

# The attacks against the bodies and the sexuality of women: some reflections from Latin America

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I think that to speak only about women's bodies without taking into consideration all the bodies, the bodies of all human beings who have inhabited this planet, would provide us of an insufficient framework.

Why ? Because our bodies are the ones who record multiple forms of oppression and discrimination, forms that we have experienced along the history of our societies; it is precisely based on them that forms of behavior are imposed and shaped; through them we live, recognize and ignore *the others*, men and women, the *different ones*. From our bodies we express and experience happiness and pleasure as well as the great systemic pains and exclusions we suffer according to the places assigned to us in the scales of domination.

We come from a region deeply influenced- and cannibalized- by the Western culture(Boaventura de Souza Santos), a fact that has evolved in different forms of syncretism not only at a religious but cultural level. We still continue to suffer, politically and culturally, the paradigmatic vision of a human being which places a white man, heterosexual, adult, with resources and without disabilities at the top of a pyramid of prestige and economic, social, cultural and political power. We have been fighting through out the years from different social movements for a change. We have struggled through anti-racist campaigns, against focusing on adulthood as the centre, against patriarchy, for sexual diversity, in favour of peace, against poverty and inequality and for the recognition of different capacities. The challenge that we face today, has to deal with how we persuade ourselves of the importance of the articulation of all these struggles to achieve more power regarding contents and practices.

In a region characterized by *mestizaje* (mixed races) and the biggest asymmetry in the whole world regarding distribution of resources and opportunities and where it is not the same to be white and to be black or mestizo, man or woman, to be employed or unemployed, the violations of our rights cover a wide range of possibilities which are linked to the patterns of discrimination already mentioned above.

Therefore, the attacks against the bodies of women are multiple, diverse and of enormous proportions. We have access to better data despite the mistakes committed by the statistic institutes of our States, which still do not show much interest regarding these matters. Violence against women exists in

different spheres such as homes, schools, working places. Sexual violence is perpetrated in the streets and at home. The cases of violence in armed conflicts. Violence due to sexual orientation. The mutilation and death of women only because of being women which made many women organizations in different countries to launch campaigns against femicide. We have pieces of legislation and policies in several countries, but there is still a dramatic gap between law and real life.

We must also remember that there also exists a beauty paradigm very linked to the structures of domination already mentioned. This reality is expressed through material and symbolic ways generating new dimensions of traces of discrimination, within a complex process of introjections of the sight of the other/s, which influences and transforms our own to the point of not to feel – practically never-comfortable with our bodies. The so called “beauty industry” has acquired new forms, capturing through an aggressive modality the advances within the field of plastic surgery which make us face a challenge that we can no longer continue to ignore: today it is a fact that we are able to transform our bodies to be “beautiful and young”. This reality that may could only be seen as directed only for a particular elite, is expanding more and more, generating death and severe sequels on bodies due to the risks that some of the practices imply in search of beauty and youth. These are also new modalities of oppression of the body, which are taking place paradoxically, in a region where malnutrition coexists with anorexia and bulimia.

From another perspective, we should also analyze the field of surgical interventions to the bodies of transsexual people and intersex, which constitutes another area of important reflection, already considered as an area of discussion and debate within the LGBTTT movement.

From this kind of reflections, among others, the Campaign for an Interamerican convention on Sexual and reproductive Rights was launched by our network in 1,999 involving different organizations in the region, presently working through an alliance<sup>1</sup>, building up a Manifiesto/Declaration<sup>2</sup> which expresses the political stand of our campaign. I want to highlight the relevance of this Document, not only because of its contents but the accumulative process we went through in order to work this as a product; different voices and reflections have been compiled, and this document already translated to English proposes:

“Restoring the political dimensions of the body requires confrontation with all philosophical, metaphysical, religious or scientific perspectives that negate its existence. It is also important for it be acknowledged as a space which “I” inhabit, and as a subject that is entitled to rights that can be exercised only in a secular State and in a secular culture that ensures economic justice, gender

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<sup>1</sup> Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir, Cladem, Iglhrc, Repem-Dawn, Rede Feminista de Saúde, Redlac, Campaña 28 de setiembre, Rsmiac, Sos-Corpo, Cidem, Cotidiano y Flora Tristán.

<sup>2</sup> Manifiesto, segunda versión para el debate, octubre 2006, Lima – Perú, Campaña por la Convención de los derechos sexuales y los derechos reproductivos.

justice and sexual justice.

Therefore the body – states Betania Ávila – has become a “space endowed with citizenship” through a series of available social experiences that produce multiple articulations. Each of these experiences of exclusion and lack of recognition has generated movements, reflections and alternative proposals that presage a horizon of change in many spaces and dimensions.<sup>10</sup> A space that undoubtedly regulates the body is the negation of the sexual rights and reproductive rights of persons, in opposition to which there is a countercultural dimension that reaffirms the right to make decisions relating to one’s own body, the right to pleasure, to a diverse sexuality that is different from heterosexual sexuality and is multiple in nature. This has fomented powerful feminist movements and movements for sexual and gender diversity the world over, around issues such as the right to freedom and recognition, besides also the struggle for redistribution of power and resources. Another dimension is marked by disease, the most dramatic expression of which is the Aids epidemic, both in terms of its magnitude as well as the prejudices and ignorance that have characterized state and social responses to it, and owing to the fact that it has been the target of resistance and interference by the Church. This situation has given rise to a paradigmatic movement in its struggle against conservative morals, and against the drug patent monopoly of transnationals.

But the agenda of the political body goes beyond confronting the regulation of the body, realized through terror and militarization. This is a phenomenon that has manifested itself, with unimaginable harshness, in armed conflicts and wars, wherein the body of women – and of all those subjects who are vulnerable, owing to their gender identity and gender expression as transvestites, transsexuals and intersex persons – is viewed and considered as “spoils of war”. Feminist struggles have achieved the classification of such violations as “crimes against humanity” in international normativity. In this perspective, the devaluation of the body owing to the colour of the skin encourages social, cultural, economic and emotional exclusions; and in the case of women it has a special impact on their sexed body, as expressed by the many movements of black and indigenous women in the region.

The impact of symbolic cultural normativity on the conception of what a woman’s body should be and what sexuality considered as “normal” by the hetero-normative system should be, is evident. This affects lesbians, gays, trans, intersex and heterosexuals who do not accept the “norm of sexual normalcy”. This marginalization of difference also finds expression against the bodies of non-hegemonic sexual diversities, through control of their access to body modification technologies, state policies on morphological homogenization and sterilization, mutilations performed on intersex children. Likewise the “ideal” of the body that has been invented by capitalist consumerism and the patriarchy, imposes certain demands, whose impact is expressed in the form of an ethical paradox: where manifestations of bulimia and anorexia coexist with

the unsatisfied hunger of others.

And it is also increasingly expressed in the effects of the hegemonic economic model, with its exclusion, inequality and hunger, which is damaging capacities – generally in an irreversible manner – in the bodies of the new generations, resulting in movements for global justice and international solidarity against neoliberal hegemonism.

If the body is the measure of experiences and social and cultural relations, and is a part of the daily lives of people, in its multiple expressions, it must be in a part of the agenda of societies and a democracy that extends to the global scenario: at the level of country, the local level, at home and in bed. The body thus conceived becomes an instrument and the end of a subversive and transversal advocacy.

I have referred to the document and included some of its paragraphs which I would recommend you to revise. We bring it here as the result of multiple reflections done by different organizations in our region, Latin America and the Caribbean.

This could be a contribution from our region in order to continue this dialogue from our own contexts and challenges to achieve a just world. We believe in dialogue and the search for a political understanding among our regions as a step forward to strengthen feminist struggles in this globalized world.

*Lima, November 2007.*