ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLES AND AFRO-DESCENDANT AND INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Presentation for the "Exchange between Indigenous and Afro-descendant women" BUILD Project of the Ford Foundation and CCARC

Juliet Hooker

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Juliet Hooker is a member of the Board of Directors of the Council Research Center of the Central American Caribbean (CCARC).
She is currently Professor of Political Science at Bown University in the United States. She is from the Caribbean costo of Nicaragua, Creole descent.

Good Morning. It is a great pleasure to be with you today. As an Afro-descendant woman from the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, it is an honor to be part of this dialogue on the leadership of indigenous and Afro-descendant women in these moments of global public health crisis that overlaps with other long-standing crises such as climate change, racism, patriarchy, state repression, authoritarianism, lack of respect for human rights, etc. The global coronavirus pandemic has caused untold losses around the world. From the terrible death toll that currently exceeds 500,000 in the United States, more than 900,000 in Latin America, and more than 3 million globally, to the economic devastation that it has caused, the disrupted lives and routines disrupted, the impossibility of having collective occasions to celebrate and mourn with loved ones, and even the most basic everyday losses of having to do without tactile human contact (a kiss on the cheek, a hug). The losses caused by the pandemic are incalculable.

At the same time, the pandemic and inadequate responses by many nation-states have further exposed existing patterns of precarity and inequality rooted in citizenship status, race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. In the United States, for example, workers now recognized as "essential," those who cannot work from home and who therefore have a higher risk of infection, are predominantly women, the majority of whom are black and Latina women. One in three jobs held by women has been designated as essential, as women make up nearly nine out of 10 nurses, the majority of respiratory therapists, and an overwhelming majority of pharmacy technicians. More than two-thirds of workers at supermarkets and fast-food establishments are women, and 90% of those employed in domestic work are women, and women of color and immigrants make up 58% and 35%, respectively, of workers in this field.

Regarding the incidence of the Covid-19 virus, the groups with the highest incidence of infection, hospitalization, and death are Afro-descendants, Latinos, and indigenous peoples. According to recent data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), indigenous peoples have an age-adjusted COVID-19 hospitalization rate approximately 5.3 times higher than that of non-Hispanic whites. COVID-19 hospitalization rates among non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are approximately 4.7 times higher than for non-Hispanic whites. These patterns of unequal access are replicated for vaccines, as these groups have lower percentages of people vaccinated to date. According to The New York Times, the vaccination rate for Afro-descendants in the United States is half that of whites, and the gap for Latinos is even greater. When we look at the situation in terms of gender, the title of a report on women's labor force participation concludes that "One year after the coronavirus pandemic, women are not doing well." More than 2.3 million women have left the workforce since February 2020, lowering their labor participation rate to levels not seen since 1988, according to the National Women's Law Center. In the month of December 2020, women represented 100% of the jobs lost in the United States.

Therefore, the enormous racial, gender, and social class inequalities in the impact of the pandemic clearly show that we are not "all in this together" as politicians often claim in times of national crisis. Rather, the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated existing systemic inequalities that already structured our societies, and that already affected more vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants, immigrants, women, etc.

I would like to take a moment to talk about these multiple impacts on the life of a particular woman who was profiled in an investigation by Pro Publica magazine on the impact of the pandemic in terms of the crisis of cancer cases that went undiagnosed during the past year due to Covid. The article focuses on the case of Teresa Ruvalcaba, a 48-year-old Mexican immigrant who lives in Chicago with her 3 children and who worked for more than 20 years in a candy factory. Last year, for fear of catching Covid, she did not seek medical attention despite pain and inflammation in her breasts. She also did not want to ask for leave from work to seek medical help for fear of being fired and then not being able to pay the mortgage on her house in a Latino neighborhood or support her children. She was recently diagnosed with an aggressive case of breast cancer and the prognosis is not very good. The article also talks about her children, especially her son Sergio, who wants to be a doctor but is the one who now supports the family, and helps care for his mother and siblings, as he has done since he was a child when he became the one who translated from English to Spanish for the household , including negotiating a payment plan for an overdue telephone bill at age 9. In the case of Teresa and her family, we see the efforts and sacrifices of generations of migrants who become part of a system in which so many families only have very precarious access to the dream of a better life in the United States.

The case of Teresa and her family shows that those who have been most affected by the pandemic are those who were already seen as disposable. The inequalities in the impact of the pandemic are the result of public investments in the lives of some and the corresponding expendability of others.

In general, it is those who were already vulnerable who are now suffering the greatest losses: immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in detention centers, undocumented immigrants who cannot access the various aid programs enacted by Congress, the people of Asian origin facing racist attacks due to scapegoating by those who refer to the 'Chinese' virus, the homeless who cannot physically distance and have no homes to shelter in, the incarcerated population which in some states was used to manufacture masks and disinfectant while they were not provided adequate protection against the virus, women who already assumed most of the childcare and domestic labor even before lockdowns forced families to work and learn from home, the LGBTQ youth for whom the home is not always a safe space. The pandemic has not simply changed our daily routines, it has revealed the profoundly uneven way in which society and family life are structured.

To understand this context, I want to talk a bit about a research project in which I was very fortunate to participate that addresses these issues and that culminated in the publication of a collective book entitled Black and Indigenous Resistance in the Americas: From Multiculturalism to Racist Backlash.

The book brings together black and indigenous academics and activists from the Americas. It is the product of a multi-year transnational research project of the Anti-racist Action and Research Network of the Americas (RAIAR) whose aim was to analyze contemporary racial politics in seven countries of the hemisphere: Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States. The main objective of the project was to explain how we arrived at the current moment of resurgent racism in the American continent and to chart a way forward for anti-racist activism in the hemisphere.

Take for example the case of two countries that we write about in the project, the United States and Brazil: the administrations of Trump in the United States and of Bolsonaro in Brazil are characterized by open racism (in addition to sexism, authoritarianism, violence, hostility to science, etc.). The open racism of their campaigns and policies in office, in a sense was not surprising, since the United States and Brazil have a long history of racism despite their respective national myths of being a country of immigrants in the case of the United States and of supposedly being a racial democracy in the case of Brazil. Yet the electoral victories of Trump and Bolsonaro were surprising insofar as they occurred after eras in which there were important achievements in terms of racial justice: the election of the first black president in the United States and the institutionalization for the first time of significant rights for black and indigenous peoples in Brazil, including affirmative action programs and the creation of a cabinet-level ministry to combat racial discrimination.

So ... how did we get to that moment? Answering this and other urgent questions was one of the main objectives of our research project, which has something very important in common with the present dialogue, and that is that in contrast to the separate way in which Afro-descendant and indigenous movements in Latin America are generally studied, we place indigenous and Afro-descendant experiences and perspectives within the same analytical framework, just as you are doing in this space.

Until recently, racial inequality in Latin America was often attributed to class differences. However, beginning in the 1980s, almost all the countries in the region adopted multicultural policies that resulted in the institutionalization of a wide range of rights for indigenous peoples and rural black communities. The multicultural rights won in this period followed the logic of cultural recognition: that everyone has the right to their own culture and therefore the State must protect minority cultures. The multicultural rights granted by Latin American nation-states in this initial phase did not include rights aimed specifically at addressing racial discrimination. But in the 2000s, Latin American countries such as Brazil and Colombia began to adopt public policies to combat institutionalized racial discrimination.

Those two phases of achievements by indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, which certainly did not eliminate existing racial inequalities, culminated in a backlash and the rolling back of policies aimed at remedying racial inequality that had begun to be implemented. This racist backlash fueled the current "right turn" in Latin America and the reemergence of authoritarian regimes (although they may periodically allow elections). We argue, then, that what emerged from the supposed return to democracy in the region that began in the 1980s, were state-led racial projects in response to black and indigenous mobilization during an era of expanding multicultural rights within the context of neoliberal capitalism.

That era of expansion of rights was followed by a violent reaction against the few gains that were achieved by indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples as a result of much struggle, which shows that (contrary to criticisms of "identity politics") the losses and anxieties produced by the failures of neoliberal economic policies have been understood in racial terms. We maintain that racial justice is under attack and in decline throughout the hemisphere and that overtly racist policies and discourses are on the rise in Latin America and the United States.

Therefore, it is urgent to identify anti-racist strategies that are up to the enormous task of confronting resurgent racism. In our view, this will involve going beyond State-centered, rights-seeking strategies. Rather, it is essential to situate a critique of racial capitalism at the center of anti-racist struggles. In our analysis, which was published prior to the beginning of the pandemic, one of the facets that we did not highlight at that time, but that I do believe is fundamental, is the role of women. In fact, two of the cases we analyzed, Bolivia and Brazil, focused on the struggles of indigenous and black women and I want to close my comments by talking a bit about the analysis of my colleagues Pamela Calla and Luciane Rocha in those two cases, because I think they illustrate how central the political ideas and practices of indigenous and black women are not only for the struggle against racism, but they also provide us with models for how to live beyond the current crisis of the pandemic and the other crises that precede it.

Pamela Calla in her analysis of Bolivia suggests that it is indigenous women who are leading the fight against extractivism. When facing the militarization of the territories they inhabit and the criminalization of protest, they have had to rethink their notions of autonomy, and have begun to formulate emerging notions of body-territory [cuerpo-territorio], a struggle inspired and oriented around the subject of land; "a struggle not only for the land in the material sense, but also deeply informed by what the land as a system of relationships and reciprocal obligations can teach us about how to live our lives in relation to each other and to the natural world in non-dominating and non-exploitative terms.¨ Luciane Rocha, based on her analysis of the Black Women's March against Racism and Violence and for Bem Vivir in November 2015, reflects on the aftermath of the coup against Dilma Rousseff that left black women without a state interlocutor after the victories of the right driven by racist backlash.

Despite this, it is black women who articulate a broad political vision that encompasses a future for all that includes: "the promotion of racial equality; the right to work, employment and the protection of black women workers in all occupations; the right to land, territory and housing/right to the city; environmental justice, defense of shared/common resources and non-commodification of life; the right to a safety net (medical care, social assistance, and social security); the right to education; and the right to justice."

In closing, I want to emphasize the following: against states that focus on genocidal policies that threaten life, we need states focused instead on public welfare policies for the common good, what feminist theorists call "a politics of care,¨ that is, a vision of life in common focused on the notion of caring for the planet and the lives of us all. At the same time, it cannot be only women who do the work of reproducing the world and life; this is a task and must be a commitment for all: women and men. But the ideas and struggles of indigenous and Afro-descendant women provide us with visions of how to sustain life in contexts characterized by extreme violence and death, that can nurture the possibility of a collective future.