

## **Opresión y resistencia. Vivencias de mujeres indígenas universitarias**

*Oppression and resistance. Experiences of indigenous university women*

*Opressão e resistência. Experiências de mulheres universitárias indígenas*

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### **Resumen**

Este trabajo aborda las vivencias de mujeres estudiantes universitarias indígenas que se autodefinen como pertenecientes a diferentes etnias del estado de Chiapas, México. Desde una perspectiva hermenéutica, se analiza la información recolectada a través de entrevistas, a partir de lo cual se da cuenta de las formas en que los mecanismos estructurales de la sociedad, caracterizada por una cultura patriarcal y sostenida por un sistema económico capitalista neoliberal, definen sus experiencias como mujeres estudiantes indígenas. Los hallazgos constituyen una forma de denuncia de las violencias sistemáticas vigentes en contra del género femenino indígena, y muestran la capacidad de resistencia de las estudiantes a través de la

formación académica, el anclaje a la identidad de ser mujer e indígena y del cuestionamiento ante la subordinación de otras mujeres, que les permite soportar las opresiones de la sociedad y la cultura de las que son víctimas, así como dibujarse un futuro alternativo y mejor.

**Palabras clave:** indígenas, mujeres universitarias, opresión, resistencia.

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the experience of indigenous University women who identify themselves as belonging to different ethnicities of Chiapas, Mexico. From a hermeneutic perspective, information is analyzed through interviews, informing the ways in which the structural mechanisms of the society are perceived, characterized by a patriarchal culture and regulated by a neoliberal capitalist economic system. Defining their own experiences as indigenous students. The findings constitute a denouncement of the current systematic violence against the indigenous feminine gender, and shows the students' ability to resist through academic training, the identity oppression they face for being women and indigenous, questioning through the subordination of other women. This process allows them to tolerate societal oppression and their own culture in which they are victims, trying to see themselves as an alternative, better future.

**Keywords:** indigenous, university women, oppression, resistance.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo aborda as experiências de estudantes mulheres indígenas universitários que se definem como pertencentes a diferentes grupos étnicos no estado de Chiapas, México. A partir de uma perspectiva hermenêutica, a informação recolhida por meio de entrevistas analisados, a partir do qual ele realiza as formas em que os mecanismos estruturais da sociedade, caracterizado por uma cultura patriarcal e sustentada para o sistema econômico capitalista liberal, definidos suas experiências como estudantes de mulheres indígenas. Os resultados são uma forma de denúncia da violência sistemática em vigor contra a mulher indígena, e mostram a resiliência dos estudantes através da formação acadêmica, ancorando a identidade do ser mulher e indígena e questionamento antes da subordinação das outras mulheres, permitindo-lhes para apoiar as opressões da sociedade e da cultura das vítimas e desenhar uma alternativa e melhor futuro.

**Palavras-chave:** indígenas, mulheres universitários, opressão, resistência.

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## Introduction

This article addresses the experiences of three female university students who define themselves as indigenous belonging to different ethnic groups in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The experiences expressed by these women show the ways in which the structural mechanisms of society, characterized by a patriarchal culture sustained by a neoliberal capitalist economic system, define their experiences as indigenous student women.

Patriarchy has been recognized by various studies, both feminist and non-feminist (Gayle, 1986), as the social system that places the power of domination in men over women, giving the male the hegemonic model in the definition of rights and life opportunities. It refers, by its historical sense, to the power of the patriarchs or heads of families who held the power legitimized by a religious mythology centered on the existence of a single God or Supreme Father. In the Judeo-Christian tradition prevalent in our Western culture, imposed on the original peoples of Latin America during the Spanish colonization, God is simultaneously man and father; The woman only acquires existence as a subsidiary of man, which implies for them not only the prohibition of holding power but also that of knowledge and the use of the word itself (Guerra, 2008).

However, patriarchy is insufficient to explain the structural violence accentuated in the specific case of women, it is necessary to recognize that the current neoliberal capitalist political-economic system determines social practices at all levels of life (Federici, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. This is how the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) raises the need to analyze the various forms of discrimination and violence that are simultaneously present on the same vulnerable social group, such as women, children, indigenous people and women. seniors, among others.

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<sup>1</sup> Desde una crítica al materialismo histórico, Federici analiza las formas en que el capitalismo sienta sus bases de producción en el trabajo no reconocido de las mujeres: sin el trabajo de reproducción de la vida que hacen las mujeres, por el cual no reciben remuneración alguna, no existiría la plusvalía capitalista.

Focusing on the study of emerging psychosocial problems resulting from the neoliberal global economic and political dynamic is a challenge and a possibility for the social and humanistic sciences. From the intersectional approach it is possible to reveal different forms of oppression and domination of the neoliberal capitalist system over societies with low economic and political power such as our country and Latin America in general, by analyzing three main categories: gender, ethnicity and class. , which, although they are not the only ones, have been those that power has used for the exercise of domination and violence in Mexico, and particularly in the state of Chiapas.

The recognition of the impact that the economic and cultural system has on the living conditions of the human being has generated diverse movements in science, philosophy and civil society; one of them is the defense and protection of human rights (UN, 1992). However, the advances toward an egalitarian society, tolerant of the other different, based more on communality than on individualism, are still on a distant horizon. It is not a matter of denying the important achievements made in human rights, but of making it clear that, even with the built legal framework, discrimination, exclusion, marginalization and other forms of violence continue to be reproduced in the concrete and daily life of numerous population groups, particularly women.

In the specific case of the contemporary public university, according to Rodríguez (2014), it is expected that it will contribute to economic growth, development and social cohesion, to the construction of citizenship and cultural integration, as well as to the protection of the environment , as demands that come from the economy, government and society. This awakens the interest of the different social nuclei to form or move through their classrooms to achieve that these demands are concreted in the improvement of life. However, the university, from its origins, has been a space built to respond to the needs and requirements of a hegemonic culture, Western culture, supported by a patriarchal platform founded on a specific model of man: non-indigenous, middle class. and heterosexual (Lugones, 2011) that has historically excluded women, cultures and different minority groups (De Sousa Santos, 2010, Quijano, 2000). The result is the lack of access to it by indigenous youth in general and indigenous women in particular, in such a way that the imaginary built around the university is that of an educational space that is impossible or unlikely to be achieved.

These considerations allow us to recover the experiences of the students who participate in this study from two forms of listening: the first as a form of denunciation of the current systematic violence against the indigenous female gender, and the second as the resilience of the subject before the systematic oppression of society and its culture.

### **Methodological process**

The research was conducted through qualitative methodology, following the hermeneutic method, which allows the study of reality in its natural context, as it happens, looking for a sense of the facts through the meanings they have for the people involved. (Rodríguez, 1999). It proposes to identify subjects in natural situations, recovering their spatio-temporal references and their contexts (Loayza, 2006).

For the collection of information, individual interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants in the spaces of the university they attend, which were recorded and transcribed through the word processor Word. The analysis of the information was done ascending, building categories that emerged from the empirical information.

The participants in this research are three college students of 18 and 19 years who define themselves indigenous belonging to different ethnic groups of the state of Chiapas, Mexico, from three municipalities of Chiapas, which are characterized by high levels of marginalization and social backwardness. Their identities were safeguarded, pseudonyms are used to name them. Adi comes from Acala, a municipality in the center of the state of Chiapas. According to the 2010 population census (National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI], 2010), Acala has 28,947 inhabitants, the dominant language is Spanish, although Zoque and Tsotsil are the local languages that are spoken the most, the index of marginalization is of medium degree, 21.01% of the population is illiterate and 52.02% of the communities that integrate it have less than 5000 inhabitants. Cecy is originally from Zinacantán, a town belonging to the Tsotsil ethnic group. According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy [Coneval] (2014), 64.8% of this population is in extreme poverty, the population of 15 years or more is illiterate at 42.3% and the percentage of minors from 6 to 14 years that do not attend school is 23.1%. Charito is a native of Tila, a municipality with a very high degree of marginalization: 69.32% of its inhabitants are in extreme poverty, 29.24% of the population of 15 years or more is

illiterate and 47.47% of the inhabitants of 15 years or more do not have the complete primary (Inegi, 2010).

## Results

From empirical information collected two categories were built: a) The forms of oppression of indigenous women in the patriarchal culture and b) The forms of resistance of indigenous university women in a culture of oppression. The first is analyzed from the five forms of oppression proposed by Young (2000) in a patriarchal context: systematic violence, lack of power, exploitation, marginalization and cultural imperialism. The second category shows the academic formation, the anchorage to the identity of being a woman and indigenous and the questioning before the subordination of other women, as options of resistance to the patriarchal domination of indigenous university students.

### **The forms of oppression of indigenous women in the patriarchal culture**

The patriarchal element is the immanent background of the culture of belonging of Ady, Cecy and Charito, not only from which they come, but also to which they arrive when they leave their community to continue their university studies. The patriarchal culture is reproduced through social institutions such as the family and the school, in daily acts that remember, reaffirm and permanently sustain a dynamic of domination-subordination of men over women. From this context they speak and sustain the following:

As a child you begin to instill that the woman has to obey you, then from that moment the man is creating an ideology that he has power in the house or in that place, it may well be a boy of five years and a woman twenty years old and they will always pay attention to what the child says (E/Cecy).

As explained below:

Coming from places like that, with a culture that are used to machismo, for example, in mine that women are subjected to and all that, that is, the woman is always there, must be subjected if not to her father, to her brother, to her husband when he marries; then they are things very like that, as they take away from you, take notice, the wings, that is, they diminish you (E/Charito)

There is a recognition on the part of the interviewees of the process of male domination in their community, they name it and they are located as depositaries of that domination, in such a way that they feel diminished, with null possibilities of equality, because even the word of a child, because of his condition as a man, he has greater value than that of an adult woman.

The feminist and contemporary political philosopher Young (2000) has developed an important work of criticism regarding the distributive theories of justice that, according to his analysis, conceal five forms of oppression that are present in the patriarchal culture. It poses oppression as a structural element, which takes effect in the systematic impediments, in the disadvantages and injustices suffered by some groups in the daily practices of the liberal society; which goes beyond the traditional concept of tyranny exercised by a determined and evident ruling group.

Young affirms that systematic violence is a form of oppression because it is the context itself that makes acts of violence possible, in such a way that they become acceptable. In addition, it is "directed to the members of a group simply because they are members of that group" (2000, p.108), as is the case of women. In a patriarchal culture, violence against them is justified by the fact that they are women and as such must be subordinated to the power of men.

I have seen many people cry, for something like this (...), it can be that they suffer abuse and they do not have the right to raise their voices or simply if they go and complain to the judge (...), the judge always gives the reason to man. How will man be left in shame? In other words, it does not matter to the woman to put all the blame on her, it may well be the man who is cheating the woman, but what does she have? He is a man, he can, you should not do it, if a woman cheats a man he receives more humiliations (E/Charito).

The lack of power is a second form of oppression. The people lacking power are those "who must accept orders and rarely have the right to give them (...), also designates a position in the division of work and concomitant social position that leaves people few opportunities to develop and use their capabilities" (Young, 2000, p.99).

The injustices associated with the lack of power are the inhibition in the development of personal abilities, the lack of power to make decisions in any area of life and the exposure to a non-respectful treatment because of low status.

Men are taking as a stereotype that all men should be the most and women the least, then there is going to be that machismo and begin to do as the divisions, and could even be mentioned to eat, to eat at a table, as men go upstairs and women on the floor (E/Cecy).

It is the daily acts that show the power gaps between men and women and the naturalization of this inequality: eating up on the table or on the floor shows the position of power between genders.

Exploitation as another form of oppression occurs through a sustained process of "transferring the results of the work of one social group to the benefit of another" (Young, 2000, p.88), which implies that the energies of the dispossessed be channeled to the maintenance of the power and benefits of the possessors. Silvia Federicci (2013) has shown that unpaid domestic work performed by women was central to sustaining the work of men, which made possible, from its origins, the development of the capitalist economic system.

In this sense, for Young (2000), the exploitation of gender occurs in the transfer to men of both the results of material work and the sexual and nurturing energies of women.

The same society in issues of each ethnicity is putting roles to each sex, for example, the masculine, which always give more tendency to work, to meetings, to take one to give the address and all that; and the woman always boxed in the house (E/Charito).

This is simultaneously a form of marginalization. As another form of oppression, marginalization consists in excluding social groups from the useful participation in the productive process that are not convenient to the capitalist economic system, such as racialized minorities, the elderly, migrants, single mothers, among others, they become dependent on the State's welfare policies. In the case of women, marginalization is related to the place of subordination that has been assigned by the patriarchal culture, and because domestic work in the private space is outside the capitalist productive process; this implies their exclusion from any possibility of making decisions and being seen in equality with men.

Finally, cultural imperialism as oppression consists of "the universalization of the experience and culture of a dominant group and its imposition as a norm" (Young, 2000, p.103). In the experiences of our interviewees, it is heard how the ignorance of the indigenous culture is



related to a discriminatory treatment towards those who self-write to them, which is accentuated given their status as women.

People from such a more urbanized place tend to not know the meaning of being indigenous, so they create discrimination towards the person (E/Cecy).

And in that same direction:

I would like other people to have a knowledge of this [refers to non-indigenous people] and that they also learn to value all the people themselves and because we are all equal (E/Charito).

Cultural imperialism establishes that everything different from the experiences, values and objectives of the dominant culture is seen as a lack or a negation and makes invisible the particular perspectives of the minority groups, which are converted into the others. For Lugones (2011), the construction of what a woman is comes from the imposition of the European subject model during the colonization of America and the Caribbean, which was basically masculine, white and heterosexual, while the woman was understood "as someone who reproduced race and capital through his sexual purity, his passivity and his attachment to the home in service to the white bourgeois European man "(p.106). This is the cultural model that was imposed on American women and remains in force.

Women, already trying in a place that is mostly indigenous, yes, sometimes being a woman costs, hurts, burns then !, you want everything [she laughs], because, as I mentioned, I think that as cultures come from a long time ago (...) unfortunately, that mentality continues that you must be very attached to a person, that everything must be in accordance with what that person says (E/Cecy).

The experience of the interviewee shows the complaint and pain of being a woman that is in the fabric of the domination of a cultural empire that wilts the possibilities of being different, of being treated as equals in a world dominated by the male figure.

### **The forms of resistance to a culture of oppression**

While it is true that our culture has been built on complex networks of power that are installed at all levels of social relations, it is also true that this does not completely erase the creative possibilities of the subject to resist and permanently institute new processes of transformation of its reality. Lugones (2011) calls active subjectivity to this minimum capacity of agency to resist multiple oppressions (p.109). Butler (2001), on the other hand, states that the primary condition for becoming a subject is precisely subjection, since it implies subordination to power, but also its possibility of resistance to domination.

Power acts on the subject in at least two ways; first, as what makes it possible, the condition of its possibility and the occasion of its formation, and, second, as that which is adopted and reiterated in the "own" performance of the subject. As a subject of power that is also the subject of power, the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; eclipses power through power (Butler, 2001, p. 25).

Butler understands the subject as a place of ambivalence where subjugation meets a power that appears external to him and the power that that same power confers on him to be internalized, on the premise that the power that has been imposed and the The power he puts into practice is never the same, given his possibility as a subject to reiterate power, that is, to signify the conditions of his subordination as active and productive structures, and not just to repeat them mechanically (p.106). This is taken up by the author from the Lacanian and Althusserian proposal of the symbolic existence of the subject, which can never be total, and what escapes to be symbolized, by the norm, by power, emerges in the imaginary as disorder and objection (p.101). And this, in turn, allows us to understand that much of the content of the experiences of the women interviewed has been one of rebellion, of disorder and of challenge to the machismo of their ethnic culture, which implies a process of resistance that has accompanied them along his way to reach, like few others, a level of university study.

### The academic formation as an option of resistance

In Charito's experience, sin appears as a form of punishment for transgressing the norms of submission, subordination and seclusion to the domestic space, which leads to humiliation and denigration.

For my part, the women where I come from are very closed people who believe that education is a sin, and this, let's say, when a person goes out to study, in my case for example, they mark you as a person of the worst, because they already say that you are not respecting your culture or that you are not respecting your own society (...), then it is like an act of rebellion for them (E/Charito).

And reinforcing that same idea:

When you go out to study or go out like that, I do not know, to send a message to the city, you are branded as well as, excuse the word, as a prostitute, because you are like a gift (E/Charito).

For Cecy excel in the field of education meant facing criticism, disqualification and discouragement of their own family, which represents the values and community expectations. The resistance appears as that tension between the mechanisms of systematic violence to retain women within the community and the minimum capacity of agency, the power of insubordination and reiteration of the power that constitutes them as subjects.

In my family almost nobody supported me, they always told me "you will not be able to, nor will you pass", even my own sisters, so, my own, they said "you will not stay or you will pass the exam" (...); However, when they say no, for me it's a win because you're going to be able to!

(...) At first, there in my community, as I was saying, I was almost not so accepted that I would leave, that is, I was only twelve years old and they already labeled me as a gift, and so [laughs] because I went to the city.

(...) What is my region, my ethnic group, I have been very criticized and everything, but I did not care, because if I had cared I think it would not be where I am now (...), the truth, by my own inspiration come out ahead (E/Cecy).

Both Cecy and Adi faced the community expectation of becoming unsuccessful by getting pregnant and being single mothers. Being a single mother is also seen as punishment for the moral transgressions involved in leaving the community.

I will never forget a man who met me on the street and said:

-And what are you studying?

And I say:

- Yes!

- And for what?

- Oh, I do not know, I'm just in high school.

And he started to laugh at me and said:

-Ay, you will not be able to, failed !, Here I'll see you when you come with your tremendous belly in front (E/Cecy).

The testimony of Adi, on the other hand, agrees to a great extent with the one quoted above:

Well, of my culture, this, like, let's say so, that women there tell us, then, comment more on women: if you go to study, if you go to school they tell you that the girl or the woman is just going to look for a child and the next day (...) will be with a child, this one, next to his dad, like (...) that his dad will keep it (E/Adi).

### **Anchoring to the identity of women and indigenous**

Another form of resistance to accept domination and subordination by these women has been the belief in the value of themselves over the devaluation and discrimination experienced. Adi, for example, defines the fact of being a woman as "something incredible". And for Charito it is "to show all those people that we are equal or more than others". Cecy, finally, described it in the following way:

They believe that woman is humiliating you, being a woman is, then, overcoming what you want.

But, yes, it is something that you must defend, the word woman does not mean to be less, but to be the same, but more than anything to make you known as a strong person, as we mentioned.

Also, the mastery of their mother tongue has been considered as an additional capacity that has given them value as people, this in a non-indigenous context always adverse, because what prevails is the valuation of foreign languages, and to be indigenous is to belong to a minority group excluded from the hegemonic cultural products. The indigenous identity has constituted for them, then, a way to resist and advance in the higher educational spaces.

I say that being an indigenous woman is something, this, for me is something (...) more valuable (...) because we speak of two languages, I apart I speak in a language [mother tongue] and apart from Spanish (E/Cecy).

The mastery of their mother tongue is an important element of the interviewees to show their identity and resist the processes of exclusion to which they are exposed in the hegemonic Ladino culture of the university.

### **Questioning the subordination of other women**

The critical capacity with respect to the living conditions of other women with whom they do not agree is a central axis in the life experience of these young university students. In the case of Charito, she is able to recognize that the discrimination of older women towards younger women by leaving the community is related to their own life history, that is, to the culture they inherited and that they have not been able to transcend.

Sometimes, there are some ladies who start talking about the girls who are going to work, because they are used to it and they see it badly for a girl to go to work alone, or to support her family, or put it like that, because they never did it and they were submitted, right? to her husband and to always obey.

(...) The woman there is used to doing what the man says, she is accustomed to being inside the house, that she should not miss that, let's say, she should be clean, she should dedicate herself more than anything to that, to your household chores. That the woman there is considered "what a good woman she is!" If she knows

how to make good tortillas, if you know how to cook the essentials, if you know how to sweep (E/Charito).

Alberti (1999) points out that one's own gender and ethnic awareness, as elements of inequality, may open the possibility for indigenous women to develop identity strategies to protect themselves, but also to question the social structures that limit their possibility of being. The possibility of realizing the situations of domination that the interviewees have allows them to interpret and recreate the "rules or ordinances" of the culture based on their own motivations and personal interests and to favor to some extent escape from that domination.

## Conclusions

The university students participating in this study come from a patriarchal and macho context, typical of the neoliberal economic-political system that defines contemporaneity, which delimits their experiences as social subjects. It has realized the oppression and gender subordination in their community of origin and the forms of resistance that these women have built to transcend them, so that, although social networks woven to retain them in these spaces play of the traditional roles of being a woman, mother and wife at an early age, have managed to gain access to the university, which is the achievement of very few.

Getting to the university was not easy for any of the interviewees, each one had to work in a special way. For Cecy was not only his teachers decided to value their right to continue their studies outside their community, but she must strive to be an outstanding student, had earned a place of recognition for his abilities as a student. For Charito, contact with a world external to her community meant understanding different forms of relationship between men and women and confronting in another way the subordinations imposed on her by her own culture. Adi, likewise, had to overcome a patriarchal culture in her place of origin and become the strong one to support the discourses that placed her as a failure.

Thus, having the consciousness of domination / subordination of gender and access to school, particularly at the university, in the case of these young women interviewed, it appears as an alternative to resist in a patriarchal and neoliberal culture and visualize other horizons of life.

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