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No “future of work” without respect for nature: ecofeminist visions of anti-extractivist re-existences from Latin America

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The current “future of work” discourse refers to the transformation of today’s economies through the “digital revolution”. Many of the rather optimistic capital and Eurocentric analyses promotes the idea of quick, technology-driven fixes for complex problems. However, such proposals lead to a deepening of the existing extractivist economic models and their negative consequences for women and workers rather than to significant transformation towards just human development socially, environmentally and gender equality. Ecofeminists in Latin America have been fighting extractivism for decades. Their critique and life experience, grounded in local alternatives, show a way to a different approach to human development and promote meaningful lives in a feminist future, based on respect for humans, nature and workers’ livelihoods.

The extraction of natural resources, historically and consistently, has been ongoing in Latin America, leading to the depletion of these resources in their conventional form. To sustain the levels of growth desired by current development models, it is necessary to intensify extraction, explore new territories and extract natural resources that were once considered to be of poor quality. This is one of the reasons why extractive models have spread across and continue

to spread in Latin America. According to Eduardo Gudynas (2013), a project can be considered extractive when there is a large volume or intensive extraction of natural resources, when 50% of what is extracted is exported, and when the exported product is mainly unprocessed (raw materials). The mining operations in Andean countries, the entrance of oil companies into the Amazon and the soybean, eucalyptus and pine tree single-crop farming practices are good



examples occurring in the Southern Cone. All of these activities have high social and environmental costs in the depleted territories. Yet, these impacts are not accounted for by conventional economics and are not usually part of the discourse during development.

Human rights and the rights of Nature (Gudynas, 2014) are violated with the advent of new economic projects in natural environments that are already depleted, where local communities have been deeply affected. The impact of these economic projects all over Southern America has reached such an extent that the social and environmental consequences are no longer tolerated by the affected communities, leading to an increase in socio-environmental regional conflicts. Sadly, these conflicts cause the escalation of death and criminalization of people who defend Nature and their territories. According to the people's rights organization, Global Witness, 168 people were reportedly killed in 2018 as a result of their environmental activism. More than half of these deaths occurred in Latin America. This continent appears to be the deadliest for land defenders.

Consequences of extractivist development for women's lives

As a result of the sexual division of labour, the extreme environmental degradation in the context of extractivist economic projects impacts women and men differently. Examples have been widely documented in Latin America (Ojeda, 2011; Colectivo CASA, 2013a; Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2014; Santisteban, 2017). Thus, divergent conceptualizations have emerged to make these gendered impacts visible.

For example, the collective *Miradas críticas del territorio desde el Feminismo* (Critical views of territory from feminism) uses the category "body-territory", coined by community feminism in Guatemala, to show that whenever there is severe degradation of the territory, this manifests in the body, especially in women's bodies. By this notion, the body and the territory influence and



define each other, forging an indivisible continuum.

In Bolivia, the CASA Collective (Collective for the Coordination of Social and Environmental Actions) uses the categorises "environmental violence against women" as "any act or omission that, by damaging the Environment, prevents or restricts the enjoyment of women's rights, undermining their quality of life, their integrity, their health, their economy, their work, their wealth, their cultural identity and is caused by anthropogenic activities".

Also, the Latin American Network of Women Defenders of Social and Environmental Rights, identified 8 categories of violence that have distinct impacts on women whenever there is a widespread appropriation or destruction of natural resources. Four of these violate women's body-territories and the remaining four violate earth-territories. The first group includes stigmatization and criminalization of women defenders, sexual violence, and the most extreme cases, femicide. The second group includes the violation of the rights of Nature, dispossession and pollution, the violation of food sovereignty and the militarization of territories.

In an extractivist model, there could be direct or indirect impacts on women. The former is linked to environmental pollution and to the negative effects associated with the masculinization of the territory. Sexist gender stereotypes are reinforced in these masculinized territories, as new workers and State or private security forces come from outside the community. Frequently, this leads to increased gender-based violence such as street harassment and sexual abuse. For women, this means a loss of security in public spaces and it confines them even further to their domestic-private settings. Furthermore, these circumstances exacerbate hegemonic masculinity stereotypes, linked to demonstrations of power through domination and control over women's bodies.



The indirect effects are the result of complex social relations and therefore tend to go unnoticed. These overlooked effects emerge through two interrelated pathways (Delbene-Lezama, 2017).



The first affects women's status, that is, it takes place when environmental degradation reinforces the unequal power dynamics between genders, increasing inequality gaps, further undermining everything associated with women and female notions. This pathway is linked to the difficulties women face to adequately fulfil the roles assigned in contaminated environments because they are unable to fulfil their tasks, such as subsistence food production. In this case, both women and their methods of production lose social value. For example, low soil fertility due to soil contamination leads to a drop in traditional food production. This pushes families to adopt western methods of production such as chemical fertilizers and crop protection products, genetically modified seeds and the use of unfamiliar equipment. As a result, women become more dependent upon a salary (generally contributed by men), there is a loss of food sovereignty, their knowledge and technologies are undermined, and they lose autonomy. It also increases the working hours devoted to caregiving tasks.

The second pathway is enforced through a position that is already subordinated and invisible and exposes women to greater vulnerability. A recent example of this was documented in Uruguay, where the impacts of the use of agrochemicals in crops on human health were studied. Where these products are used, the study shows that women who live on lands close to the crops' plantations are the group most severely affected, as the detected contamination level is three times higher than the level detected in the applicators that are predominantly men (Núñez, 2017). This is mainly because women, as they are not direct employees, are not considered when providing the safety measures needed when applying chemicals. Whereas, by law, the applicators must wear masks and protective gear. Still, we can go even a step further with plenty of supporting evidence and say that most environmental and land-use public policies are gender-blind (not gender-neutral), since they are based on a generalized standard-subject that is male, white and urban. Hence, women are left unprotected by regulations and rationales that normalize what is male-related (Delbene-Lezama, 2019).



Why women are leading the defence of the territories and Nature in Latin America

In general, prevailing conditions of the sexual division of labour and models of hegemonic masculinity and femininity dictate that it is men who are more inclined to accept extractive operations and are more resilient to negative environmental impacts, since they obtain some type of compensation in exchange, like financial gains or employment opportunities.

For example, interviews carried out with women affected by extractive operations in Bolivia demonstrated many cases where women reacted differently to their male counterparts when their environment was contaminated or threatened, even leading to family breakdowns (Delbene-Lezama, 2015 b and c). In these women's words, it is possible to identify diverse notions as to how they perceive their relationship with the environment: they acknowledge belonging to the natural world, which generates a sense of accountability towards Nature; there is awareness of the connectedness, from and towards Nature; therefore, it is believed that the environment affects us and that we affect the environment. There is consideration for human and non-human lives. Finally, a sense of vulnerability is acknowledged by accepting that we don't have complete control over natural processes. Many of these approaches are consistent with ecofeminist beliefs. While their husbands, many of them mineworkers, who also appear in their narrative, see themselves as insurmountable fortresses and believe that the contamination in their bodies, as a result of mine work, can be easily washed out with a simple bath.

Bearing in mind their various life paths and subjectivities, which are shaped by the sexual division of labour, women and men generally have had differing perceptions of the detrimental and beneficial impacts of productive activities that cause substantial changes to the landscape and environmental degradation. In this region, akin to other parts of the world, men are tempted or socially forced to accept jobs in those operations to fulfil their role as providers. Women, on the other hand, are the ones who lead the fight against the advance of extractive operations since



these activities jeopardize the sustainability of their families' lives.

Consequently, there are more and more independent women's groups in Latin America fighting to defend the territories and ecofeminist activism. Some of these groups, such as the Latin American Network of Women in Defence of Social and Environmental Rights, deliberately call themselves ecofeminists. Ecofeminism is also present in a broad sense, in the practices and discourses of many women's collectives who advocate in favour of protecting Nature and the territories.

For example, women's collectives, especially indigenous and rural women, who promote agroecology as a way to fight for food sovereignty and their rights as women (Puleo, 2011). Unique proposals and contributions that are essential to achieving a new type of relationship among people and with Nature emerge from the grassroots intervention of these women in their territories that are essential to achieving a new type of relationship among people and with Nature. Meanwhile, collectives, such as the aforementioned Network, are contributing impressively by coordinating efforts at regional levels and collecting evidence, distinguished by gender, of the environmental impacts that are usually invisible.

Finally, it should be clear that although there is a growing trend in women's leadership in grassroots movements to defend the territory, this leading role is not reflected in decision-making environments, neither at the community, institutional or political level, which are historically and currently environments dominated by men.

Thus, it is important to stress that impacts on the environment, as mentioned above, are not gender-neutral, but neither are responsibilities. Recognizing the androcentric nature of widespread environmental destruction is a pressing matter since the current power systems are male-dominated and respond to patriarchal rationales (Mary Mellor, 2000; Delbene-Lezama 2019).



In this sense, the Venezuelan ecofeminist collective LaDanta-LasCanta introduces the concept of "Phalluscene" (Faloceno in Spanish) as a working hypothesis. These authors base this designation on the notion that our current era is structured around

A network of unequal, hierarchical, oppressive and destructive social relations, which primarily affect women and nature, and underpin the Western civilization. The current destruction of the network of ecosystems in our planet is a "natural" extension of the typical power relations and forms of violence of the patriarchy (LaDanta-LasCanta, 2017b).

An ecofeminist framework to develop re-existence alternatives

If we recognize that both forms of oppression, of women and Nature, are responsible for the current hegemonic socioeconomic system and for several of the current global crises (environmental, climate, social, caregiving), it seems useful to develop possible alternatives from an integrative perspective and to take on a constructivist ecofeminist approach.

Ecofeminism, according to Yayo Herrero, is a school of thought and a social movement that explores the common ground and potential synergies between environmentalism and feminism. Starting with this dialogue, the movement intends to share and promote the conceptual and political merit of both movements, so that the analysis of the problems each of the movements undertakes separately is enhanced in depth, complexity and clarity (Herrero, 2015).

Besides illuminating the environmental and gender-differentiated impacts of current development models, there are other advantages to the integrated approach of ecofeminism when considering alternatives. The potential of ecofeminism as an analytical framework lies in the articulation of both critical theories, environmentalism and feminism, creating a more realistic theory that puts life at the centre.

Ecofeminist movements voice the need to start thinking about the material foundations that



sustain life. In the words of Herrero, “we must begin to recognize that human beings are inter and environmentally dependent” (2013 and 2015). Recognizing interdependence implies recognizing that as human beings we are incapable of living in isolation. Every person, as we are incarnated in vulnerable bodies, needs to be cared for during their life cycle, some phases more than others (such as in childhood and old age), but we must all be cared for. Such care, which cannot be ignored, requires time, work, and energy and rests disproportionately on female shoulders. Furthermore, since we are environmentally dependent beings, we rely upon Nature’s resources to survive. Therefore, we are not detached from Nature and its cycles. We must recognize that as a species, we are also a part of Nature.

Environmental issues, without the actual use of the term as such, were included early in the regional feminist agenda, especially with the demands of indigenous feminist movements that claim their rights as women cannot be separated from their territories or their collective rights (Lilián Celiberti, 2019). Since the beginning, ecofeminism in Latin America has been known to be active, undertaken by collective action and networked: it is anchored in a strong grassroots component (Nancy Santana Cova, 2005). According to LaDanta-LasCanta, the first Latin American ecofeminist movements emerged in the 1990s stemming from the Liberation Theology, through work with grassroots communities of theologians and catechists.

How can we develop alternatives based on ecofeminism to address social welfare and the economy?

Of course, there is no single answer to this question, nor should there be, since alternatives must be formulated based on a geographic approach, taking into account local attributes. However, from an ecofeminist standpoint, all initiatives should focus on strengthening community ties and the subjective reconnection with Nature. In other words, actions must focus on generating fertile environments that make it possible to fulfil and

re-establish positive subjectivity surrounding the interdependencies mentioned in the previous section. Community building is unequivocally related to interdependence and reconnection with Nature and environmental dependency. These alternative proposals seek to achieve new ways of living that favour bottom-up approaches focused on the sustainability of life. To this end, it will also be necessary to break away from the supremacy and overestimation of scientific-technical knowledge and open the spectrum to other equally valid forms of knowledge.

So, what are the environmental characteristics that build community? They are spaces where we can come together and exchange experiences and knowledge. Forums for reflection and listening. They are environments that foster commitment and mutual help, which are essential features for bonding and community building. They would help to strengthen relations that go beyond family ties and promote forums for shared support and caregiving. Given the prevailing sexual division of labour, these elements can progressively develop extended support and caregiving networks, resulting in the remarkable improvement in many women’s lives. All of this is in order to nurture cohesion between people who share a particular space and have the capacity to generate positive bottom-up synergies, reaching larger scales. Thus, they serve to create value and build environments that promote the actions needed to preserve one of the two material co-dependencies that sustain life: interdependence.

Nonetheless, from an ecofeminist perspective, alternative actions must also foster positive subjectivity to re-connect with Nature. Why? Because we must recognize and embrace environmental dependency, that is, the relationship between the reproduction of people’s lives and the state of the environment. Correspondingly, it is imperative to generate forums or initiatives that allow us to raise awareness of the work required, the natural times involved, the resources depleted, and the impacts resulting from any production method.





Finally, the third characteristic that initiatives should observe is to promote favourable environments for the transfer of knowledge and find a new appreciation of the alternative forms of knowledge that every member of the collective can contribute, where everyone has something to contribute and something to learn. It introduces a counter-discourse that challenges the overestimation of Western knowledge based on scientific-academic undertakings as the only way to understand reality. Additionally, this divides and hierarchizes society: on the one hand, there are the minority who are considered as makers and agents who transfer knowledge and, on the other hand, there are the majority who are considered merely passive recipients of such knowledge. Some examples of such forums that simultaneously fulfil these characteristics and are currently in practice are community gardens, responsible consumption associations, feminist barter and liberation spaces, and initiatives to re-use abandoned bicycles complemented with basic mechanics classes.

Final thoughts

Generating forums like those described in a Latin American context, where most people live in individualistic, atomistic urban societies and the government's highly-centralized decisions are based on servile technocracies, is a pressing matter. Urban people in the cities, primarily men, make the decisions that are relevant to the fate of the country and land-use planning. Decisions made by someone fully aware of the amount of work, time and resources involved, in healthy food production for example, will be completely different from the decision of someone who is under the impression that food sprouts spontaneously every day in the supermarket aisle.

Therefore, it is urgent and essential that awareness of the abovementioned challenges is raised, in order to change the course of events and end the forfeiture of people and territories that, in fact, sustain life. This requires changing the underlying beliefs that establish our understanding of the world and our actions. It means that our work as ecofeminist activists needs to address different levels: symbolic and material. To transform the material, predominant ideologies

must be dismantled to construct alternative social relationships amongst people and with Nature. These new ways of envisioning community life, even if they start at a small scale, as in small community gardens, are the first step to preserve local knowledge and begin to generate support networks. Thus, people who are aware, for example those involved in community gardens, will seek to engage themselves in responsible consumption networks that purchase directly from family farmers, who in turn adopt organic farming practices. They, at the same time, are involved in national networks and become part of a social movement of Latin American narrative like the agroecological movement.

This is a clear example of how the transformation of our social practices at the individual and community levels can be linked to larger structures leading to regional movements that have the political and economic potential to bring about institutional changes. Yet, we must not lose sight of the fact that transformations of this nature, at the institutional level, will remain ineffective and dubious unless there are people who defend them and put their hearts and souls into the social and ecological transformation that we urgently need. In Latin America, the body that embodies transformation is a feminized and feminist body.

Finally, it is important to stress that re-existence forums that comply with the above-mentioned characteristics are already in place, they have always existed. We just need to look at those historically invisible and disregarded areas. We will find there the alternative proposals that we are so desperately seeking. Proposals that are neither commercial nor individualistic, but rather new types of relationships that are not based on destruction and fragmentation. It is enough to analyse why the two unavoidable co-dependencies necessary to sustain life continue to exist (e.g. the interdependency and environmental dependency) to understand that had these alternatives not persisted, the reality of the planet would now be much more sterile. ◉





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Lucía Delbene Lezama obtained a degree and post-grad specialization in Natural Area Management as well as a master’s degree in Geoscience from the University of the Republic Uruguay. She also holds a master’s degree in Public Policy and Gender. Her research is focussed on Social Ecology and Ecofeminist theories. Lucía is co-founder of the Dafnias Ecofeminist Collective in Uruguay, organizes courses, lectures and workshops in several countries and creates several publications.

The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform Forum Mulher and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

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The Feminist Dialogue Series proudly counts on the artistic contribution of Ruth Bañón (art header) and the design of Sebastião Montalvão (Lateral Comunicações).

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