Intersectional Praxis and Socio-Political Transformation at the Colombian Truth Commission in the Caribbean Region

Audes Jiménez González and Juliana González Villamizar

1. Introduction

Audes Jiménez González is a Black woman from a popular and peasant background in Colombia. She was born in Chigorodó, Antioquia, but arrived as a child in Barranquilla. In 2020–2022, Jiménez worked as coordinator of the territorial office for Atlántico, the North of Bolívar and San Andrés of the Colombian *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* (CEV; Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition), one of the transitional justice mechanisms established in the peace accords signed between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP guerrilla in 2016.[1]

Juliana González Villamizar is a mestiza, upper-middle class, light-skinned woman from Bogotá. She currently does research on the mainstreaming of intersectionality in the CEV. Her work incorporates participative-action methodologies and aims to build ethical solidarity among activist and knowledge-producing networks.

We share the same dreams and desires to help transform the realities of injustice and inequality in the Colombian Caribbean region, which are, in many

1 The Colombian armed conflict began with the formation of the FARC guerrilla in 1964 and extended until the signing of a peace accord with the Colombian government in 2016 in Havana, Cuba. It took place particularly in the rural areas and involved paramilitaries and other guerrilla groups. These armed groups, as well as state forces, are responsible for multiple war crimes and for the victimization of more than nine million people (CEV, 2022). Women, ethnic groups and the peasant population were disproportionately affected by the armed conflict.

ways, interwoven with the violence of the armed conflict.[2] A common concern in our conversations has been how to incorporate an intersectional framework in the work of the CEV, in ways that contribute to transforming the roots of the armed conflict and of socio-political violence in this region. Together with the CEV's work teams in the Caribbean region, we put some of our ideas in practice by co-organizing the 'Women's Agoras' and the 'Marronage Route', two dialogue processes with women and Black, Afro-descendent, Raizal, and Palenquero communities[3] which took place recurrently in 2020 and 2021. This article is the result of our ongoing dialogue and collaborative work around these processes from our different positionalities and enunciation sites.

Women's Agoras brought together Afro-descendent, Indigenous, peasant, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women leaders from all subregions of the Colombian Caribbean who have suffered sexual and political violence in the armed conflict. The Marronage Route were meetings with female and male representatives of Afro-descendent community councils[4] in the Caribbean region. Both the Women's Agoras and the Marronage Route continued as autonomous mobilization processes after the CEV finalized its work and presented its final report in June 2022. Simultaneously, we carried out a participative study on the possibilities and challenges of mainstreaming intersectionality in the teams' research methodologies.[5] This study involved several in-

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3 Afro-descendent people in Colombia are divided into subgroups due to internal debates regarding the political value of these categories, as well as the ethnic particularities of Raizal and Palenquero communities, which preserve their ancestral territories and languages.

4 Community councils are Afro-descendent people's legal territorial units, which aim to satisfy their right to self-government and to materialize their cultural traditions according to Law 70 of 1993. Although community councils are a historic achievement of Afro-descendent struggles in Colombia, many have not yet received the collective land properties to which communities are entitled.

5 The German-Colombian Peace Institute (CAPAZ) funded this study, as well as the publication Hilando Resistencias that resulted from the Women's Agoras and the Marronage Route, to which we refer below.

terviews with staff members, including research and social dialogue coordinators, as well as documentors, analysts, and administrative staff, collective dialogue spaces and an online training on intersectionality.

This article includes the voices of three participants in the processes we reflect on. Beatriz Elena Mejía Vizcaína is an Afro-descendent and lesbian woman, practicing attorney, LGBTQ+ human rights defender and currently president of the Diverse and Affirmative Peace Organization in the department of Cesar. Estebana Roa Montoya is an Afro-descendent, peasant woman from a poor family in Acandí, Chocó. She is a women's human rights defender and legal representative of the Victim and Professional Women's Network. Concepción Julio is an Afro-descendant elder woman, social leader, human rights defender of vulnerable populations and victims of the armed conflict, now legal representative of Winds of Peace organization in San Bernardo del Viento, Córdoba. She became the first female councilor of the same municipality.

Based on our and these participants' experience in the context of the CEV's work in the Colombian Caribbean, we aim to shed light on the significance and the transformative effects of an intersectional praxis for the work of transitional justice institutions, as well as for human rights public policy that addresses violence against the body-territories, families, and land of individuals and collectivities. We are interested in transcending perspectives based on the summation of violences, and to identify and contribute to creating the conditions for women and LGBTQ+ people, their families, organizations, and communities to heal and coexist peacefully in their territories in the Colombian Caribbean in the short and medium term.

2. Intersecting Inequality and Conflict Dynamics in the Colombian Caribbean Region

The cultural context of the Caribbean region involves patriarchal practices based on gender and sexuality stereotypes that make women and LGBTQ+ people particularly vulnerable to violence against their bodies and to their exclusion from leadership roles in society. Within this patriarchal culture, armed actors asserted their dominance through weapons and engaged in the massive violation of women's rights, lives, and bodies (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2011). Mejía's experience evidences, too, that the violence committed by illegal armed groups, as well as by state forces (the military and the police)

against people with nonconforming sexual orientations and gender identities was based on prejudices and aimed to preserve a heteropatriarchal order and punish deviant identities and behaviors:

> Once a paramilitary got interested in me and came to my mother's house drunk. He threatened that if I didn't go out with him, he would kill my family. He said I was supposed to be with him. He was very obsessed and I was afraid he would kill me because he couldn't be with me. Men here say, too, that lesbians are unfair competition (Personal Communication, 14 February 2022).

Black communities inhabit large portions of the Colombian Caribbean since the arrival of European colonists in the 16th century as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Although slavery was officially abolished in Colombia in 1851, Afro-descendent people continued to suffer racial discrimination and to occupy subordinate positions. The agents and dynamics of this violence have changed, but the same colonial logic remains, considering Black people as *others*, inferior, and submissive. The violence exerted by guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and state forces in many Black territories included the prohibition of social reunions, the exercise of political rights and even funeral ceremonies for the dead. Gender stereotypes aggravated this situation, as Julio's experience shows:

> I had the good and the bad luck to work with 12 councilmen who made my life impossible, due to this idea that women should not participate in politics. Because of my struggles in defense of people's rights and life projects in the countryside, paramilitaries came into my house and threatened to kill my family. I had to move to Bogotá with my kids while they were still little (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

Actions such as these have contributed to establishing an extractivist economic model in many Black territories in the Colombian Caribbean. Transnational agroindustrial and mining projects have dried up rivers and swamps, leaving Black people in misery or forcing them to relocate (Jiménez González et al. 2021).

In fact, the most intense period of the armed conflict in the Caribbean region (1997–2005) is also characterized by the expansion of the land tenure by economic and political elites and the massive forced displacement of peasant,

racialized populations. Roa's experience shows that sexual violence was employed against rural and racialized women in order to silence them and inhibit their resistance:

> I worked in banana plantations in Apartadó and was part of the labor union. I was handing out flyers with a colleague when four paramilitaries got us off the bus and raped us in a nearby property. The next day, paramilitaries came to my house and I had to leave with my three kids (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

Forced displacement affects women severely, as they experience revictimization and a triple discrimination in the urban centers where they arrive, as Roa explains:

> I had to work as a prostitute in Cartagena to support my kids. Once, a bar owner said to me: 'You look good, but we can't hire you because we only hire one Black woman, and we already have one.' I didn't understand then that they were discriminating against me (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

3. From Theory to Praxis

Intersectionality is a critical perspective on the simultaneous and inseparable interlocking of various dimensions of inequality based on gender, race, social class, heteronormativity, among others, that also sheds light on the differentiated impact of inequality on people's experiences according to their social positioning. Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) developed the concept within the legal field to illustrate the conceptual gaps with regard to discrimination and violence against US women of color.[6] In Latin America and the Caribbean context, feminists aligned with decolonial, critical, and autonomous strands of the movement propose an intersectional framework to critique mainstream feminism for reconducting White patterns and concepts and to acknowledge the interweaving of gender, race, class, and heteronorma-

6 The genealogy of intersectionality traces a rich legacy of Black feminist thinkers and activists, such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and Angela Davis, among many others.

tivity in the project of modernity and its colonial legacies.[7] Many of these authors share the conviction, too, that intersectionality is not only a tool for structural analysis, but that it should serve to "construct a social movement that addresses all types of oppression, exclusion and marginalization" (Viveros Vigoya 2016: 13).[8]

The Colombian Truth Commission has the duty to clarify the truth and help recognize victims and the crimes committed, as well as facilitate peaceful-coexistence and non-repetition (Presidency of the Republic 2017). The CEV's methodological guidelines include gender, ethnic, psychosocial, life-course, and territorial approaches to guarantee differentiated attention to specific populations (CEV 2019). Although this framework appeared promising to mainstream intersectionality at first, one of the biggest obstacles to achieving this was that it tended to fragment social struggles instead of interlocking them and focused on the intersectionality of individual identities, rather than the social structures that produce the inequalities (González Villamizar 2021). In the Caribbean region, moreover, the research teams struggled to reflect on gender relations and the impact of the armed conflict on women and men as internally diverse categories. They often analyzed what had happened to peasant or mestiza women and to LGBTQ+ people, but could not explain the violations that occur simultaneously on racialized bodies.

Audes Jiménez González: Juliana arrived at the right moment with her research questions and made us reflect on our methods. Based on her suggestion that we might want to deepen our application of an intersectional framework, many staff members in the CEV research teams in the Caribbean, including myself, began to think that incorporating intersectionality in our work could support the Commission's objectives by explaining the relationship between the armed conflict and "historical continuums of violence that organize power as a gendered and racialized pyramid that have contributed to the persistence of war, even after the signing of the peace accords", as my colleague Eliana Toncel argues (personal Communication, 7 October 2020). We associated intersectionality, thus, with the possibility to intervene in the armed conflict dynamics in ways that help prevent its recurrence.

We considered that facilitating authentic transformation processes at the CEV through an intersectional framework required engaging in a process of "action-reflection-action". This process involves initiating interventions on the

7 Cf. Lugones 2014; Gonzalez 2020; Curiel 2020; Espinosa-Miñoso 2016.

8 Cf. Crenshaw 1988; Lorde 1984; Lugones 2000; Curiel 2020.

ground and having many eyes on what we are doing in order to decide which further actions we must engage in. In order to go beyond abstract discourses on the need to transform the world, we need to understand the domination relationships in the context where we act. We hoped this would allow us to construct concepts and confirm relationships among categories based on the work we are doing and, therefore, to propose far more accurate theories. Moreover, I suggested bringing others who are also engaged in advocacy processes on board, as I considered they could be excellent allies. The Women's Agoras and the Marronage Route became our interventions and simultaneously the laboratory to explore our ideas on intersectionality.

Juliana González Villamizar: Engaging in allyship with Audes and her work team, I participated in several meetings to help organize and assess different stages of the Agoras and the Marronage Route. I realized that, throughout this process, Audes was leading us, not only to develop methodologies to analyze intersecting inequalities, but specially to draw upon and utilize an intersectional framework in our activities. She was using intersectionality as a political strategy to build networks of collective action against all forms of oppression. This was evident in the pedagogic work she did with the research teams, as well as in her interest in bringing in allies to the process, including myself. She motivated us to interact with the people on the ground as equals and to recognize and validate their knowledge, if we aimed to produce differentiated analyzes that truly responded to the Caribbean social and political context.

In fact, Audes and many of her co-workers proposed that the Agoras and Marronage Routes should not only aim for recognition, peaceful-coexistence, and non-repetition, as the CEV had stipulated for social dialogue activities, but that they were research activities themselves. The Agoras and the Marronage Route thus became spaces where everyone had the chance to tell their own version of the narrative and to feel they were part of the historical dialogue fostered by the CEV. The publication *Hilando Resistencias*, which reflects these dialogue processes, demonstrates that colonial and racist logics are a pattern in the violence committed against women and ethnic-racial communities in the Caribbean, according to the empirical and analytical bases acquired during the dialogues (Jiménez González et. al 2021). *Hilando Resistencias* also contains the political agendas constructed in the meetings, which engaged local and regional authorities to develop policies that directly address the living conditions of women and Afro-descendent people in the Caribbean.

Jiménez/González: As expressed by Roa:

> Thanks to these spaces of articulation and listening, we have published a text that includes our collective experiences. Before, the state had us Black people *enmochilados*[9] in a single bag as victims of the armed conflict. We had never spoken of violence against us as a collectivity. Now, we can make visible the unwritten tragedy endured by the Afro-descendent, Raizal, and Palenquera communities as racialized people (Personal Communication, 19 October 2021).

Our strategy of "action-reflection-action" thereby enacted the transformations an intersectional framework proposes while producing intersectional knowledge of the armed conflict in the Caribbean. In this sense, it produced the synergy between theory and practice that Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins refer to as they highlight the tensions that lie within intersectionality as a framework oriented to inquiry and political action in interconnected ways (Bilge/Collins 2020). This made us think of our work as 'intersectional praxis' (González Villamizar, n.d.).

4. Healing-Deconstructing the Body-Territory: from the Inside Out and Vice Versa

Jiménez: With the idea in mind that naming the oppressions opens the door to transform them, I ask in which part of the body-territory intersectionality actually takes place and which are its effects.[10] I think: 'I perceive myself as a Black

9 Enmochilado in this context means that Black people were classified generally as victims, while their cultural and historical specificity was overlooked.

10 The concept of "body-territory" is very present in the discourses and practices of the peoples of Abya Yala, which is how the territory of Latin America was called by its original inhabitants prior to European colonization. We understand the body-territory as the energetic and spiritual connection of our individual physical bodies with Mother Earth, our ancestors, and our collective memories. Beyond the Cartesian dualism of mind and body that subjects emotions and embodiment to rationality, we recognize the integrality of our lived experience in the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions and our interdependence with land. In the ancestral traditions of Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples in Abya Yala, women sow the navels of the newborn in the earth, signifying this deep connection. Anything that takes place in our bodies and in our minds transcends our physical boundaries and affects the land, and anything that happens to our Mother Earth affects us, because our roots are buried in her.

woman, coming from a peasant background. But this image I have of myself is very similar to the one the oppressors have of people like me!' So I am neither Black, nor woman. These are both social constructs and I need to deconstruct them from within. Our praxis of intersectionality went, therefore, beyond external oppressions and also tackled internal tensions produced by the historic subordination of racialized and gendered beings. As Frantz Fanon duly noted, these tensions involve our tendency to identify ourselves as oppressed people and to appropriate subaltern roles (Fanon 1961: 181).

Jiménez/González: We plead for a concept of democracy that does not only focus on political institutions, but that emphasizes our daily lives as sites of democratic intervention. This requires us to comprehend how our bodies – as our first territories – work and interact with one another. If we do not intervene at this level, we will just go on talking about transformation processes while never actually achieving them. The CEV's official questionnaires asked questions related to the victimizing act and to each identity component (woman, Black, lesbian, poor, etc.). We knew this would not make evident the connections, so we proposed that the dialogue center rather on longer-term and simultaneous layers of the participants' life experiences: Before the victimizing act, which situations made you feel bad, less than, or not entitled? Did these situations produce any complexes or insecurities related to any part of your body or being? Do you know of other women – friends, mothers, grandmothers – who experienced something similar? This way, we aimed to tackle the structural component while allowing the participants to reflect on the similarities and patterns in their experiences.

Mejía's experience shows that this environment and methodology was helpful for the participants to comprehend the inner effects of racial and gender and sexuality constructs and to gain power over them:

> My late grandmother was White. When I was six or seven, she would let all my siblings come inside her house except for me. I would ask her to let me in, but she'd say I have to stay outside because I am dark-skinned, just like my father. Now my family rejects my sexual orientation. Sharing my story at the Agoras and listening to other women's experiences, I began to understand that my family discriminates against me. This knowledge helped me forgive my grandmother and taught me how to speak up to earn my family's respect (Personal Communication, 14 February 2022).

Roa's reflection on the Agoras, on the other hand, demonstrates the positive impact of the experience on her regaining confidence and her sense of self-worth:

> For 24 years after I was raped, I couldn't speak in public. My hands would sweat and I couldn't pronounce a single word. The Agoras helped me because I felt trust with other women who spoke up about everything that has happened to us. I lost my fear because now we all struggle for the women's cause (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

Jiménez: Our society is built upon a series of ideals, symbols, and prejudices that don't allow us to live our lives fully. These ideas fill us with insecurities, fear, hatred, and contempt against others, making our minds sick. When we are able to deconstruct these thoughts, we can heal and free ourselves. Whenever leaders undergo this process, it becomes a complete success because their voice then multiplies their individual healing. This is what Mejía was able to do as she forgave her family for their abuses and herself for not winning her family's respect. But also Julio's words demonstrate the gains of this experience from an intersectionality of struggles perspective:

> Ten years ago, I thought it was horrible that a man would like another man. At the Agoras, I listened to the life stories of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women and began to recognize their value and the fact that we are all on the same path of seeking the truth. I have become a defender of LGBTQ+ people's rights (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

Deconstructing the effects of intersectionality in our body-territories means too, therefore, to be able to see ourselves, as well as others, with humanity.

Many Debates, Not Enough Applications?

In the last decades, intersectionality has become a popular framework to analyze social inequalities. People speak either in favor or against intersectionality. "I'm not convinced by intersectionality. It's just another sophism", Ochy Curiel said in a talk in 2020. We agree that there are superficial uses of intersectionality that threaten to instrumentalize the struggles behind it, as happened with other categories, such as gender or human rights. Based on our experience, however, we plead to reinject the notion of intersectionality with transforma-

tive content by revitalizing its original contribution as activist knowledge, instead of throwing it away for good. Activist knowledge is practice-based knowledge, as opposed to intellectual and analytic operations that hardly change anything. As Sirma Bilge argues, this use of intersectionality might in fact have caused many 'intersectional' projects to lose sight of any political aspiration (Bilge 2014).

The extended period of violence in Colombia has left a deep wound in our society, which manifests in an inability to trust, to be transparent, and to deal with the enormous pain of the thousands of losses that the conflict has left behind. In order to work through this collective trauma and wake up as a society, we need to transmute such pain through a collective healing process. In contexts such as this, applying intersectionality in transitional justice procedures and human rights programs needs to go way beyond just analyzing structures of inequality. Entire populations have naturalized multiple forms of oppression and cannot even see which transformations are required to live a happy and beautiful life. Fostering collective healing and memory construction with marginalized communities such as Afro-descendent women, LGBTQ+ people, and ethnic communities in the Caribbean may be aided by an intersectional framework if both the inner and outer aspects of our bodies-territories are addressed and we are able to move toward different ways of being, feeling, and acting.

Our intersectional praxis in the context of the Women's Agoras and the Marronage Route in the Colombian Caribbean was key to materialize socio-political transformations by producing counter-hegemonic narratives of the armed conflict that centered around the differentiated experiences of marginalized sectors, while activating healing processes. Rather than mere respondents, the participants in the dialogues became protagonists of this experience and will be forever owners of their truth. We highlight, however, that these transformations are far from sufficient and that transitional justice processes must commit to addressing the economic hardships that very often, as in the case of Colombia, dominate the living conditions of victims. As Roa explains:

> Changes haven't been very big in other areas because of the economic system. Since I barely have a high school diploma and I'm 63 years old, whenever I present my resume, there is immediately some obstacle, and my resume is archived (Personal Communication, 12 February 2022).

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