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# Feminist Theology on Ecofeminist

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# Feminist Theology on Ecofeminist Practices in America Latina:

## Problems and challenges in the 21st century

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### Introduction

In a century where women are conquering more and more spaces in all levels: academy, literature, arts, economy and politics, some churches still have not considered gender issues seriously. Pope Francis seems inclined to hear the women: he has opened the discussion on many important social items like the situation of divorced couples, sexual diversity, ecology, reproductive issues, but he is still very discrete in what refers to the women's role in church. During the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Feb. 9, 2015, he affirmed a new paradigm of 'reciprocity and equivalence in the difference': *The man-woman relationship should recognize that both are necessary as they have an identical nature but with different modality*. The Pope has been clear about women's ordination: according to Pope Francis, this is out of question!

Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara, in an interview to ADITAL[1] said that Pope Francis is attentive to women issues, he tries to understand our claims, but as he lives inside masculine ecclesial structures, do not have conditions to give revolutionary steps to, in fact, promote the necessary innovation for today's world. 'He is a product of his time, of his clerical formation and the limits that it covers'. Gebara is of the opinion that the necessary changes should start from below, from the people's lives and behavior. And she adds: 'of course, the changes from the top are very welcome and necessary, but they will hardly happen if the people's secular behavior of submission do not change."

Besides the women's roles in church, which involves the ordained ministries, the most difficult point of discussion is what refers to body, sexuality, reproductive health and rights. Ecofeminist struggles point out women's rights for the control of their body and life and a more sustainable relationship with the environment in order to achieve a full citizenship.

## Women and Solidary Economy: a means of ecology preservation

Many are the reasons of poverty in Latin American countries, but one of them is the migration due to lack of opportunity, lack of water, illegal land exploitation etc in some poor regions of our continent. The lack of water by lack of rains, the destruction of forests due to illegal wood cut, the hegemonic practices of nature appropriation, in short, the devastation of traditional means of survival, have struck specially women, as they are who traditionally pick up the pieces with redoubled work. If water is polluted and scarce, women walk twice as far to carry it on their heads. If money is short, women plant domestic gardens to produce vegetables to sustain daily life. Women go out to be a cleaner or a cooker in the houses of the rich families or to make handicrafts to sell their products in the streets.

In the poor families, women are in general poorer than the males of their own families as they are the ones who take care of the children or the elders, or the sick people in the family, providing food, care and protection. Mothers are so concerned about their children´s well being that they are often found malnourished and sick for overwork and/or lack of health care.

The situation of non-life of poor women in the Third World is the reason of decease of millions of women and children up to one year old. This phenomenon is known as "poverty feminization". Feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out the main reasons of this phenomenon. She asserts that there is an economic system separated for women, generated by the patriarchal separation between public sphere and private feminine domain. This economic system presupposes that the whole family is always headed by a father who works and sustains the family. In old times, women who worked only did it temporarily. Therefore, the low salaries paid to women were justified, as well as the lower responsibility positions. Their wages were supplementary, not to maintain a family. The consequence of this economic system separated for women gave origin to the *poverty feminization* [2].

This phenomenon is still worsened by racism. The women of color – black, brown, yellow – according to all statistics earn less and have less opportunity of good job than the white women.

The feminist movement in Brazil has been effective in their work with poor women. For example, since the 1970s, feminist agents had an educational prospect to work with the poor women in the periphery of the big cities, instructing them how to deal with their sexuality and informing about their reproduction rights. Some of these women participated at CEBs (Ecclesial Base Communities) in the big cities. It is unbelievable, but some of these women were married to social activists – of the left hand parties - who were good at claiming for political policies for the poor communities, but at home they used to oppress their wives. The feminists, using the method of auto-esteem raise through workshops and seminars, taught those women that they were more than mothers and wives, that they were persons with full rights as citizens. Women were taught to spend some minutes of their day to take care of their own body by looking at the mirror, combing their hair nicely, putting some make up to look more attractive. Strange as it may seem, some of them did not have the use of looking at their own face in the mirror, for many years, as the male oppression inside the house was so strong that they did not consider themselves a person with rights. These women also learned that they could have pleasure in sexual relations and that they had rights as citizens, as much as their male partners. These workshops and seminars took place especially in the decades of the 70s and 80s.

The feminist agents also helped these women, at these decades, to struggle for their citizen rights, going to the streets or after the regional Government institutions to demand for health care, education, and especially for mothering houses and public nurseries for babies so that they could go out to work. That was the beginning of poor women´s independence: as they could have a trustful place to leave their small children, during the day, they also became able to enter the labor market.

Due to the public policies for women conquered by the feminist movements, the poor women´s situation improved a lot during the last 3 decades. In many regions, even in the very distant ones, women are becoming experts in the development of micro-business of all kinds.

It seems that women at the poor communities have also discovered another type of economy, which is known as *solidary economy*, a fast growing phenomenon in countries known by their economic instability, with high taxes of unemployment and under-employment. This type of economy is considered as a contemporary reaction when the collective action is placed as a possible alternative for its actors which are in the majority, excluded by the formal labor market and the consuming market. Moreover, the solidary economy goes beyond income generation and brings proposals of change in the interpersonal relationship and the environment.

Cooperation and not competition, natural resources preservation, no labor exploitation, equality of power in the decision making inside the business market and responsibility with the local community, where the business is inserted, are the principles which direct this practice. In most of the cases, the women are leading this type of economy, which is organized by means of solidarity and collective work and has a thorough concern with the ecology preservation. As these women were frequently excluded by the formal labor market, it was an alternative activity they found to assure work and income, where the sources were scarce or non-existing.

The action of women in the solidary economy starting from profitable activities opened them a space to become owners of their own economic activity, with the same chances of the male workers through the collective propriety. Income is also better distributed among men and women, as the surplus distribution is based on a democratic principle of equal rights among the members of a collective enterprise, independently of gender.

Women's alternative organizations for survival are becoming major actors in the movements of resistance towards capitalism and globalization as well as an alternative vision of ecologically sustainable forms of development.

The women's movements from Latin America, Europe and Asia have participated in the *World March of Women*[3] since its beginning in 2000 which displayed women's capacity of leadership at the World Social Forums[4] since 2001. Especially at the 2015 Forum in Tunis, the March was able to fully show the empowerment of women, with their discussions on food security, family income, reproductive health/rights, effective public policies and other secondary issues. Women unfolded to be the actors of the daily life in its more concrete expressions, proclaiming their citizenship and the recognition of their dignity in the sphere of society and public life.

## Control of women's body: a challenge to the Feminist Theology

Ecofeminist movements and the feminist theology have greatly contributed to the women´s empowerment and struggles for the ecology preservation in the last decades. On the other hand, conservative churches, as some Evangelical churches, seem to start an aggressive campaign leadered by ordained male pastors, which follows the prescriptions of their hierarchy: they show a *kyriarchal*[5] ideology which still associates women with nature, as an object of submission and control, forbidding

them to raise their voice to exercise their authority as Jesus' disciples and apostles. Therefore they still follow biblical texts as the First letter of Timothy chapter 2, 11-15:

*Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. I do not allow that woman teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence…*

The image of subordination and submission of women brings many consequences which should be seriously reflected by the theologians. Women´s body and sexuality are still controlled by men in the Catholic church, but women are now contesting this control as we are the ones who get pregnant, who carry a baby for nine months before its delivery, we are the ones who feed the baby and who, in general, grow up a child, teaching her/him the first steps and most frequently the following ones.

The control of women´s body can be illustrated by the messages spread out by the churches. Let's give an example from the Roman Catholic Church's practice during lent time. Each year its highest hierarchy CNBB (National Council of Brazilian Bishops) establishes a so called 'Fraternity Campaign', which is an educational activity started in 1963 to raise solidarity within their followers in relation to a concrete problem related to the Brazilian communities.

Since the 1970s, due to the liberation theology influence, social issues have been the theme of such Campaigns. Ever since 1985, the Church has focused on Brazilian themes. Social themes like hunger (1985), land (1986), housing (1991), excluded people (1995), prisoners (1997), drugs (2001), ecology (2011), youth (2013), human traffic (2014) were determined, and also gendered (1990) and racial themes (black people in 1988, indigenous people in 2002) have been chosen. In 2008, the theme was about reproductive rights, with the title *Defense of Life*, in a very conservative perspective and it represented a fragrant disrespect to women´s rights. One of the more controversial items was the prohibition of the use of condoms used as a contraceptive method, in some conservative pastorals. On the contrary direction, the feminist movements called a campaign of condoms to prevent sexually transmissible diseases.

The ecofeminist struggle is one of the priority issues of the feminist theology in Latin America as ecology and the ecosystem protection is one of the most recent discussions of the Latin American theologians: this has been theologically debated during the *World Forum of Theology and Liberation*[6] in Belém, Brazil, in 2009, which theme was *Water, Earth, Theology For Another Possible World*.

The association of the words 'women' and 'ecology' in the construction of the word "ecofeminism" reminds how women, who struggled

for a change in the women-men relationship also started to struggle for a change between their relationship with the ecosystem. This discussion was introduced by the feminist sociologist Françoise d'Eaubonne at the end of the 70's of last century, in France: her debate was made in the political-ideological level, to show her concern on the increasing ecological disaster, as related by Gebara[7].

The ecofeminism while an idea and a social movement has to do with the ideological connection between nature and women's exploitation inside the patriarchal hierarchical system, as object of domination in view of the capital growth. According to Gebara: *ecofeminism can be considered a wisdom that tries to recuperate the ecosystem and the women*[8] .

The identification of women to nature was due to the physiological functions of reproduction: women during child birth and child feeding were excluded from a more active participation in the culture and politics. Another factor of exclusion is the women's tendency of doing child care, as well as old and unabled persons care.

The control on women´s body has to do with birth control and an arbitrary protection of the male´s rights. Moreover it is certain that the Institutions like the Roman Catholic Church are very well known for its sexist kyriarchal ideology. In 2010, an astonishing event took place in the Northern part of Brazil. A young teenager girl of 9, but looking like 6 years old, got pregnant of twin children, after being raped. She and her sister of 13 years had been continuously raped by their step father during 3 years. She suffered a medical intervention to stop her pregnancy as the doctor had considered her unable to give birth to her babies. The Brazilian laws allow the interruption of pregnancy in case of rape, until 20 weeks of pregnancy and in case of cerebral malformation. She suffered the surgical abortion, but the regional bishop of Recife, D. José Cardoso Sobrinho published a document informing that he had applied the Canon Law of the Catholic Church to excommunicate the mother and the medical team who assisted the girl in the procedure. The bishop said: "worse than the sexual violation is the abortion". And further he explained that "it is written in the Canon Law that any person who commits abortion is automatically excommunicated." So the girl's mother and the medical team[9] were informed by the newspapers that they had been excommunicated by the bishop. And paradoxically, the man who raped his daughter in law, who rendered her pregnant, was not even mentioned, no word of condemnation was pronounced toward him. At the end, he looked more a victim than an aggressor! There was no official pronunciation from the part of the hierarchy of the Church.

As a conclusion, we can assert that the rescue of women's integrity in every day life by the feminist theology, includes the struggle for their citizenship and integral rights. These rights include the sexual and the reproductive rights. There are great challenges to be overcome by the feminist theologians. The negative vision of sexuality represented as a malignant energy to be repressed has persecuted either the clergy and the liberation theologians as well. Women have been repressed in their body and sexuality in diverse ways, since the body ignorance, the charge of virginity, the use of sexuality only for procreation. The ignorance of her body induced women to have little control over the number of children they wanted to have. For the liberation theologians, these themes – contraception, abortion, domestic violence, divorce – are often considered irrelevant when they refer to women of working classes. The ethic option in the Liberation Theology asks for life, but the scarcity of mediations – of gender, class, race/ethnicity, generation – led that life would only understood as a material life, linked to food, house, material consumption. The ethical-theological reflection over the reproductive rights as a recurrent fact of women's life can lead to a conscience that life is bigger than the material life . It's a search for a life to the full[11].

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## Notas

1 *www.adital.com.br*. March 8, 2015.v

2 SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, Elisabeth. *Discipulado de Iguais: uma Ekklesia-logia Feminista Crítica da Libertação*, p. 242.

3 The *World Women's March* (MMM) is an international feminist movement since 2000 that was inspired in a march held in Canada in 1995 when 850 women walked from Quebed to Montreal against poverty; they achieved an increase in the minimum salary and more rights to the women/ migrant women and support to the solidary economy. They were received in Montreal by fifteen thousand people, the motto of the March was 'Bread and Roses'. By and by the March was strengthened by different campaigns in several countries of the planet, expressing alternatives for the economic, social and cultural areas for the construction of a world founded in principles of equality, freedom, jus-

tice, peace and solidarity among peoples and human beings, respecting the environment and the biodiversity. In Brazil the MMM is very effective since the first World Social Forum in 2001, gathering hundreds of women's groups and movements, from the North to South. In that year the 'Brazilian Women's Letter' was created.

[4] The *World Social Forum* started in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001 as an international event held by social movements from the various continents with the goal of creating alternatives for the global social transformation. Its motto is "For another possible world". Since the 2007 it crossed the Atlantic ocean to Africa (Nairobi (Kenya), Dakar (Senegal), Tunis (Tunísia).

[5] Elisabeth Schüssler has created the expression 'kyriarchal' in the 90s of last century to define the women's oppression as a structural domination from men over women in a kind of pyramidal hierarchy where the kyrios – Lord – is on the top. Women are at the bottom of the pyramid and the slaves (non-white women) are at the very bottom. Therefore the structure of the pyramidal oppression is sustained by the multiplying structures of control, exploitation and dehumanization: the oppressive forces of heterosexuality are multiplied by racism, poverty, cultural imperialism, military colonialism, homophobia and religious fundamentalism. SCHUSSLER, E. F. *Violence against Women*. p.11

[6] The *World Forum of Theology and Liberation* is an event organized by worldwide theologians with the goal of global social transformation, which follows the World Social Forum since its beginning, wherever it happens. In general, it is held at the same days of the WSF offering round tables of theological discussion and trying to fully participate in the general social discussions.

[7] GEBARA, Ivone. *Teologia Ecofeminista*, p. 9.

[8] *Ibid*, *idem*, p.10

[9] Very recently, on Feb. 19, 2016, the digital newspaper BBC showed an article where the doctor who made this abortion, Olimpio Morais, is now being again excommunicate – 'by the second time' it says - by the Catholic Church for now he is in favour of the women who want to do abortion when they find out that the child has microcephaly, due to the zica virus.

[10] TOMITA, Luiza. "Por uma ética feminista de resgate dos direitos reprodutivos como direito de cidadania das mulheres", p. 194-195.

[11] John 10,10.