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An economic model that privatizes life: Listening to La Cuerda

In bringing together diverse perspectives, we can begin to see the links in the systems of oppression that we confront, and in the common vision of change shared by diverse movements. Maria Dolores Marroquin has been working on 'bringing feminism out of the closet' in Guatemala for over 25 years. The title of the publication she co-founded, La Cuerda, is a double entendre, simultaneously meaning 'the cord' - something that binds things together, that makes links - and the feminine version of 'cuerdo' - a word describing someone who is astute, rational, wise.

Maria Dolores sat down with us while on a speaking tour in Europe with our member organisation Broederlijk Delen to discuss the relationships between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, and her work trying to build a common cosmovision between feminists and the indigenous communities of Guatemala.

1. How do you believe that our current systemic crises and gender equality are connected?

The current system is characterized by an economic model that is sustained by the privatization of life. In order to privatize life, there are a series of criteria and disciplinary regimes imposed on the way the population lives, and this includes the roles assigned to men and women. This model has justified the mistreatment of the population by classifying them as 'different'. Women are 'different' because we are not masculine beings who have been socially assigned the power of authority. This power of authority has been assigned in historic texts to justify the supremacy of men's decision-making, even in the very construction of history, and the analysis of medicine and anatomy. Anthropocism is also an element that characterizes this model, but also skin color which has been used to justify all of the processes of economic and ideological colonialism.

This absolutist, dichotomic, binary way of thinking established by force that someone has to lead and someone has to obey, that it's only possible to relate to each other in terms of obedience or subordination, this way of thinking imposes an extremely violent mentality of domination which is normalized.

The relationship between gender inequality and this economic model comes from the need for this economic model to have people dedicated to realizing all the care work that has been assigned to women, and this allows those with privileges to keep their privileges. We're not just talking about men, because it's not only men who are privileged, we're talking about a whole social and political organisation that establishes on one side the privatization of care in which the poor and particularly women have been assigned the care work. And by the privatization of care work I refer to the privatization of families, the recent and purposeful construction of the nuclear family. Families have not always been this way. The nuclear family was above all constructed during the industrial revolution. It

was constructed because before families were wide and there was a different kind of participation in care which included networks of men and women. Silvia Federicci for example made a reflection about how we lived in the period before the arrival of mercantilism and the industrial revolution, how there was not such a pronounced division of work between the sexes in these wide families, and how the control of the bodies of women was not as strong as it is now. So we can say that the family has become a space in which women are responsible for the reproduction of the work force.

Every enterprise needs that work, and we women have been educated that we have to do that work out of love. It's part of that social contract established between the unequal, that we women are going to be the guardians of the patrimony of men, of their children, and in return we can count on the income that allows us to live.

So to speak of the relationship of this system, it's deeply rooted in gender inequality because the economic model could not exist without that inequality, nor without racism. This economic model of accumulation is sustained by the concept of inferiority to others. And therefore the indigenous populations, particularly in Guatemala and the Americas, the countries that have been colonized, that relationship still exists. These are peoples that are no longer considered human. We don't have the same citizenship status. Therefore we can be exploited, we can be paid lower salaries, and our territories are not considered ours, but territories that can be possessed by anyone with the economic capacity to obtain them and control them. This possibility of access is exactly what allows privilege. And this is one of the central elements that establishes this economic model which is sustained by racism and sexism and cannot function without them.

2. What are the overlaps between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of natural resources?

It's important to note first that extractivism and this liberal economy are essentially patriarchal, because they are imposed and non-consensual. And it is imposed by those who have more resources, and more historically-constructed authority, those who have had the opportunity to possess the means of production and the capital to invest. These are generally men. And these also have tools available to them in the government to benefit their interests.

In the case of Guatemala there came to the light some bills for fuel that the mines paid for the armed forces so that they would offer security to these private enterprises or so that they would directly oppress the population. Establishing so called 'emergency zones' was a practice used by the last governments in Guatemala to restrict the rights of citizens in certain territories with a marked military and police presence. For women, this strong presence of armed men implied, on the one hand, being cloistered, because during the 36 years of civil war, the armed forces used sexual violence as one of the instruments to break the social fabric. This happened from the perspective that women were the property of men, and that to punish your adversary you would take his property. So in moments of strong repression, sexual violence is used, but also in moments without repression, moments of normal extractivism, we've also observed the increase of centers of prostitution – the practice of grouping women for sexual service near places of employment. On top of this are all the women who are incorporated into domestic, or domestic exploitation, to do all the care work that is not valued and that is underpaid.

So extractivism is patriarchal since it's imposed, it devalues women. It forces many indigenous women into servitude, because they're seen as people with less rights and less capacities to express themselves as citizens and to say no and for their no to be recognized in all these processes of resistance.

3. And as for responding to all of these systemic injustices how does your organisation work to find a common vision of systemic change with other organisations?

At La Cuerda, we began with the objective of bringing feminism out of the closet. Then we found a second objective, which was to construct a feminist political subject, and the third objective is now to support the construction of an emancipatory political object. We had achieved a philosophical framework to guide us, and we use this current of thought and politics as our primary source of inspiration, but we understood that transformation is not something just for us. We need to build new political alliances with others who don't know feminism but have other cosmovisions. In order to construct an emancipatory political subject we found that we need to construct new mentalities, for which we need to find other ways of looking at reality and to construct new words and categories for new concepts and to be able to share with others our proposals.

When we construct this new way of thinking, we are also questioning the objective of society, and today we see that the central objective is to have. And that having is marked by money and it's regulated by the market. All social institutions that exist are governed by that market and that market even dominates governments and imposes its public policy. This form of social and political organization that we have today in which governments respond to those interests and not to caring for life and still less to caring for the network that sustains life.

We are also trying to balance all of the elements of the approaches, including trying to get out of anthropocentrism, and get out of our heads this idea that we are the center of the planet. Instead, we're trying to incorporate a different idea of being one element in this great network of life. This is another notion we share with indigenous organisations and peasants. We did an exercise reflecting with them to try to name the characteristics of this new conviviality we would like to promote. And to start this reflection from consultation processes and collective construction from the very launching of this.

So we are doing this kind of questioning. And this calls also for a questioning of our own practices, our own beliefs, and to have processes to construct the new.

In general a systemic change for me would be for us to understand that what we do here impacts people on the other side of the planet, to have that consciousness. Our imaginary has established a classificatory system that puts us in boxes and in those boxes we construct identities that make it difficult for us to see the classificatory system in it's who and to realize that we are part of the machinery of domination and that we are placed in relationship to others. We need to be conscious of that paper that we have been assigned. It's important for also doing a deconstruction to take off the duties that have been imposed on me and to decide for myself what kind of person I want to be and what kind of relationships I want to have.