

Confronting the ‘Coloniality of Gender’¹ in Gender Equity Work & Public Discourse: Considerations for EU-LAC Relations

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The effects of European colonialism, attempts at native genocide, the enslavement of West Africans and the overall exploitative conditions which characterised the extraction of Asian, European, Indigenous and African labour power under colonialism, reverberates throughout the Caribbean and Latin American region today. This history is the context within which gender relations and identity evolved and thus to speak of gendered inequalities outside of these realities is to miss the very conditions under which access to the human is granted and denied. It is worth acknowledging that the quest for gender equity and justice, in regions with such fraught histories of struggles against multiple inequalities, is pursued in the context of what Maria Lugones refers to as “the colonial/modern gender system.”² Conversations, actions and policies on the path toward gender equity and justice have been dominated by a focus on the unequal distinctions between women and men. This is a feature of gender policies produced in the Caribbean, as well as North-South dialogue on how best to achieve more equitable gender relations. The man/woman distinction, so dominant in these policies and discourses globally, obscures the human/non-human distinction to which Sylvia Wynter points.³ In the Caribbean and Latin America the latter binary has indeed been overdetermined by race and racialisation. Furthermore, addressing difference – in particular, how race, class, gender, ability, nation, sexuality, *inter alia*, interact to produce uneven outcomes – should be prioritised if EU-LAC relations are to be mutually beneficial and if the ideal of equitable access to public services is to be achieved.

Inter-country and inter-regional dialogue on these questions is crucial. For instance, last year in Barbados and earlier this year in The Bahamas, it was reported that the principals of secondary schools banned black girls from wearing their so-called ‘nappy/kinky/natural’ hair open. The principals in both countries insisted that while they support natural hair, the girls needed to be “appropriate,” “neat” and “tidy.” Much of the public opinion arising out of these rulings betrayed both the obvious and subtle operation of race and racialisation that continue to police how women and girls in post-colony societies come into being. In contrast, the girls’ mothers, as well as other members of the public, named the cultural and institutional racism underpinning the attempts at disciplining blackness. Joanna Joswik’s comment that

¹ The concept of “The Coloniality of Gender” is drawn from the work of Maria Lugones.

² Maria Lugones. “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 24(4) (2010): 742-759.

³ Sylvia Wynter’s Theory of the Human is finely articulated across a number of publications and provides crucial insights into how race and the overall colonial order continues to organise societies.



as “the second white” and “the first European” she felt like a silver medallist after the 800m finals in the recently concluded Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, essentially reinforced how the presumably all-inclusive category of ‘Woman’ is often exclusionary. Embedded in her commentary are the hierarchical distinctions within and among the categories of race, nation, gender and sexuality. These examples are instructive of the importance of confronting taken-for-granted categories as they manifest in very problematic ways in the everyday, and can shape the development and implementation of policies and programming to address inequalities.

One specific example of how this manifests in access to social services in the Caribbean is provided in early research on domestic violence in Guyana by Graham Danns and Shiw Parsaud. They document how social service providers respond differently to Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese women who report that they have been violently victimised by their male partners. It was found that while Indo-Guyanese women were constructed as victims of violence by representatives of the state, Afro-Guyanese women were declared to be fighting with their partners.⁴ Studies have shown that both Afro-Caribbean and African American women are often dismissed as strong, black, emasculating matriarchs who are either responsible for their own victimisation or are capable of defending themselves, when they seek social services to address the violence they experience in intimate relationships. The reductionist alignment of Indo-Caribbean women to the status of victim is equally problematic, as missing from this account is the agency exercised by both Indo- and Afro- Caribbean women in their many acts of resistance to violence and in their help-seeking practices.

Gender equity and justice work within and across the LAC and EU regions should not be separated from the on-going project of the decolonisation of knowledge, being and power in LAC countries, as the above examples indicate. Much of the intellectual work supporting these intersecting (and, too often, distinctively defined projects) has been produced in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The LAC region has much to offer by way of shaping the way forward on the kinds of policies and actions necessary to achieve Goal Five (5) of the Sustainable Development Goals – gender equality. At the root of conversations among activist/intellectuals in the LAC region is the need to challenge the very way in which we understand the categories woman, man and human, particularly in circumstances where entrance into and exclusion from such groupings continue to be circumscribed by race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, nation and other relations of

⁴ Graham Danns, and B. Shiw Parsad. “Domestic violence and marital relationships in the Caribbean: a Guyana case study.” Georgetown: Women’s Studies Unit, University of Guyana, 1989.



power. EU-LAC cooperation on gender equity and justice should begin with a historical and geopolitical unpacking of the very way in which the term ‘gender’ is mobilised as an analytical category in policy, practice and the popular; it should involve a critical examination of how various categories of difference shape gender relations across both regions; and it should take full account and make appropriate use of the intellectual work of a range of activists/intellectuals/policy makers (across both regions) engaging in decolonial-gender analysis.

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