in this professional field. Part of the challenges we identify in this reflective process is that, as social work professionals, we have a determining political role in the transformation of the patriarchal codes of daily exchange, with which we seek to question machismo with the active participation of women, in order to advance in the conquest of spaces, dynamics and vindication of their rights.

## Resumen

La intervención del trabajo social con mujeres que han vivido violencia de género en el continente es relativamente reciente. En Colombia, así como en otros países latinoamericanos, el tema se ha visibilizado gracias a las movilizaciones ciudadanas que, por un lado, repelen y desenmascaran el patriarcado, y por el otro, posicionan en la agenda pública el desarrollo de políticas sociales llamadas a atender el problema. Aun siendo el tema visible, se requiere que su análisis y abordaje se realice desde una perspectiva feminista que ponga en evidencia los efectos del patriarcado en los cuerpos feminizados, lo cual sigue siendo un tema urgente en las diferentes esferas sociales en la medida que no se logran disminuir las cifras de violencia. Por otro lado, las instituciones tampoco tienen suficiente claridad respecto a los requerimientos de este tipo de atención, dados los límites que se imponen en cada caso. A partir de los resultados de un estudio cualitativo con enfoque narrativo, en el que participaron trabajadoras sociales que atienden víctimas de violencia de género en instituciones del Estado en Bogotá, este artículo ofrece una reflexión desde una perspectiva feminista acerca de las complejidades de este fenómeno y las características de su intervención, así como de los desafíos que plantea su atención en este campo profesional. Parte de los desafíos que identificamos en este proceso reflexivo es que, como profesionales del trabajo social, tenemos un papel político determinante en la transformación de los códigos patriarcales de intercambio cotidiano, con lo cual se busca el cuestionamiento del machismo con la activa participación de las mujeres, para así avanzar en la conquista de espacios, dinámicas y reivindicación de sus derechos.

**Palabras Clave:**  
Violencia contra las mujeres;  
intervención social; trabajo social;  
patriarcado;  
feminismo



## Introduction

Social work is a profession and discipline dedicated to the defense of human rights, social justice, the improvement of living conditions, the search for equity, among others (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2014); in this framework, the field of attention to violence against women constitutes a scenario in which all these professional purposes are required and put into play. Considering that violence against women in Colombia has worsened in recent years (Pinzón, 2021), in this article we present some reflections arising from a qualitative study with a narrative approach that recovers experiences of professional intervention in the field of violence against women. Based on the analysis of the narratives of four professionals working in two public institutions in the city of Bogotá, we offer a reflection from a feminist perspective that considers as a starting point the trajectory of the authors in research and interventions on the subject, and identifies key elements for a problematization of the issue based on the testimonies of the participants in the study.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion of gender-based violence, highlighting the power relations inherent to the patriarchal and heteronormative order that underlie the phenomenon of violence against women. It is followed by a contextualization of violence against women as a current social problem as a focus of professional intervention, revealing the barriers and critical knots that arise in its approach. The study, its purposes and methodology are presented, followed by the main findings, where it is identified how social workers develop their interventions, recognizing key elements that allow for posing professional challenges from a feminist perspective. From these reflections, we discuss the lessons learned from the professional intervention, the contributions achieved, but also the difficulties we face as a profession in this field.

## Gender violence and patriarchy

Gender violence is a relatively recent term in Colombia. Its use, from the legal protection of relationships, connotes the damage or affectations inflicted on women or bodies that become feminized, due to their condition as women or for subverting the hetero-norm as an organizing principle of social relations. In 2008, Law 1257 used the term “violence against women” and in 2012 the National Public Policy Guidelines on Gender Equity for Women incorporated the term “Gender-based violence” (High Presidential Counselor’s Office for Women’s Equity, 2012). It is important to clarify that in



the first case, the defense of a subject that, by biological sign, we identify with the female sex is assumed: feminine/woman/vagina. In the second case, we appeal to gender as a social construction of sex in some analyses (Delgado 2017), but also to the structure (héteronorma) that is a condition of possibility for the ordering and construction of gender identities, in which case - for example - a trans woman or a woman with a penis can be violated for not adhering to the héteronorma. Therefore, when we talk about gender, we are not necessarily talking about women, but about the framework or structure that organizes and reproduces matter in a gendered way. On one side or the other, beyond the essentialization of the female subject to which some theoretical perspectives adhere, gender violence alludes to the defense and reproduction of a hetero-normative regime that constitutes that which becomes feminized as banal and minor and that which becomes masculinized as superior and a guarantor of order. In other words, the concept of gender appears in the social and legal literature to account for the subordination of women or the feminine in a hetero-normative regime.

The understanding of the social that underlies this order understands that the world is made up of men and women who relate to each other unequally. The heterosexual matrix in which these relationships are inscribed is deeply hierarchical and violent to such an extent that it is possible to assault or kill someone for the mere fact of being a woman or for not behaving as the gender norm indicates. This understanding of the social has been investigated by many, but problematized - at least in gender terms - by few (Barbieri, 2004; Pateman, 1988). The discomfort and indignation that comes with feeling and knowing oneself to be a subsidiary of the masculine perse in a hetero-normed world and a second-class citizen in a time frame that salutes the discourse of rights, human freedoms and gender equity proposed by the modern state, has been a condition of possibility for some authors to deal with this problem.

Different theoretical perspectives attempt to explain gender violence in context - not only spatially but also temporally. We found at least three problematizing perspectives of the discussion that have focused on the Latin American context. One perspective argues that gender domination is a universal problem, thus enabling the possibility of transmitting to all women, including Latinas, racialized and indigenous women, the discourse of the rights of the modern white and liberal world. Another argues that there was no gender oppression in the pre-colonial period (Lugones, 2007) because gender oppression only comes with the race/gender system installed in the modern colonial world system. And a third explanation argues, as Segato (2016) says, that there were already in the precolonial period gender nomenclatures that are going to be dangerously modified with modernity.





*Documentary, historical and ethnographic data from the tribal world, show the existence of recognizable structures of difference, similarities to what we call gender relations in modernity.*

*(Segato, 2016, p. 112)*

But why is this discussion important? We are slowly approaching the use of a concept that has been of vital importance for the understanding of social relations from a critical perspective. In other words, a concept that serves to identify, enunciate and problematize gender violence, the concept of patriarchy<sup>2</sup>. In principle, it should be noted that the emergence of this concept is one of the great contributions that feminism has made to critical theory. In political terms, adhering to this concept is problematic, since at its heart is the anthologized relationship of male supremacy over women. However, its analysis allows us to walk through a history that makes it possible to see the cracks through which it passes and the orders it proposes. Also, the exits or political alternatives that we can operate to dismantle it.

Let us return to the three perspectives. The first, which enunciates patriarchy as a universal problem and without major differences throughout the planet; the second, which suggests that gender oppression arrives with the conquest of the Americas; and the third, which announces that in the pre-colonial period there were gender nomenclatures that are dangerously modified with modernity. We will develop the third perspective precisely because we are interested in seeing the problematization in more detail in the modern precolonial/colonial framework, perhaps in order to understand what these dangerous modifications are that gender nomenclatures undergo. Segato speaks of a patriarchy that in the pre-colonial period can be called “low-intensity patriarchy”, and in the modern period, “high-intensity patriarchy”.

What happens then in that meeting of patriarchies, in the low and high intensity? Segato (2016) suggests that although in the village world there were hierarchical relations between men and women based on the differential status between them, the domestic sphere was exposed, that is, it was part of the community space. This will no longer be the case when the colonial/modernity project is articulated. There the domestic sphere will be deprived given the reconfiguration of social relations, that is the superinflation of the leading role of men in the organization of the community by acting as intermediaries now in front of the power of white administrators. This relegates women, together with domesticity, to the private sphere, annulling their participation in the community. As a result of all this, the family form, anchored to the heterosexual matrix that already

<sup>2</sup>The concept of patriarchy refers to the system that gives authority and predominance to men over women. It has been a controversial concept due to its general and totalizing nature.

existed in the pre-colonial period, is enclosed in privacy, so that violence against women will not be subject to surveillance by the community. A private conjugality allows and favors impunity for violence. According to Segato:

*... the discourse of colonial/modernity, despite showing itself as egalitarian, hides within it an abysmal hierarchical hiatus, due to what we could here tentatively call progressive totalization of the public sphere or totalitarianism of the public sphere (...). (2016, p. 114)*

Thus, the social organization that is being constituted and that privileges the public sphere over the private sphere is a problem. Not only because women have been marginalized from the community scenario, but also because some forms of organization, such as the family, will henceforth empower, reproduce and sustain gender violence. Some analyses adhere to this thesis, arguing that violence is consubstantial to the 'family' form, partly because its structure is hierarchical and unequal (Gil, 2009). We also find analyses that, reviewing domestic violence, warn how the 'modern family' form can become a scene of torture (Copelon, 1997), precisely because it is kept hidden and considered a personal, private and domestic matter. The need to maintain a patriarchal order, for some the natural order of things, leads to the reproduction of practices of violence within the family that are analogous to those of official torture, that is, the intentional infliction of physical or psychological pain for specific purposes (sustaining hierarchies), with some form of active or passive official participation. In the case of the family, given its legal protection to such a degree that it is considered the nucleus of society, it is complex to advocate its de-romanticization. The family is a sacred entity that must prevail over any other form of social organization. And although it must be admitted that the figure of "intra-family violence" is used to suggest the regulatory nature of the violent relations that occur within the family, the fact that this category is privileged to the detriment of gender violence - of course in cases in which what becomes feminine is violated - hides and prevents us from seeing what is in itself a condition of possibility for the exercise of violence: the regime that authorizes inequality between the genders.

The hierarchical order on which the 'family' form is built and reproduced is in fact patriarchal. In Colombia, we observe that throughout the 19th century, the enunciations about the family are relatively few in contrast to the enunciations referring to the pater familias. It is the father, the man or the pater familias who has rights, ownership and power over his subjects, including the wife. History has changed, it is true. Throughout



the twentieth and twenty-first century we have witnessed the bet of making family under the seal of love, but unfortunately leaving its structure untouched, that is, the reproduction of the family form with the respective socialization of gender role patterns and their reigning hierarchies. This approach may be objected, but a society that understands that domestic care work is a women's issue, as shown by the multipurpose survey conducted in Bogota in 2014<sup>3</sup>, does not speak in the long run of great transformations.

At this point we have to warn that within the same processes of social organization that we have celebrated and legally protected, we knot and second gender violence<sup>4</sup>. This criticism of the family form is important, but it is not the only scenario for the reproduction of gender violence. If we adopt patriarchy as an explanatory category of gender violence, taking into account the framework of power relations that has been constituted in Latin American societies, it is because it allows us to question experiences that, like the family, have contributed to the maintenance and reproduction of hierarchies between the feminine and the masculine. It is useful to review what other structures or institutions favor gender violence.

## **Violence against women in Colombia and its intervention as a problematic issue**

Violence against women, as we have pointed out in the previous section, operates as a power device of male domination in a patriarchal order (Muñoz, 2019). According to Law 1257 of Colombia, violence against women is defined as any action or omission that causes death, harm or physical, sexual, psychological, economic or patrimonial suffering to a person because of her condition as a woman, as well as threats of such acts, coercion or deprivation of liberty whether this occurs in public or private settings (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2008); according to Muñiz (2018), violence against women is generally held by men and the State through legislation, policies and interventions. Colombia has faced this phenomenon directly since 2008, in which the State committed to raise awareness, prevent and punish forms of violence and discrimination against women, materializing its adherence to the Convention of Belém Do Pará given in 1994 (National Human Rights Commission, 2013).

Despite the enactment of various laws to address the issue, violence against women in Colombia continues to be a matter of priority given its aggravation in recent years,

<sup>3</sup> 80% of women carry out unpaid care work in contrast to 52% of men. Results of the 2014 Multipurpose Survey, Secretaría Distrital de Planeación.

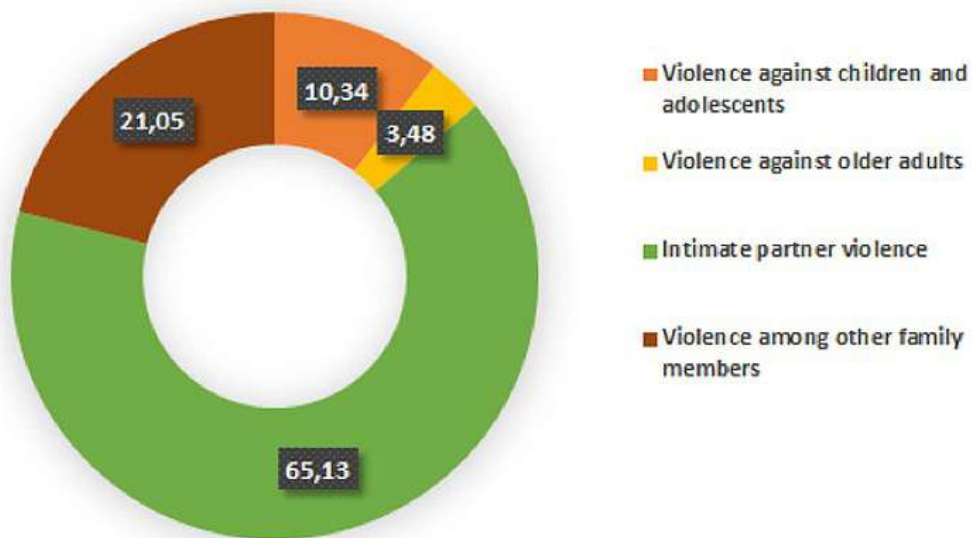
<sup>4</sup> According to Segato "the first lesson of power and subordination is the familiar theater of gender relations, but, as a structure, the relationship between its positions is replicated ad infinitum, and is revisited and rehearsed in the most diverse scenes in which a differential of power and value are present" (2016, p. 92).



especially in the last year, in which the pandemic caused by COVID 19 forced confinement and thus forced women to stay with their aggressors, which further exacerbated the conditions of violence in the country. In 2020, according to Sisma Mujer, more than 90% of reports of domestic violence were made by women. It also warns of figures between 79% and 90%, depending on the source determined, of cases of sexual violence against women in the context of armed conflict.

In general terms, violence against women in Colombia is systematically presented in figures that reveal the lack of institutional efficiency. According to the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INMLCF) between January and July 2021 there were 20,859 women injured by domestic violence compared to 5,961 men. Of these, 15,239 are immersed in contexts of intimate partner violence, thus being the scenario with the highest number of complaints reported in this period, as shown in Graph 1:

**Graph 1: Percentage of domestic violence by context (Colombia, January-July 2021)**



Source: Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses-INMLCF/ Grupo Centro de Referencia Nacional sobre Violencia-GCRNV (2021).

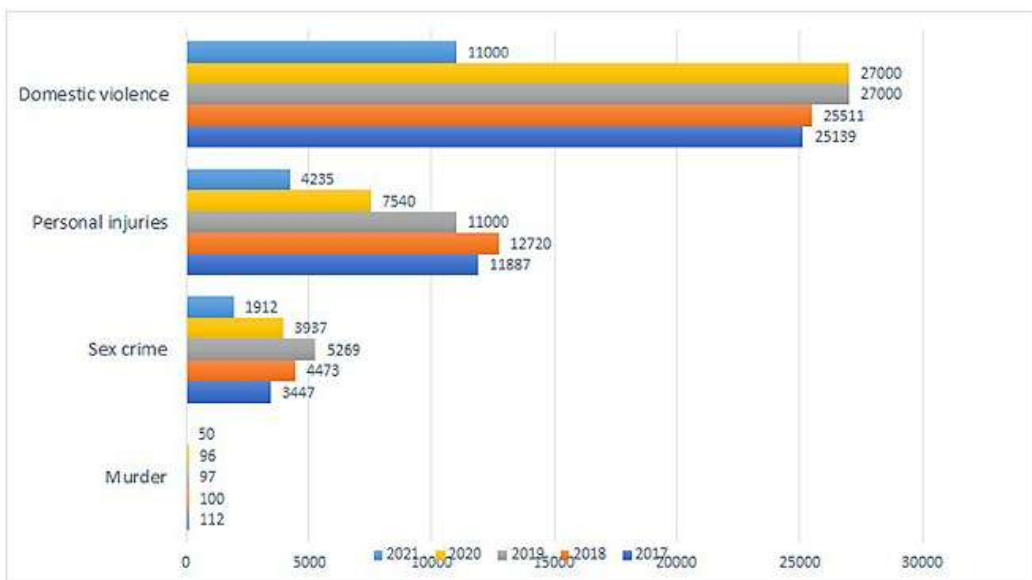
According to the Statistical, Criminal, Contraventional and Operational Information System of the National Police in Colombia (2021), 12,055 cases of sexual violence against women were registered between January and July 31, 2021. From the statistics reported by the Observatorio Femicidios en Colombia coordinated by the Red Feminista Antimilitarista (2021), so far this year up to June there have been 320 femicides, a situation that has worsened in recent months.

When analyzing the situation in Bogota, the above is ratified, despite the fact that it is the territory with the greatest institutional offer of attention to cases of violence against women. The phenomenon is still present, even with the efforts of institutions to address the issue, including the District Secretariat for Women (SDM)<sup>5</sup>, which has presented worrying data corresponding to the first year of the pandemic, among which is that quarantines were not a protective factor for the murder of women, that domestic violence could increase with confinement and not be reported, although it is also suggested that for sexual crimes, isolation did seem to be a protective measure.

This is shown in the following image, which reflects figures for different types of violence and their visibility in terms of complaints filed. (See Graph 2).

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**Graph 1: Percentage of domestic violence by context (Colombia, January-July 2021)**



Source: Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses-INMLCF/ Grupo Centro de Referencia Nacional sobre Violencia-GCRNV (2021).

<sup>5</sup> The SDM is responsible for leading, guiding and coordinating the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Public Policy on Women and Gender Equity, as well as the mainstreaming of women's rights, gender and differential approaches in plans, programs, projects and district public policies, for the protection, guarantee and realization of the human rights of women in the differences and diversities that constitute them, promoting their autonomy and the full exercise of their citizenship in the Capital District.

One of the most common phenomena as a result of violence against women in the world are femicides, and Bogota is no exception since between 2019 and 2020 192 murders of women were committed, with 15 of those committed in 2019 classed as femicide (Secretaría de la Mujer, 2021).

Professional intervention with a gender perspective for the attention to violence against women is fundamental (Organization of American States, OAS, 2020), but some shortcomings can be identified that need to be highlighted, such as the lack of institutional response based on the regulations and their barriers, and the lack of training and awareness on the part of professionals who can respond to the requests and requirements that the victims have when attending the government entities that are supposed to have the legal tools for the attention and response to the violence that they seek to denounce and therefore resolve. Among the institutions that can be identified for the attention to violence against women are: the Attorney General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, the District Secretariat of Social Integration, the Secretariat of Health, the General Secretariat of the Mayor's Office of Bogotá, the District Secretariat of Security, Coexistence and Justice, the District Secretariat of Women and the National Police (See Table No. 1).



**Table N° 1. Institutions that deal with the phenomenon of violence against women**

Institutions	Units	Service
Attorney General's Office	Center for integral criminal attention to victims, pre-procedural attention units, etc.	Receipt of reports of acts of violence
	Immediate reaction units	Receipt of reports of acts of violence
	Center for Comprehensive Care for Victims of Sexual Violence (Caivas)	Reception of reports of crimes of sexual violence.
Ombudsman's Office	Gender Program of the National Public Defender's Office National System	Orientation Legal Advice Legal technical assistance
District Secretariat of Social Integration	Family Police Stations	Attention to Domestic Violence Attention to sexual crimes in the family environment Ordering of life protection measures
Secretariat of Health	Bogotá emergency hotline 123	Coordinates emergency situations and emergencies of the various entities included in the system for the prevention, attention and dispatch of physical resources.
General Secretariat of the Mayor's Office of Bogota	Local Centers for Attention to Victims (CLAV)	Guidance, assistance and counseling based on the principles of coordination and concurrence to victims within the framework of the armed conflict.
District Secretariat of Security, Coexistence and Justice	Houses of Justice	Psychological counseling and legal advice
District Secretariat for Women	Houses of Equality	Psycho-social counseling and socio-legal advice
	House of All	Psycho-social and psycho-legal counseling for people who engage in paid sexual activities.
	Shelter Houses	Protection of the right to life Psycho-social and psycho-legal care. Housing, food, clothing and transportation for women and their children facing cycles of violence.
	Purple Line	Counseling and psychosocial care
	Line 155	Information on access to your legal, psychological and medical rights at the national level.
National Police	Immediate Attention Centers (CAI inmediato)	Reception of information on cases of violence

*Source: Own elaboration with information from the Ruta única de atención para mujeres víctimas de violencias y en riesgo de feminicidio (2017).*



It is observed that the institutional offer in Bogotá is significant and most of the services provided are focused on reporting, information and psychosocial and socio-legal counseling. This as an initial process of attention is not empty. The problem arises when it comes to eradication and prevention processes of violence. This situation, according to what one of the authors of this article has identified in her intervention experience, occurs when women require effective responses to their violent experiences but do not meet the institutional requirements for the situation to be attended to, such as that the violence has been perpetrated by a permanent partner (cohabitation), or that the woman has gone through the complete route<sup>6</sup>. This impedes the resolution of the difficulties presented by the women, due to the lack of knowledge or experience in the approach of the professionals to the responses required by the concerns expressed by the women.

Despite the accumulation of legal norms that support the care and prevention of violence against women, at the time of their application, obstacles are identified that have to do with institutional barriers, professional actions based on patriarchal reproduction, limits in the protocols of care and questioning among peers that prioritize the time of care over the accompaniment that can be provided to women. In this regard, Segovia (2016) states that in the consideration of the difficulties of gender mainstreaming in Latin America, there are, among others, institutional barriers, which are understood as those related to the lack of articulation with other entities and actors for the implementation of the equality mandate, the insufficiency of accountability mechanisms, and evaluations that guarantee the commitments related to gender equality.

Part of the professional actions has to do with the bets on the family: there is evidence of biases that romanticize it and propose it as the only possible scenario for the development of human beings, clarifying that such bias is not exclusive to social work. One of the barriers identified corresponds to the imposition of the family ideal, which in the context of violence against women fractures their dignity, reflected in the actions of the institutional apparatus, in which the rights of children and adolescents are privileged, motivated by the union of the nuclear family; even when this implies putting women at risk in contexts of violence, reaffirming their role as women mothers sacrificed for the “well-being” of their children, although, paradoxically, the family, as a scenario of violence against women, considerably affects children (Dominelli, 2019).

On the other hand, institutional barriers are reflected in the border lines of each entity that deal with violence against women following the care route (Secretaría de la Mujer,

<sup>6</sup> In the experience of one of the authors, a case of femicide risk was identified in which a referral for high-risk care could not be made because of two fundamental issues: first, the aggressor was the boyfriend and they did not live together; and second, the corresponding complaint had to be filed with the prosecutor's office and a series of requirements had to be fulfilled.

2017). This situation means that in some cases women must go to different scenarios and wait for attention, follow-ups and referrals from one institution to another without having a timely response that guarantees the redress of the specific situation. In this order, the protocols of attention of the institutions become a barrier to justice for women, discouraging them from continuing with the complaint process, which culminates in institutional distrust (Birgin and Gherardi, 2012). This situation has been identified by the authors in the framework of research and implementation of standards and protocols for the care of women who report gender-based violence, but they are not taken into account because it is assumed that the facts presented (undervaluation of functions, leering, insinuations, among others) are not behaviors that constitute violence, and such considerations occur precisely because of the normalization of such behaviors in the framework of patriarchy or the lack of knowledge to address such situations from a gender perspective; on the other hand, because there is inequity in access to justice, which has required some governments to issue documents that favor the inclusion of the gender perspective as a guarantee of access and administration of justice in the countries (Birgin and Gherardi, 2012).

Another problematic issue is the professional interventions where social workers lack training with a gender perspective. They fail to identify key elements in these types of cases of care for women, especially if they are experiencing violence, and may end up reinforcing patriarchal values in the care, thus generating actions with damage that emotionally affect women causing feelings of guilt or undervaluation about the violence they have received. Faced with this, Chacón (2019) states that very few social work professionals work with a gender perspective, and those who approach it do so from a rights approach, which has a more “familiarist” orientation in training. Then, the gender perspective is articulated in the professional practice as these tools are required.

Considering these elements of the current context in which interventions aimed at addressing situations of violence against women in the city of Bogota are developed, questions emerged regarding the perspectives that social work professionals have built around the approach to this problem and their reflections on the successes, difficulties and challenges of their professional intervention, in a scenario of worsening violence resulting from the prevailing patriarchal order that is exacerbated in times of pandemic. With the realization of this study we proposed to problematize the professional intervention in this field and to contribute a critical look at the challenges from a feminist perspective.



## Methodology

The study was based on a qualitative methodology with a narrative approach. According to Puyana (2012), narratives refer to accounts of experiences of social interactions, giving sense and meaning to the way in which the so-called 'reality' is lived and interpreted by the subjects who narrate. To learn about the experiences and reflections that arise in professional intervention in the field of violence against women, four professionals from two emblematic public institutions working in this field were selected. All the participants are social workers, residents of the city of Bogota. The age range of the participants is between 28 - 30 years, with more than 2 years of experience in working with women. Three of them have postgraduate training in studies related to the gender perspective, and the other has extensive professional experience in the field. The four participants work with cases of violence against women, two of them work in the technical and university educational field and the other two participants work in an institution whose mission is to guarantee women's rights.

Through stories, the professionals narrated their experiences about the ways of approaching the processes of attention to cases of violence against women, which shows a reflection of situated practices, insofar as they are social, historical, located in a specific space and time with specific conditions of the groups with whom they work (Ortiz, 2020). In order to construct the narratives, in-depth interviews were conducted guided by key questions that allowed the professionals to reflect on their intervention with women who experience violence from their partners. The chosen approach is based on the recovery of intervention experiences through the reflexivity of the professionals (Puyana, 2012). For their participation, the professionals signed an informed consent form.

Due to the confinement and physical distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted via the Microsoft Teams platform and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Thus, they became transcripts for the analysis process, which was developed from the guidelines proposed by Bolívar (2020), who states that texts and contexts are interdependent in intertextual networks that are moved by social actors. In this case, we account for a problem given in specific contextual frameworks that, when reflected upon by professionals who deal with the phenomenon, give meaning and significance to their professional practice with a gender perspective. In the analysis of the testimonies of the interviewees, what they interpreted as successes of the intervention, difficulties of the process and challenges in this field of professional action were recognized.



## Strategies for professional intervention in institutions that deal with violence against women

Gender violence as a field of integral professional intervention raises contributions that focus on the prevention, reduction and eradication of aggressions that affect women. The psychosocial teams that attend to women immersed in these contexts of violence are made up of disciplines such as psychology, law, medicine, nursing, nutrition and social work.

In a literature review on the contribution of social work to the understanding of this social phenomenon, advances in the problematization of cycles of violence, theoretical developments of the different typologies, analysis of resistance and coping strategies of women in violent contexts, family studies on the analysis of inequality in the roles and distribution of care are generally identified (Romero, 2016). It is precisely in these fields of action that the legal, health, educational and public institutions whose purposes are focused on the attention to violence are identified.

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Although there is a common orientation in the two fields in which the interviewees work -educational institution and center for guaranteeing women's rights-, the actions of the professionals differ when considering the institutional purposes: while in the educational field the accompaniment of students is promoted by attending to the difficulties that affect them in the permanence of the academic program (difficulties, such as, for example, being affected by gender violence); in the public field the guarantee of women's rights and their translation in plans, programs and projects specialized in that field are projected. The above has some difficulties that depend, on the one hand, on the women themselves who request support, who come from diverse socio-cultural conditions and therefore give different meanings to this type of attention; and on the other hand, on the professional or institutional limitations.

In the first case, the professionals working in the educational field state that topics such as gender violence are considered taboo, making open dialogue on situations of violence difficult or favoring women's evasion in the follow-up. It is precisely because violence against women has been associated as a problem of the private sphere that reporting it means breaking into privacy, as it has been culturally constructed: "dirty linen is washed at home". This expression reproduces the silencing of women, and at the same time blames them by making it visible in external scenarios. However, in the sphere of public institutions whose purpose is to defend women's rights, there is a hi-



gher rate of women seeking support; however, this does not exempt them from being silenced and blames them for expressing violence in other scenarios, as identified in the following account of a professional:

*She (woman assisted) told me that she felt ashamed to be there (public institution). She had suffered from violence all her life, and if it had not been for the economic factor, she probably would never have gone, since she considered it shameful to see people telling their problems to the institutions. (Interview 2, 2021)*

However, in this same field, cases were identified of women who questioned themselves for not having asked for help in time, which reveals a connotation of personal reflexivity that unravels this concealment in the search for support and change in their situation.

In reference to the professional and institutional difficulties, it is identified that in the care of women, the intervention has an emphasis on orientation. Through it, the women's situation is accompanied and monitored, which is seen as a limitation to the possibilities of intervention of social workers. In general, the professionals focus their intervention on the identification of the different forms of violence that may affect women in relation to physical, psychological, sexual, patrimonial and economic aggressions, among others. In this order, the aim is to identify the level of risk in which women find themselves, since in some cases the aggressor shares daily spaces occupying the position of partner, father, brother, boss, co-worker, among others, putting at risk the guarantee of women's rights. As mentioned in the section on gender violence and patriarchy, it should be remembered that the first lessons of power and subordination take place in the family setting and are extended to other scenarios such as school, religious and work settings.

Institutional limitations are related to the disarticulation between officials, who from the interpretation of the norms sometimes fail to agree to provide answers according to the needs of women who require support; or the same lack of inter-institutional coordination, which is due to the non-existence of standardized databases or clear protocols regarding care, and even the discontinuity of the processes of hiring professionals, which contributes to the knowledge and trajectories in the issues and cases being lost and the need to start over again. In addition, there are parameters of attention that restrict time and resources, which affects the possibilities of approaching cases.



Despite the above, there have been significant successes in the positioning and value implied by the intervention in the accompaniment of women, the strategies employed by the professionals as a result of the specificity of the discipline<sup>7</sup>, such as the search for the defense of human rights, the recognition of women with the capacity of agency that overcome the manifestations of violence, the promotion of the change of stereotypes that favor a life free of violence and the mobilization of women's resources towards the transformation of the situation.

In this sense, the diagnosis becomes interesting in the identification of sensitive readings that problematize the object of intervention, since the codification of the analysis of the risk factors to which women are exposed is achieved. This issue is favorable in recognizing that in some cases social workers provide the first attention, allowing them to contribute to the orientation and accompaniment of other disciplines such as psychology, law and health. Likewise, this accompaniment from social work promotes the identification of the violence that women have experienced in their daily contexts, favoring the recognition of the single care route for women victims of violence and at risk of femicide (Secretaría de la Mujer Distrital, 2017), thus contributing to the prevention of the phenomenon.

When thinking about the intervention strategies implemented by the professionals, both individual and group actions are recognized, the latter are understood from the interdisciplinary articulation in the psychosocial teams. Individual practices are subordinated to the approach that the professionals give to the intervention, which are related to the understanding of the expressions and origins of gender violence; in other words, the recognition of the issues or causes that are at the root of gender-based violence, the place that women occupy in power relations within the manifestations of violence, the conditions that limit women from leaving violent spaces, among other questions that allow us to put into tension gender stereotypes that re-victimize women, judging their narratives. The naturalization of gender violence, it must be said, also affects professionals. The sacralization of the family and of the rights of children and adolescents has done its part by upholding the patriarchal family as the nucleus and reducing the capacity for agency in children and women.

These understandings in the professional area have an impact on the intervention model, based on the recognition of gender violence as a social and cultural problem that is subordinated to an order that hierarchizes and legitimizes the power of the patriarch over the subordinate position of women. This recognition of power relations makes it

<sup>7</sup> The Code of Ethics of Colombian social workers raises a series of values, principles and purposes that determine the professional intervention, which is relevant at the time of the implementation of care strategies with populations. (National Council of Social Work, 2019)



possible to problematize women's aggressions, in addition to identifying that culturally violent control over their bodies is approved, thus naturalizing their affectations, which occur mostly in the scenario of couple relationships (Tepichin, 2020).

Individual and subjective strategies on care are identified in the narratives of some professionals, as they are not translated into guidelines for the comprehensive interventions of the psychosocial teams of the affected population. As well as the naturalization of some gender violence reproduced by the professionals, it is important to point out that the discussion of the nuclear family as a reproducer of patriarchy has been a success, even when this implies opposing the protectionist discourse of the family promulgated by the judicial apparatus (Barraza, Benjumea and Chaparro, 2020). Defamiliarizing their analysis has contributed to the professionals developing particular strategies that show their sensitivity and empathy with the gender issue, as identified in the following account:

*We establish a space for dialogue to talk about what happened and evaluate strategies that will somehow alleviate the tension. In terms of emotional health and mental health, it will depend a lot on the situation, but I speak in my case; I think my colleagues will do the same, because fortunately, the professionals we are working with are very sensitive to the gender issue. (Interview 1, 2021)*

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In this particular case, sensitization with a gender perspective becomes an intervention referent based on the professional's criteria. This can be a controversial issue because it is subject to the criteria of those who are or are not sensitized to the issue, thus circumventing the effective commitment of the professionals to guarantee appropriate and comprehensive care for women. If the orientation lacks a gender focus, it may possibly affirm gender stereotypes, generating the revictimization of the affected population.

Another of the strategies used by professionals is active listening<sup>8</sup>, whereby the conversation becomes a space for exchange between the experiences of the protagonists of the stories and the professional who attends to their situation. This active listening is characterized by empathy reflected in the possibility of encountering the situation of those affected; the identification of their emotional affectations and the factors that influence their permanence in violent contexts. From there, the professionals assess the scope of the response according to the care route, and the potential and resources that can be strengthened to overcome the barriers that the women are experiencing. In the words of a professional interviewed: "the case of a woman who arrived crying, conti-

<sup>8</sup> Following Belziti (2016), the exercise of listening is an intervention strategy in social work in which the professional's own subjectivity comes into play, reflects our experiences and becomes: "a key to rethink issues linked both to the intervention and to the profession itself and its implications" (p. 6).





nued for almost an hour; she needed to talk, she had been keeping silent for 50 years”. (Interview 3, 2021)

In that order, women’s reflexivity about their own situation is a permanent strategy used by some of the professionals; precisely the recognition of women’s meanings and meanings about their experiences allows them to value the internalization of self-love and the self-recognition of their capacity for agency in violent contexts. The danger of assuming the term patriarchy as a category of analysis of gender violence was mentioned, precisely because of the tendency it has to anthologize the supremacy of men over women; however, facts such as those observed in relation to the reflexivity of the women who have suffered violence, open the opportunity to think that although patriarchy is a long-lasting structure, it is not immovable.

The group strategies are guided by the interdisciplinary and inter-institutional dialogue of the psychosocial teams, in some cases allowing reflection on their own professional actions, avoiding discourses that replicate machismo, promoting non-sexist language in the orientations, especially when male professionals refer to the population with expressions such as: “my love”, promoting the naturalization of power relations that subordinate women.

In general, the challenges of the profession are focused on the legitimization and positioning that we can achieve from interdisciplinary teams and institutions in general, which can place social work as a fundamental profession-discipline in the care of women immersed in contexts of violence, valuing its contribution in the defense of rights, the approach to cases from a gender and feminist perspective, and training in awareness processes that reinforce an equitable culture for women without any type of discrimination. To the extent that the profession is welcomed and valued as a discipline that contributes to the processes of intervention and research, the contributions to the social sciences in the field of gender violence will be increasingly visible, and therefore, it remains a challenge for the gender perspective to be taken into account in training as a central tool for social interventions.

## Conclusions

Thinking about the intervention of social work with women who experience violence implies recognizing the training biases based on patriarchy, inherited from the subjuga-



tion and subordination as a feminized profession. But we also think about the possibilities of overcoming violence against women from the positioning of social work as a discipline that generates knowledge that can contribute to the reduction of such a phenomenon. This makes sense in the legitimization of our profession within psychosocial teams, institutional apparatuses, and with service users, recognizing in social work the possibility of promoting proposals that aim at the transformation of power relations that arise between genders, and to contribute to overcoming subordination underpinning violent relationships.

Although the actions of social work promote the reflexivity of women immersed in contexts of violence, their autonomy prevails in these processes of accompaniment. However, it is important to recognize that we are located in a patriarchal cultural system sponsored by socialization scenarios such as family, school, church, among others, which make it difficult to permanently transform the submission of women, who have historically been located in violent contexts since power relations are the support of the interactions in which women are involved. Therefore, from our ethical-political stance, we seek not only the transformation of patriarchal codes but also the reflexivity of women on their own experiences to enhance their autonomy and agency.

Active and empathic listening is a fundamental strategy in social work as a space for exchange and dialogue of knowledge, in which the field of action is achieved from the recapitulation of women's narratives and the return of questions to themselves; it becomes an opportunity for materialization and work with words to redefine their place in social relations and thus build strategies for the mobilization of actions and resources for the dismantling of sexist practices in their daily lives.

Despite legislative advances and greater institutional operability in addressing gender-based violence, those affected are still afraid and ashamed to talk about the issue, which makes it difficult to make it visible and problematize in everyday scenarios and reinforces the concealment of the manifestations of violence. This requires the social work profession to promote processes of accompaniment for women that focus not only on overcoming the situation of violence itself, but also on the recovery of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-recognition. That is to say, to promote the overcoming of re-victimizing judgments regarding her condition as a woman who has suffered violence.

Finally, the approach to gender violence in social work with a feminist perspective makes sense to the extent that power relations are problematized, denaturalizing the



exercises of violence against women in everyday contexts. In other words, it puts in tension and challenges the reproduction of the patriarchal system in social relations, which has been interposed as a continuum that has historically affected women. This recognition contributes to the defense of women's rights but also contributes to the problematization of this increasingly visible phenomenon.

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TRANSLATIONS

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## Introducing the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ approach<sup>1</sup>

### Introduciendo el enfoque ‘¿Cómo llega a ser representado el problema?’<sup>1</sup>

**Carol Bacchi<sup>2</sup>**

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The ‘WPR’ approach is a resource, or tool, intended to facilitate critical interrogation of public policies. It starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change). Following this thinking, policies and policy proposals contain *implicit* representations of what is considered to be the ‘problem’ (‘problem representations’). For example, if forms of training are recommended to improve women’s status and promotion opportunities, the implication is *that their lack of training* is the ‘problem’, responsible for ‘holding them back’. The task in a ‘WPR’ analysis is to read policies with an eye to discerning how the ‘problem’ is represented within them and to subject this problem representation to critical scrutiny. This task is accomplished through a set of six questions and an accompanying undertaking to apply the questions to one’s own proposals for change:

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<sup>1</sup> Original chapter published in 2012, in A. Bletsas and C. Beasley (eds.), *Engaging with Carol Bacchi: Strategic Interventions and Exchanges*, (pp 21 - 24). University of Adelaide Press. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/press/titles/engaging>. We thank the author and Toni Luppino from the University of Adelaide Library, for granting permission to translate and republish the manuscript.

1. What's the 'problem' (for example, of 'problem gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', 'gender inequality', 'domestic violence', 'global warming', 'sexual harassment', etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

***Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.***

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Question 1 assists in clarifying the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal. Subsequent questions encourage:

- reflection on the underlying premises in this representation of the 'problem' (Question 2).
- consideration of the contingent practices and processes through which this understanding of the 'problem' has emerged (Question 3).
- careful scrutiny of possible gaps or limitations in this representation of the 'problem', accompanied by inventive imagining of potential alternatives (Question 4).
- considered assessment of how identified problem representations limit what can be talked about as relevant, shape people's understandings of themselves and the issues, and impact materially on people's lives (Question 5).
- a sharpened awareness of the contestation surrounding representation of the 'problem' (Question 6).



The undertaking to apply the six questions to one's own proposals signals a commitment to include oneself and one's thinking as part of the 'material' to be analysed. The argument here is that the ways in which 'problems' are constituted elicit particular forms of subjectivity, influencing how we see ourselves and others. Hence, self-problematization ('reflexivity') forms a crucial part of the analysis.

In this account policy is not the government's best effort to *solve* 'problems'; rather, policies *produce* 'problems' with particular meanings that affect what gets done or not done, and how people live their lives. However, the focus is not on intentional issue manipulation or strategic framing. Instead, the aim is to understand policy better than policy makers by probing the unexamined assumptions and deep-seated conceptual logics within implicit problem representations. This focus means paying attention to the forms of knowledge that underpin public policies, such as psychological or biomedical premises, producing a broad conception of governing that encompasses the place of experts and professionals.

In this view the 'public', of which we are members, is governed, not through policies, but through problematisations-how 'problems' are constituted. To be clear, this claim does not ignore the host of troubling conditions in people's (and peoples') lives; nor does it suggest that we are simply talking about competing interpretations of those conditions. To the contrary the proposition is that lives are lived in specific ways *due* to the shaping impact of proposals that create particular understandings of 'problems'. Hence the analysis counters a relativist assumption that any one 'truth' is as good as any other.

The 'WPR' approach has a broad field of application. Specific pieces of legislation or policy pronouncements provide the most obvious starting points for analysis. However, more general government documents also contain implicit problem representations. For example, a stated commitment to 'community cohesion' in a government report implies that there is a *lack* of this presumably desirable state or condition in the community (i.e. lack of community cohesion is constituted as a 'problem'). Governmental instruments, such as censuses or activity regimes for the unemployed, can also be analysed to reveal underlying assumptions about what is problematic and what needs to change. In addition, the 'WPR' approach facilitates a form of critical thinking that extends well beyond the study of government and public policy. For example, the six questions prove useful in identifying the underlying presuppositions and forms of problematisation in theoretical and methodological propositions, which are in effect postulated 'solutions'.



Initially the approach to policy analysis outlined above was described as the ‘*What’s the Problem?*’ approach (Bacchi 1999). It became clear that amplification was needed due to the tendency for some readers to interpret this question to mean a determination to seek out the ‘real problem’ in order to develop ‘appropriate’ ‘solutions’. The ‘WPR’ acronym, shorthand for ‘*What’s the Problem Represented to be?*’ (for which I thank Angelique Bletsas), is intended to make it clear that the point of the analysis is to begin with postulated ‘solutions’, such as policies, in order to tease out and critically examine their implicit problem representations. At the same time, Question 4 opens up a space to imagine different futures but always with a commitment to examine proposals for their modes of problematising.

The most recent incarnation of the ‘WPR’ approach (Bacchi 2009) includes two questions (Questions 3 and 6) that did not appear in its initial formulation. The goal in these questions is to develop a sharpened awareness of the forms of power involved in the shaping of problem representations. A genealogical tracing of the emergence of particular forms of problematisation, prompted by Question 3, also highlights the spaces for challenge and change.

These elaborations signal that the ‘WPR’ approach ought to be conceived as an open-ended mode of critical engagement, rather than as a formula. In light of this understanding I have recently:

- asked some ‘hard questions’ concerning the notion of reflexivity (Bacchi 2011).
- probed the analytic potential of the concept ‘discursive practices’ (Bacchi and Bonham 2011).
- considered more fully the political implications of different analytical paradigms (Bacchi and Rönnblom 2011).

In an era when a problem-*solving* motif is near hegemonic - think here of evidence-based policy and contemporary western eagerness to produce students as ‘problem solvers’ - the ‘WPR’ approach serves as a much needed interruption to the presumption that ‘problems’ are fixed and uncontroversial starting points for policy development. It reminds us that the banal and vague notion of ‘the problem’ and its partner ‘the solution’ are heavily laden with meaning. To probe this meaning the ‘WPR’ approach recommends ‘problem’-*questioning* as a form of critical practice.

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**A ‘Normal’ Life. Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law, Dean Spade, Barcelona, Bellaterra Editions, 2015, 276pp, ISBN: 9788472907300. Referential Value: \$26,000 / US\$37.00**

Catalina Fernández Vergara<sup>1</sup>

In A “Normal” Life, Dean Spade leads us to ask ourselves what is the problem with rights and what have been the guidelines followed by gay and lesbian social movements in the United States in recent years, positioning legal reform as their cornerstone and the difficulties this has implied for those who have been most excluded from access to rights. On this basis, the author seeks to highlight the transformative potential of a critical trans politics, driven by those who do not fit into the normativity of the state and who are not intelligible under the heteronormative binary gender approach. All this around the central concept of life in neoliberalism, which has been able to co-opt the instances of struggle, distancing them from redistribution and rebuilding them under its own logics with all the difficulties that this has implied but also with all the possibilities and dreams of struggle that we can generate against it.

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The book was first published in 2011 by South End Press, with a second edition that included additional material published in 2015 by Duke University Press. The book was translated and published in Spanish in Barcelona by Ediciones Bellaterra in 2016.

Spade has been a Professor of Law at Seattle University since 2012, teaching courses on Administrative Law, Poverty Law, Gender and the Law, Surveillance and Incarceration, Law and Social Movements, among others. In addition to his teaching career, Spade has excelled in the field of activism, founding in 2002 the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, dedicated to providing free legal counsel to trans, intersex and non-conforming gender people who do not have the resources to fund it, appealing to a collective governance that prioritizes these leaderships.

Through the development of the arguments, the text evidences the context that influences the proposals that accompany the configuration of critical trans politics, where the

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desires of the anti-prison and abolitionist movement, black feminisms, critical race theory, migrant movements and those who position themselves against ableism collide. With this confluence, Spade seeks to articulate the perspectives of his politics and the way in which his horizons are positioned beyond legal frameworks, transcending the possibilities offered by neoliberal states, with a view towards redistribution and the dismantling of forms of power that marginalize and criminalize life.

One of the fundamental provocations that accompanies the book relates to the failure of legal reform strategies, anti-discrimination and hate crime laws to capture the real nature of power and control and the ways in which they could play a critical role. In doing so, the author calls us to rethink the goals that have guided LGBT rights struggles in a neoliberal context and the way in which this same neoliberalization of life has implied a change in the articulations and goals of social movements.

In the different sections of the book, Spade covers topics such as trans law and politics in the neoliberal context, addressing from a historical perspective the different directions taken by homosexual movements in the US and the ways in which their objectives have been modified within the neoliberal context, thus producing an unequal distribution of the benefits and harms implied by these strategies framed in privilege. It also addresses the commodification of normative strategies, such as anti-discrimination and hate crime laws, showing how these have not led to a significant improvement in the living conditions of the people they seek to protect, especially trans people, establishing a framework of criminal repression and allocating resources to punitive apparatuses that have often been used to incarcerate the people they are supposed to protect.

On the other hand, it analyzes the relationship between transphobia and power from a Foucaultian perspective, involving a perspective of inequality of opportunities that allows us to show how the same type of legislation can affect different subjects in different ways, depending on the intersection in which their lives are read. In doing so, it invites us to question the supposedly neutral ground that has been established in the normative field, asking if this equality of opportunities effectively means that everyone has the same possibilities of access to rights or if, on the contrary, it becomes a justification to reproduce and reify the existing conditions of inequality.

Thus, the author seeks to illustrate how the power dynamics underlying inequality of opportunities can be applied to different areas of the lives of trans people, producing conflicts with institutions due to the difficulty in obtaining identification documents,





gender segregation in institutions of confinement (which often opens the door to abuse, discrimination and explicit violence) and in access to health care. With this, the author seeks to make us reflect on the structural exercise of discrimination, which has sought to be presented, from the normative sphere, as a space of individualized violence. Thus, it is worth asking ourselves what type of discrimination we are seeking to combat: is it a question of focusing only on the exercise of violence at the individual level, on conflict between people? or are we talking about the monopoly of marginalization carried out by the States that make certain lives uninhabitable? Spade seeks to argue that the problem should not only focus on these events carried out by individual subjects, but also on all those structural conditions that foster the existence of conditions of marginalization and violence, betting that the legal reform objectives of trans movements seek to focus more on the impacts that legal regimes have on the lives of those most vulnerable subjects, and less on what the law says or does not say about trans people.

All this constitutes a scenario where questioning the role of legal reform projects in the trans social movement is fundamental, raising the second central provocation of the text: that formal legal equality cannot be the only objective of trans movements. With this, a crossover is established between the path that gay and lesbian movements have followed in the current American scenario, where the neoliberalization of protest has transformed it into a pursuit of legal changes that facilitate the confirmation of the rights of those who are in a more privileged sphere, ignoring the way in which many of these projects have strengthened social systems of exclusion.

All of the above leads Dean Spade to propose a critical trans politics that is organized in mass mobilization, that does not limit itself to legal reform as the maximum horizon, that shows that there are possibilities of action and resistance beyond the margins imposed by the States. A critical trans politics that seeks to show what underlies the notions of neutrality, what type of subject is the one that benefits from the policies of formal legal inclusion and what is the one that, once again, is left on the margins.

This way of thinking makes us question what the trans movement should pursue. Do we seek to be part of and assimilate ourselves within the neoliberal model, coupling ourselves and obtaining a space within it? Do we want to position ourselves critically in opposition to the justification and maintenance of the normative model in which we find ourselves? This is what lays the foundations for what the author calls a critical trans politics, a bid for redistribution and recognition that aims to go beyond simply being named in the normative, evoking images such as the Stonewall revolt, where the



eruption of discontent implied an explicitly contrary positioning to a model that sought to perpetuate the exclusion of certain subjects.

With this, Spade seeks to make us reflect on the consequences that are socially produced thanks to the actions and objectives raised by social movements, within a context where the verification of identity, control policies and governmental management of risks is accompanied by marginalization and criminalization of certain lives. Who are those not falling within the normative framework of the States? What ways of life are we making uninhabitable? What possibilities do we have to question the exercise of power and the monopoly of the use of force exercised by the States? All these questions accompany the reflection on the horizons we seek for our social movements, where critical trans politics is positioned as a possibility at the intersection, to articulate this redistributive proposal that bets on the true liberation of all and not just a consecration of privileges and reinforcement of normativity.

A pending challenge, perhaps more so for ourselves, is to reimagine critical trans politics in contexts distant from that of the United States, since we are well aware that in the Third World the political advance of inclusion has acted in different ways. But it has also followed similar lines, imparted by many neoliberal states in the region, where the co-optation of social movements under financialized logics allows us to establish parallels with the situation that Spade identifies.

It is worthwhile projecting the way in which different contexts influence the objectives of critical trans politics and the way to understand its approaches in the Chilean context, particularly after the social outbreak, where we find ourselves with a relevant opportunity to reform the normative system that governs us, but which, if not approached carefully, could confirm the uses and exercises of power used by the State during the post-dictatorship. This makes us wonder how critical trans politics can contribute to the analysis of the current scenario. By seeking to go beyond the limits set by the normativity of the State and ending the practice of legal change as the final solution to the problems of discrimination, we can open the door to reimagine our forms of existence, with a view to an effective redistribution that does not marginalize those who have been left out of the protective action of the State due to the intersections they inhabit.

With this, A “Normal” Life goes beyond a political proposal, being also an invitation to dream about what ways of life we want, what expectations we have and in what ways they are framed, what they respond to and what they make possible. In this, critical



trans politics and the paradigm shift of social movements play a key role: moving away from the central position of legal change and moving towards redistribution becomes not only a way to fight against neoliberalism and the management of power produced from the States, but an invitation to imagine new possibilities to inhabit the world, articulating itself as a new tool to dream of ways of life that allow us to coexist in freedom, especially for those who have been vulnerable, marginalized and criminalized by the exercise of power.



## Natalia Corrales Cordero, feminist social worker and Union Leader<sup>1</sup>

By Rodrigo Cortés Mancilla



*“I never imagined that I would end up in this, disputing the election of constituents, to write the new constitution and eliminate Pinochet’s constitution.*

*The priority is to make this constituent process participatory and popular. We do not have the constituent assembly, which is what we are asking for in the streets, but we are going to make it concrete through the links between social movements that we have already begun to promote”*

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In this issue dedicated to addressing discussions from feminist and intersectional perspectives to think about critical proposals in social work, we could not ignore the voice of a social worker who has been intensely involved in the movement of the Coordinadora Feminista 8M and in the constituent process, running as a candidate in the constituent elections held in May this year. It is an honor to have this powerful interview with Natalia Corrales Cordero, social worker, Master in Social Psychology and union leader, who currently works in the Department of Works of the Municipality of Valparaíso.

We thank Rodrigo Cortés Mancilla<sup>2</sup> who kindly talked with Natalia, giving us this interesting look at social work, feminism and political action on the front line.

**Rodrigo:** Thank you very much Natalia for accepting our invitation to this conversation. First of all, we would like to know more about you, about your professional trajectory, in order to understand how feminism has appeared in your career.

**Natalia:** Well, first of all I thank you for the confidence, it is always very nice for me to talk and connect with my colleagues, and well, obviously, one of the reasons why we

<sup>1</sup> Conversation held via online platform on May 07, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Rodrigo Cortés Mancilla. PhD in Social Work from the Universidad Nacional de Rosario, Argentina. Academic-researcher of the Social Work Career at Universidad Andrés Bello, Viña del Mar, Chile. Contact e-mail: rcortes@unab.cl

are here has to do with the decision to have studied social work. So, starting with the first question: I am Natalia Corrales Cordero, I was born in Iquique, I studied in Iquique and then I came to Valparaíso to continue studying and I have been here for almost 13 years. I also came here because my mother was from here, she was from the Fifth Region and we had plans to come and live here... then she got sick and passed away. That project was left unfinished, and I feel that must have been one of the unconscious motivations that drove me to come here. While I was at school I was part of the Student Center for a while, and then at the university I was also a leader of the Social Work career. Before social work I studied law. I felt that I was very emasculated, I felt that I could not give my opinion, I could not develop the capacity for reflection. I was born to a communist woman, a union leader, who organized everything that came her way, very used to discussing. I remember those lunches with her, having long after-dinner conversations. So, entering a world where I was not allowed to speak was terrible for me. Besides, I saw how teachers mistreated my classmates and it seemed horrible to me. I was not comfortable there.

When my mother died in 2001, I was 21 years old. I decided to change careers, because when your fundamental pillar dies, the person you love the most, it changes your whole life. It changes your place. The loss of my mother made me rethink many things that have to do with how I wanted to live, how I projected myself in life, what I really felt, what I was passionate about. And what I was always passionate about was connecting with the community, connecting with people. When I studied law I felt that it was an individualistic career and that made me very sad, because deep down - I realized later, when I entered social work - I really liked the collective.

I decided to change to social work and I felt that I could not be anywhere else. I got a scholarship for academic excellence and because my mother had passed away, I took care of my younger sister. My sister was 11 years old at the time, and we were left alone. I worked, studied and took care of my sister. After graduating I started working on different projects.

I am a union leader and I am part of social movements, and that permeates my work as a social worker: I always try to link people, neighbors and neighbors with other organizations, collectives, groups. This is something typical of my professional training, that is, you don't stay only with the work you develop in an institution, but always expand beyond, because social dynamics are so complex and so diverse, that expanding the community is fundamental.

I worked at the Housing and Urban Development Service, but at the end of my work cycle, suddenly, I was fired. I was in shock because I said “what do I do with my sister”, “how do I solve this problem immediately? My colleagues could not believe it, they started to organize, but there was no case and I had to leave.

And then something woke up in me. I had the experience of my mother’s precarious work. She worked on contract for the National Service for Children. She was fired and a month later she was diagnosed with leukemia. Some time after my mother’s death, they called me from the institution to give me my mother’s contract. I don’t think it was with bad intentions, maybe they thought that giving me her contract was a kind of legacy, but I remember that I threw it in their face with a lot of anger. Then, by the twists and turns of life, it was my turn to work as a worker Without a Stable Contract (WSC) and suddenly, I was fired.

I wrote my thesis on WSC workers, thinking “hopefully one day WSC workers will have the possibility, or feel the need, to organize themselves and that in the future there will be an organization that will allow them to advance in dignity and rights”.

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And now I am here: I formed the first union of WSC workers of the Municipality of Valparaíso.

**Rodrigo:** How did you come to work in the Municipality of Valparaíso?

**Natalia:** Once I was fired from Housing and Urban Development Service, I continued studying, graduated and worked in an NGO developing reconstruction projects after the 2005 earthquake. Then I came to Valparaíso and worked on large-scale social housing projects. When those projects were finished, I joined the municipality of Valparaíso, thinking it was a project we had with my mother. I worked on different projects, all as a WSC worker, and generally in housing, territory and community work. Then I joined the Department of Works, accompanying the execution of projects, which is the work I do now.

**Rodrigo:** And how was this articulation with the union? How was it built up and how did you also become involved in other spaces?

**Natalia:** That happened because when I started working the payment of my salary was very late. This is a type of mistreatment of workers that occurs in the public sector. One

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<sup>3</sup> Entidades de Gestión Inmobiliaria Social:



day they were doing a survey on drug use among public employees. It bothered me and I answered to the person who was handing out the forms: “before asking if I take drugs or not, ask me under what conditions I am working, that is, what is the reason why someone ends up taking drugs or alcohol in a job like this”. He was a union leader in the municipality. Through him I met other women colleagues who thought in this way, we began to know each other and to set up the union.

When the President Michelle Bachelet came to Valparaíso, we gave her a letter telling her about our status as WSC workers. We got in touch with the workers of the Housing and Urbanism Service that I knew, so we began to put together a group of WSC workers, we allied ourselves with unions that had already been in existence for a couple of years and with people who wanted to organize from all over Chile.

We organized meetings in secret at first, because we were always told that we would be fired if we were caught. Most of us were women. That must be emphasized. We women are always the spearhead of revolutions, and that has to do with feminism.

We held meetings at lunchtime. I think it is very important to highlight this because when a worker gives up his or her eating time to organize, it is because it is a vital and important need.

I was worried about the fact that we didn't have the right to work, it was true that we could be fired. My uncle, who had been a union leader, recommended me to present the union in society. Another fellow leader recommended the same thing to me: “you have to present the union to society, you have to go straight ahead, tell the mayor, let's set up this union! But before telling him, everyone has to know that you are already organized, that there are many of you, ideally make a press release or something like that”. We did it that way in 2014. The mayor did not want to receive us, but a close person invited us to a meeting with him. It was like a trap. We were just women and a fellow sexual dissident. We told him: “We are WSC workers. Many of us have been working in that way for 6 or 8 years. We are going to form our union. The idea is that we have a permanent connection, that we work together because the idea is to improve the working conditions of the people who make it possible for you to be mayor”. We had a letter, a petition, and we sent it to them.

The formation of the union was very exciting. We elected a provisional directive that later became permanent, we raised our first petition, we signed a protocol of agreement with the mayor of that time, Castro. We included almost all the basic labor rights, and





then we began to advance in the recognition of rights, we carried out mobilizations, protests, we took over the cash registers, different actions. In the course of a year, the union was very well known, very well supported, because the strategy is that it was not only our union, we were part of the National Union of State Workers, and this unity also has to do with the social movements in which we participate. Most of us are social workers, many of us are also social workers in the federation's leadership and we understand that union work does not develop alone, that it has to be connected with the community. That is how we linked up with No + AFP , with the Coordinadora Feminista, with the Mesa Social de Valparaíso, with the Mesa Social de Valparaíso and the Mesa Sindical de la National Workers Union (NWU).

Solidarity began, and I began to learn a lot from the most experienced leaders, from the most hardened leaders. I think I have had a wonderful school here in Valparaíso with comrades who were from the NWU, who were from the National Association of Public Employees, who were from movements of different trade union organizations, of different militancy, and with whom I may have many differences, but I also learned to work in the difference, with respect for the opinion, for the different opinions. There are things, of course, that I do not compromise on, of course. I am anti-neoliberal. In any case, almost all of us are anti-neoliberal in the trade union world, so that's where we are aligned.

This is how I came to unionism, a lot of it because my mother was a union leader. I never thought I was going to be a union leader, and I am super honest, I never imagined I was going to end up in this, let alone contesting the constituent assembly to write the new constitution and burn Pinochet's constitution, which is what I want to do.

**Rodrigo:** Addressing that surprising history, your legacy and trajectory, how did you come to be a candidate for the constituent assembly, and surely related to that, how did you arrive at this feminist militancy?

**Natalia:** I think you realize that you have always been a feminist. At some point you realize why feminism is so special. It is not a movement like No+AFP, which has a very concrete demand and that I can say: I have been a member of No+AFP since 2014, for example, which is when we started building our union. Feminism, I believe, is not entered into at a certain date. One day I realized that I had been a feminist for many years, so when did I realize it? During the union work, that's when I realized it.

As I was telling you, we were all women who began to raise the unions, not only in Valparaíso, but also at a national level. Cannon fodder right away, first line. Among women we began to organize this political life, this new union political life. When the Coordinadora Feminista 8M was formed, which happened in the framework of the First Feminist Strike of 2018, I had already dabbled in feminism. Feminism has its good things and its bad things. One of the things we urgently need to solve is language: how feminism reaches working class neighbourhoods. It is not that feminism is not present in working class neighbourhoods. Feminism exists there, because our *compañeras* are the ones who are raising the common pots, they are the ones who take care of their neighbor's children because they have to go out to work. Feminism, in fact, is born in the working class neighbourhoods, in the territories, in the organizations. It is not the patrimony of the intelligentsia, but the intellectual discourse is sometimes presented as a barrier to make feminism flesh, so that it penetrates people.

I also felt insecure, until today, because I am not a scholar of feminism and I respect my friends very much. One of my best friends is one of the important intellectuals of feminism here in Chile, but I feel that there is a debt in this sense. In feminism there is an adhesion from the youth, and the youth have had the possibility of having more information than our grandmothers, than our mothers. For example, with young women one can talk about patriarchy, because they have already internalized this concept. But our mothers, our grandmothers, have not internalized it. We have to do this exercise. And it is not a question of going to teach the women, but simply of accessing this capacity to reconcile the everyday with the concepts, nothing more than that. This is a pending task.

So remembering, I think that is how I realized that I was a feminist, I realized that my mother was a feminist woman, who fought against the dictatorship, who risked her life for democracy, who was later mistreated by the system, because she was not one of those who was later *apitutada* in the governments of the Concertación. She never even wanted to be registered in the Program for Reparation and Integral Health Care. My grandmother participated in the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women. They had a feminist life, perhaps without knowing it or wanting to say it. During the dictatorship there were feminist comrades and they were very criticized. The lesbian feminists were victims of discrimination within their own political parties for being lesbians; this invisibilization that we women have historically had, is made flesh there too. During the dictatorship women fought, risked their lives, took care of their families, took charge of the political parties, because their comrades were imprisoned and this



is absolutely invisible. When “democracy” was reestablished, the government cabinet was made up only of men and feminist demands were transformed into gender agendas, institutionalized, framed in the policy of “as far as possible”.

I understand feminism as a transversal struggle, as a mass movement that allows uniting different causes, something that no other movement achieves, in my opinion. Here we are the students, the paid workers, the unpaid workers, the caregivers, the sportswomen, the ecofeminists. When we decided to run for the constituent assembly, it was also a very critical discussion. I did not agree with the way in which the November 15 agreement was reached. It is not the merit of the political parties, as some say, - that if the parties had not come together within four walls there would not be a new constitution -, because I believe that we would be thinking of a new constitution without Piñera, without a criminal president who has attacked his own people. However, we decided to assume this responsibility and my candidacy was raised from the 8M Feminist Coordinating Committee, from the Federation of Workers WSC and from the Association of Social Workers of the province of Valparaíso. This is how my participation in the constitutional convention was conceived. That is to say, it is not a personal decision, it is collective.

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**Rodrigo:** What are the key proposals that have to be in the constituent process, from your perspective?

**Natalia:** Today all rights are really a class privilege: health, education, housing, dignified old age. Rights are being profited from, because the current state is a subsidiary state and because the constitution is a neoliberal constitution. What we are disputing, then, is above all an ideological discussion, why does the current constitution prioritize private property before life and biodiversity? Why does it guarantee the freedom to choose where to treat an illness, in the hospital or in a private clinic, but does not guarantee my right to timely, dignified, plurinational health, which respects my ancestral traditions? What we are dealing with here is an ideological dispute at the neoliberal root.

In this sense, I believe that the most important political project has to do with putting the articulation with social movements at the center. I have just come from a press point among our sister lists of social movements throughout Chile. We have been invited to participate in the First Plurinational Meeting, organized by the constituent social movements. It is a kind of national meeting, where we are going to address various issues and we hope it will be the first of many. What we are doing is to begin to articulate the struggles at the national level, from the peoples, with a plurinational perspective. I be-



lieve that this is the most important political project that we have as future constituents, as social movements. It is a matter of forming networks, of transforming our culture of silence into a culture of speaking out, of raising our voices, of critical reflection and of losing our fears.

The priority is also to make this constituent process participatory and popular. We do not have the constituent assembly, which is what we are asking for in the streets, but we are going to make it concrete through these links between social movements, which we have already begun to promote.

This constituent process has to be transparent, it has to be public. The sessions have to be transmitted on television, we all have the right to know what is being discussed. The territories must have the right to speak and vote in situations that affect them. For example, here we have sacrifice zones, and the communities have not been heard. There must be mechanisms of direct democracy that allow the territories to decide on issues that affect them at the national and local levels. This redistribution of power must take place.

If we are talking about the redistribution of power, its objective is greater political participation of communities and territories, of intermediate groups. This implies thinking about how we, as leaders but also as social workers, achieve, make and build a participatory society; how we make children, from early childhood, aware of the importance of political participation, and make it their own, as a necessity. If we do not educate people for political participation, it will be useless to have this number of plebiscites and citizen consultations, because there will be no need or political awareness in our people of the importance of participation. Participation is also key in our intervention from Social Work. We are well aware that there are many policies that are implemented in the neighborhoods, where no one reaches because no one feels it makes sense, because no one was asked, because people do not feel part of it

We need to build a caring, supportive State, which is regulated by a constitution framed by respect for human rights and the dignity of people. Feminism seeks equality and if we talk about unrestricted respect for human rights we are talking about equality. I am not taking weight away from feminism, but I am saying that the constitution does not necessarily have to be called “feminist constitution” to be so. What we have to do is to put at the center of the discussion the patriarchal violence that affects women, children and gender dissidence. Put at the center the recognition of the rights of nature, the right



to water, which is vital; social rights, which must be substantive rights and not class privileges. To put at the center the historical memory, a feminist historical memory, in the sense of making visible the struggles that we women have fought; the sexual political violence that we suffer from the State until today, women and sex/gender dissidence. On March 8<sup>th</sup> we had several reports of women comrades who were abused by the police in brutal ways. We have to take charge, as social workers, because we do Social Work from a human rights perspective.

### Learn more about Natalia's work:

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<https://www.eldesconcierto.cl/nacinal/2021/05/10/natalia-corrales-candidata-por-el-d7-de-la-cf8m-sobre-trabajadores-a-honorarios-no-tenemos-derechos-laborales-basicos.html>

Cofré, G. y Corrales, N. (2020). Covid-19: Pandemia de la precariedad. CIPER: <https://www.ciperchile.cl/2020/04/02/covid-19-pandemia-de-la-precariedad/>

Corrales, N. y Rivera, I. (2020). Presupuesto Base Cero Ajustado, ¿hacia más precarización estatal? Columna de opinión publicada en La Voz de Los Que Sobran <https://lavodelosquesobran.cl/presupuesto-base-cero-ajustado-hacia-mas-precarizacion-estatal/>

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Federación Honorarios del Estado <https://www.facebook.com/HonorariosdelEstadoUNTTHEmcn>

Coordinadora Feminista 8M  
<http://cf8m.cl/>

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<sup>4</sup> Agentes policiales del Estado.



*Poster of Natalia in her candidacy as Constituent for District 7.  
December 2020.*

## Marisela Montenegro, researcher of the Faculty of Psychology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona

By Caterine Galaz and Lelya Troncoso



*“We can take advantage of the entry of the intersectional perspective into the discussion of public policies to point out how oppressive relations are reproduced within the social intervention itself. How sexism is reproduced, how racism is reproduced, how ableism is reproduced, in our own interventions”*

We talked with Marisela Montenegro about the relevance of intersectional perspectives in looking critically at the processes, approaches and aspirations of our professional interventions. Marisela is an academic at the Faculty of Psychology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and Director of the Research Group Fractalities in Critical Research (Fractalidades en Investigación Crítica, FIC), holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and defines herself as a feminist psychologist. In recent years she has worked on intersectional analysis of public policies and social interventions both in Spain and in some Latin American countries, especially with respect to collective memory processes, international migration and gender and sexuality issues. We thank Caterine Galaz and Lelya Troncoso<sup>1</sup> for conducting this interview<sup>2</sup>.

**Caterine:** For years you have been conducting critical feminist studies in relation to social intervention. Tell us, in what year did you start linking these readings with intersectional perspectives?

**Marisela:** In my doctoral thesis I make a critical analysis of the basic premises of social intervention, both from directed and participatory perspectives. The intersectional

<sup>1</sup> Academics from the Department of Social Work of the Universidad de Chile, members of the Diversity and Gender: Intersectional Approaches Research Cluster

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted online in April 2021.



issue began to interest me from the studies done with your team Catherine, which included Karla Montenegro and Laura Yufra in a work on social services aimed at migrant women. In those studies we began to explore postcolonial perspectives, especially the figure of “the woman of the third world” proposed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, since it served us perfectly to analyze how, from the social services, migrant women were constructed in the context of the Spanish State. And there, from that entry into postcolonial studies, we also began to work with the perspectives of black feminisms, Chicano feminisms, among others, and that is where I particularly began to get into the subject of intersectionality studies and to understand the concept, its political origins, among other factors.

**Lelya:** You have talked about the idea of situated intersectionality... Can you explain to us how you understand this notion? Where does it come from, and how do you link this notion to your call for interventions to be situated?

**Marisela:** Well, this idea is worked on by different authors, especially Yuval Davis, who makes a whole conceptualization to understand how different axes of oppression are situated in a context and affect people’s life trajectories. This is because she questions a perspective of intersectionality - which is quite entrenched - that has to do with defining intersectionality based on the positions of the subjects. When we speak of black lesbian women, for example, we are talking about the position of the subject, and not about the context that makes that position be subalternized at a certain moment. That is to say, what the situated or contextual perspective proposed by these authors seeks refers to how in any context different axes of oppression converge to generate forms of discrimination. Therefore, it starts, let us say, from another place, not from the position, but from the context. However, the link with the field of social intervention is a link that is not so clear. In my case, the perspectives I used to build a critical look at social intervention were based on Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge, which somehow converges with the issue of intersectionality, but they are not the same thing, they do not come from the same thinking: the notion of intersectionality comes from black feminisms and Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge emerges in the field of feminist epistemologies. So of course, the articulation of this is not so easy and, in fact, it is something we are currently working on. In a chapter that Suryia Nayak, Joan Pujol and I wrote, we talked a bit about how to work from an intersectional perspective in professional interventions, but it is a very complex issue because, as I was saying, many times the reading of intersectionality starts from the subject position. When working on intersectionality in this field, it is often considered that what we have



to do is to look for the least favored positions. On the other hand, if we take the concept of intersectionality from a contextual perspective, what we should do is to intervene on the axes of oppression that negatively affect people's lives.

**Caterine:** Can you tell us about some research as examples to visualize this intersectional critique?

**Marisela:** Research on this intersectional critique? well... There is the research of Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis, there is Ange Marie Hancock herself, who talks about the Olympics of Oppressions; well, maybe Leslie McCall who makes this classification of the different perspectives of intersectionality. However, we do see a lack of integration of the intersectional perspective in the field of social intervention. It is something that is being worked on in some services here in Barcelona, however, there is no clear vision of how to effectively apply an intersectional perspective in intervention. This is because it is a perspective that, above all, is based on a political vision of changing the structures of oppression, and as we know, many times social intervention is based on working on attention to the subject. Therefore, a contextual perspective for thinking about social intervention is something that has yet to be elaborated.

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**Lelya:** How do you assess the sometimes depoliticized ways in which the idea of intersectionality has entered academia and public policy?

**Marisela:** In relation to how the concept of intersectionality is used in certain places - so to speak - more institutional, I would say that there is a process of depoliticization. One of the reasons is because in many places the political origin of the concept is not taken into account, that is, it is used as an academic notion or one that is useful for public policies. But it is not clearly recognized that it is a concept that arises from an identification of how power works. It is a concept that is born to explain how structures of oppression intersect. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's text, she actually talks about public policy. In the case of black women workers, which she discusses in this text, what she says is that neither public policy related to racism nor public policy related to gender protects these women because they are single issue policies. They are identity-based policies, and therefore, they do not address the intersection of different ways in which oppressions can affect people.

Having said that, often in public policy, when the notion of intersectionality is applied, it is applied in a rather summative manner. There is also the case of its application using a main category and then subcategories, which appear as affecting the main oppression.



For example, in the LGTBI laws here in Spain, which Carmen Romero and I analyzed in a text published in the journal *Psicoperspectivas*, the main difference that is emphasized is the one referring to sexual orientation and gender identity, and then in one section it says something like “well, we must also take into account differences such as migratory status, disability, etc.”, right? In other words, one category is used as the main one and then others are named and treated as subcategories that intersect that main one; so the different oppressions are not integrated in the intersectional view of these public policies. In the case of social interventions, the same thing happens a bit, given that the interventions are designed precisely on the basis of public policies and are usually thought of in terms of identity subjects: policies for women, policies for young people, policies for migrants. For all these reasons, it is very difficult to generate a complex or contextual intersectional view within the field of social intervention. Here there are some associations that are trying, for example, to think about the issue of intersectionality in gender violence, although it is taking a long time. What they are working on is how economic precariousness, roles, etc., affect the phenomenon of gender violence in particular people. What happens is that the framework where intervention is made is already prefixed by a policy that is based on gender difference as the main category.

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**Caterine:** What do you think are the dangers of intersectionality operating as diversity? Especially when there are some uses of diversity as a benign variation that ignores power relations.

**Marisela:** The great danger of intersectionality is applying it in the same way with the categories, that is, that sub-categories are simply sub-categorized. An example would be the “woman” category and then the “black woman” sub-category. This has the same negative consequences as identity categories. First, the category is internally homogenized, that is, all black women are understood as equal to each other. Secondly, the category is essentialized, it is understood that there is something natural about this sub-category (as was the case with the category woman). Finally, the category functions as a representation in the sense that, if a black woman is on the panel or somewhere, then she seems to represent all black women. These are the same negative consequences that the issue of identity categories has, which is reproduced when intersectionality is applied in a sub-categorical manner, that is, when different sub-categories of a larger category are generated. When I spoke to you about public policies, it is somewhat the same phenomenon, that is, for example, in the analysis we made of the categories of LGTBI public policies in the Spanish State, we saw that there is a large category, which is the LGTBI category, which is then subdivided into migrant LGTBI, LGTBI



seniors, etcetera. So what is the danger there? The danger is that we return to the same categorical logic and forget or make invisible the power relations that generate these categories. Here we could go to Judith Butler, to how she explains that what we have to look at are the mechanisms through which the categories are produced rather than the category itself.

We could summarize this previous part in that the concept of intersectionality has been understood from different theoretical points of view and that it is not trivial which theoretical point of view it is understood from, that is, if intersectionality is understood from a categorical point of view, then it has the same negative consequences as the identity categories that have already been analyzed: homogenization, essentialization and representation.

Meanwhile, if we go back to the political origin of the concept of intersectionality, which is the work of black feminisms, what we see there is precisely a critique of identity politics: both to public policies which, as I said before, is the example of Kimberlé Crenshaw's text, in which she shows that anti-discrimination policies by race protect black people -in the case she put- and policies against the patriarchal system protect gender, but neither of them see the situation of black working women that she was problematizing in that text. Likewise, the Combahee River Manifesto -which is one of the texts that is understood to be foundational to the intersectional perspective- criticizes the social movements themselves, the civil rights movement, the Black Panther movement, etcetera, saying that they do not see their own sexism, and since the feminist movement at that time did not see its own racism, it was somewhat the same idea.

This is the origin of the critique and of the proposal made by Nira Yuval Davis and other authors, of contextual intersectionality, which refers to studying in each specific context, which are the axes of oppression that are affecting the lives of the people in those contexts. I often use the example of migration in which it is very clear that the category is not an essence of the subject, because if you are in your country, you are not a migrant, but if you cross the border you begin to be a migrant. That is to say, the category is a consequence of the border, it is not prior to the border. So, in this case, if one looks at it from a contextual perspective, one looks at the mechanisms by which these borders are porous with respect to certain bodies, certain nationalities or certain people and are not porous for other people. Then, an intersectional analysis could be made in terms, for example, of geopolitical relations, of gender, in terms of capacity/disability,



in terms of age, etc., but around, for example, a concrete context, which would be the use or uses given to the border.

**Caterine:** And how could the notion of intersectionality be included in public policies and interventions to avoid falling into this whitewashing or depoliticization of feminist struggles?

**Marisela:** There are several complexities here, the first complexity is the one we have already mentioned, which refers to how the concept of intersectionality is used in public policies. There is currently a great debate about the concept of intersectionality in which, let's say, the more categorical view is the dominant one, at least in the context of the Spanish State. So of course, the public policies that would be born from there are the public policies that I have already criticized above, those that generate subcategories. Now, if we were to think of a world in which the contextual stance were the majority, what would those public policies be like? There is a strong difficulty here because public policies tend to be generalizable, that is, applicable to different situations and the contextual view of intersectionality rather seeks to specify a situation in order to analyze it from there, so this difficulty means that public policies are not universal.

However, it would be possible to think of some lines of reflection that could be included in public policies, especially in social intervention, to help us see how these systems of oppression affect people contextually. In this sense, one of the main ideas or a proposal that I make is to generate tools of analysis to see how public policies and social intervention reproduce the oppressive relationships that exist in the context, for example, through the imaginaries that exist about migrant women, something that we have been working on for years. If the staff or professionals have an imaginary of women, weak, victims, etc., then racism and patriarchy are being reproduced intersectionally, based on the very imaginaries of the people who intervene and the people who make public policies as well.

Therefore, one axis of work is to analyze how oppressive relations are reproduced in the work of public policies and in the work of social intervention. How sexism is reproduced, how racism is reproduced, how ableism is reproduced, and so on. Of course, it is a bit abstract, it is not a very concrete application, but I do believe it is useful. In the courses and training I do, I see that generating analytical tools is a good way to reflect on the practice of intervention itself.

One example is to reflect on the spaces in which care is provided: they are culturally defined spaces, they are not neutral spaces, as people think; they are culturally defined and they invite certain people and not so much others; and of course, questioning the asymmetrical relationship between professionals and people, users, clients, beneficiaries, participants, whatever they are called. Looking at this relationship critically would allow for opening spaces for the participation of these people, for the assumption that the knowledge they have about the context is a valid knowledge to observe these oppressive relationships that are affecting them at the moment, and also for the agency of these people in the very work of the society which they are in.

And finally, it is important to build a much more critical view of the forms of oppression that generate situations of precariousness or subalternization, that is, to produce a critical view of the power relations that shape the social world. Much progress has been made in the gender perspective, but the critical view of racism, at least here in Spain, is very incipient, if not non-existent in the field of social intervention. The look at other forms of oppression is also, let's say, quite uncommon, so I believe that one can take advantage of the entry of the intersectional perspective to the discussion of public policies and social intervention to point out how within the social intervention itself oppressive relations are given and reproduced, understanding the social intervention itself as a context. In other words, applying the intersectional perspective to the context of intervention in order to see how these relations of oppression are reproduced.





Marisela giving classes at the University of Costa Rica.

### To know more about Marisela's work:

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