

## Marisela Montenegro, researcher of the Faculty of Psychology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona

By Caterine Galaz and Lelya Troncoso



*“We can take advantage of the entry of the intersectional perspective into the discussion of public policies to point out how oppressive relations are reproduced within the social intervention itself. How sexism is reproduced, how racism is reproduced, how ableism is reproduced, in our own interventions”*

We talked with Marisela Montenegro about the relevance of intersectional perspectives in looking critically at the processes, approaches and aspirations of our professional interventions. Marisela is an academic at the Faculty of Psychology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona and Director of the Research Group Fractalities in Critical Research (Fractalidades en Investigación Crítica, FIC), holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and defines herself as a feminist psychologist. In recent years she has worked on intersectional analysis of public policies and social interventions both in Spain and in some Latin American countries, especially with respect to collective memory processes, international migration and gender and sexuality issues. We thank Caterine Galaz and Lelya Troncoso<sup>1</sup> for conducting this interview<sup>2</sup>.

**Caterine:** For years you have been conducting critical feminist studies in relation to social intervention. Tell us, in what year did you start linking these readings with intersectional perspectives?

**Marisela:** In my doctoral thesis I make a critical analysis of the basic premises of social intervention, both from directed and participatory perspectives. The intersectional

<sup>1</sup> Academics from the Department of Social Work of the Universidad de Chile, members of the Diversity and Gender: Intersectional Approaches Research Cluster

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted online in April 2021.

issue began to interest me from the studies done with your team Catherine, which included Karla Montenegro and Laura Yufra in a work on social services aimed at migrant women. In those studies we began to explore postcolonial perspectives, especially the figure of “the woman of the third world” proposed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, since it served us perfectly to analyze how, from the social services, migrant women were constructed in the context of the Spanish State. And there, from that entry into postcolonial studies, we also began to work with the perspectives of black feminisms, Chicano feminisms, among others, and that is where I particularly began to get into the subject of intersectionality studies and to understand the concept, its political origins, among other factors.

**Lelya:** You have talked about the idea of situated intersectionality... Can you explain to us how you understand this notion? Where does it come from, and how do you link this notion to your call for interventions to be situated?

**Marisela:** Well, this idea is worked on by different authors, especially Yuval Davis, who makes a whole conceptualization to understand how different axes of oppression are situated in a context and affect people’s life trajectories. This is because she questions a perspective of intersectionality - which is quite entrenched - that has to do with defining intersectionality based on the positions of the subjects. When we speak of black lesbian women, for example, we are talking about the position of the subject, and not about the context that makes that position be subalternized at a certain moment. That is to say, what the situated or contextual perspective proposed by these authors seeks refers to how in any context different axes of oppression converge to generate forms of discrimination. Therefore, it starts, let us say, from another place, not from the position, but from the context. However, the link with the field of social intervention is a link that is not so clear. In my case, the perspectives I used to build a critical look at social intervention were based on Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge, which somehow converges with the issue of intersectionality, but they are not the same thing, they do not come from the same thinking: the notion of intersectionality comes from black feminisms and Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge emerges in the field of feminist epistemologies. So of course, the articulation of this is not so easy and, in fact, it is something we are currently working on. In a chapter that Surya Nayak, Joan Pujol and I wrote, we talked a bit about how to work from an intersectional perspective in professional interventions, but it is a very complex issue because, as I was saying, many times the reading of intersectionality starts from the subject position. When working on intersectionality in this field, it is often considered that what we have



to do is to look for the least favored positions. On the other hand, if we take the concept of intersectionality from a contextual perspective, what we should do is to intervene on the axes of oppression that negatively affect people's lives.

**Caterine:** Can you tell us about some research as examples to visualize this intersectional critique?

**Marisela:** Research on this intersectional critique? well... There is the research of Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis, there is Ange Marie Hancock herself, who talks about the Olympics of Oppressions; well, maybe Leslie McCall who makes this classification of the different perspectives of intersectionality. However, we do see a lack of integration of the intersectional perspective in the field of social intervention. It is something that is being worked on in some services here in Barcelona, however, there is no clear vision of how to effectively apply an intersectional perspective in intervention. This is because it is a perspective that, above all, is based on a political vision of changing the structures of oppression, and as we know, many times social intervention is based on working on attention to the subject. Therefore, a contextual perspective for thinking about social intervention is something that has yet to be elaborated.

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**Lelya:** How do you assess the sometimes depoliticized ways in which the idea of intersectionality has entered academia and public policy?

**Marisela:** In relation to how the concept of intersectionality is used in certain places - so to speak - more institutional, I would say that there is a process of depoliticization. One of the reasons is because in many places the political origin of the concept is not taken into account, that is, it is used as an academic notion or one that is useful for public policies. But it is not clearly recognized that it is a concept that arises from an identification of how power works. It is a concept that is born to explain how structures of oppression intersect. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's text, she actually talks about public policy. In the case of black women workers, which she discusses in this text, what she says is that neither public policy related to racism nor public policy related to gender protects these women because they are single issue policies. They are identity-based policies, and therefore, they do not address the intersection of different ways in which oppressions can affect people.

Having said that, often in public policy, when the notion of intersectionality is applied, it is applied in a rather summative manner. There is also the case of its application using a main category and then subcategories, which appear as affecting the main oppression.

For example, in the LGTBI laws here in Spain, which Carmen Romero and I analyzed in a text published in the journal *Psicoperspectivas*, the main difference that is emphasized is the one referring to sexual orientation and gender identity, and then in one section it says something like “well, we must also take into account differences such as migratory status, disability, etc.”, right? In other words, one category is used as the main one and then others are named and treated as subcategories that intersect that main one; so the different oppressions are not integrated in the intersectional view of these public policies. In the case of social interventions, the same thing happens a bit, given that the interventions are designed precisely on the basis of public policies and are usually thought of in terms of identity subjects: policies for women, policies for young people, policies for migrants. For all these reasons, it is very difficult to generate a complex or contextual intersectional view within the field of social intervention. Here there are some associations that are trying, for example, to think about the issue of intersectionality in gender violence, although it is taking a long time. What they are working on is how economic precariousness, roles, etc., affect the phenomenon of gender violence in particular people. What happens is that the framework where intervention is made is already prefixed by a policy that is based on gender difference as the main category.

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**Caterine:** What do you think are the dangers of intersectionality operating as diversity? Especially when there are some uses of diversity as a benign variation that ignores power relations.

**Marisela:** The great danger of intersectionality is applying it in the same way with the categories, that is, that sub-categories are simply sub-categorized. An example would be the “woman” category and then the “black woman” sub-category. This has the same negative consequences as identity categories. First, the category is internally homogenized, that is, all black women are understood as equal to each other. Secondly, the category is essentialized, it is understood that there is something natural about this sub-category (as was the case with the category woman). Finally, the category functions as a representation in the sense that, if a black woman is on the panel or somewhere, then she seems to represent all black women. These are the same negative consequences that the issue of identity categories has, which is reproduced when intersectionality is applied in a sub-categorical manner, that is, when different sub-categories of a larger category are generated. When I spoke to you about public policies, it is somewhat the same phenomenon, that is, for example, in the analysis we made of the categories of LGTBI public policies in the Spanish State, we saw that there is a large category, which is the LGTBI category, which is then subdivided into migrant LGTBI, LGTBI



seniors, etcetera. So what is the danger there? The danger is that we return to the same categorical logic and forget or make invisible the power relations that generate these categories. Here we could go to Judith Butler, to how she explains that what we have to look at are the mechanisms through which the categories are produced rather than the category itself.

We could summarize this previous part in that the concept of intersectionality has been understood from different theoretical points of view and that it is not trivial which theoretical point of view it is understood from, that is, if intersectionality is understood from a categorical point of view, then it has the same negative consequences as the identity categories that have already been analyzed: homogenization, essentialization and representation.

Meanwhile, if we go back to the political origin of the concept of intersectionality, which is the work of black feminisms, what we see there is precisely a critique of identity politics: both to public policies which, as I said before, is the example of Kimberlé Crenshaw's text, in which she shows that anti-discrimination policies by race protect black people -in the case she put- and policies against the patriarchal system protect gender, but neither of them see the situation of black working women that she was problematizing in that text. Likewise, the Combahee River Manifesto -which is one of the texts that is understood to be foundational to the intersectional perspective- criticizes the social movements themselves, the civil rights movement, the Black Panther movement, etcetera, saying that they do not see their own sexism, and since the feminist movement at that time did not see its own racism, it was somewhat the same idea.

This is the origin of the critique and of the proposal made by Nira Yuval Davis and other authors, of contextual intersectionality, which refers to studying in each specific context, which are the axes of oppression that are affecting the lives of the people in those contexts. I often use the example of migration in which it is very clear that the category is not an essence of the subject, because if you are in your country, you are not a migrant, but if you cross the border you begin to be a migrant. That is to say, the category is a consequence of the border, it is not prior to the border. So, in this case, if one looks at it from a contextual perspective, one looks at the mechanisms by which these borders are porous with respect to certain bodies, certain nationalities or certain people and are not porous for other people. Then, an intersectional analysis could be made in terms, for example, of geopolitical relations, of gender, in terms of capacity/disability,



in terms of age, etc., but around, for example, a concrete context, which would be the use or uses given to the border.

**Caterine:** And how could the notion of intersectionality be included in public policies and interventions to avoid falling into this whitewashing or depoliticization of feminist struggles?

**Marisela:** There are several complexities here, the first complexity is the one we have already mentioned, which refers to how the concept of intersectionality is used in public policies. There is currently a great debate about the concept of intersectionality in which, let's say, the more categorical view is the dominant one, at least in the context of the Spanish State. So of course, the public policies that would be born from there are the public policies that I have already criticized above, those that generate subcategories. Now, if we were to think of a world in which the contextual stance were the majority, what would those public policies be like? There is a strong difficulty here because public policies tend to be generalizable, that is, applicable to different situations and the contextual view of intersectionality rather seeks to specify a situation in order to analyze it from there, so this difficulty means that public policies are not universal.

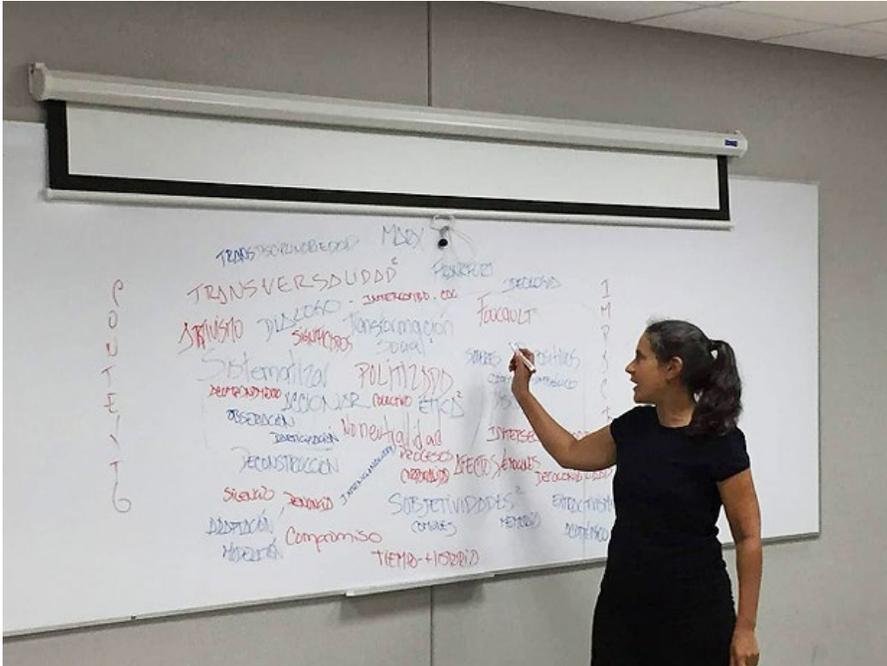
However, it would be possible to think of some lines of reflection that could be included in public policies, especially in social intervention, to help us see how these systems of oppression affect people contextually. In this sense, one of the main ideas or a proposal that I make is to generate tools of analysis to see how public policies and social intervention reproduce the oppressive relationships that exist in the context, for example, through the imaginaries that exist about migrant women, something that we have been working on for years. If the staff or professionals have an imaginary of women, weak, victims, etc., then racism and patriarchy are being reproduced intersectionally, based on the very imaginaries of the people who intervene and the people who make public policies as well.

Therefore, one axis of work is to analyze how oppressive relations are reproduced in the work of public policies and in the work of social intervention. How sexism is reproduced, how racism is reproduced, how ableism is reproduced, and so on. Of course, it is a bit abstract, it is not a very concrete application, but I do believe it is useful. In the courses and training I do, I see that generating analytical tools is a good way to reflect on the practice of intervention itself.

One example is to reflect on the spaces in which care is provided: they are culturally defined spaces, they are not neutral spaces, as people think; they are culturally defined and they invite certain people and not so much others; and of course, questioning the asymmetrical relationship between professionals and people, users, clients, beneficiaries, participants, whatever they are called. Looking at this relationship critically would allow for opening spaces for the participation of these people, for the assumption that the knowledge they have about the context is a valid knowledge to observe these oppressive relationships that are affecting them at the moment, and also for the agency of these people in the very work of the society which they are in.

And finally, it is important to build a much more critical view of the forms of oppression that generate situations of precariousness or subalternization, that is, to produce a critical view of the power relations that shape the social world. Much progress has been made in the gender perspective, but the critical view of racism, at least here in Spain, is very incipient, if not non-existent in the field of social intervention. The look at other forms of oppression is also, let's say, quite uncommon, so I believe that one can take advantage of the entry of the intersectional perspective to the discussion of public policies and social intervention to point out how within the social intervention itself oppressive relations are given and reproduced, understanding the social intervention itself as a context. In other words, applying the intersectional perspective to the context of intervention in order to see how these relations of oppression are reproduced.





Marisela giving classes at the University of Costa Rica.

### To know more about Marisela's work:

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AFIN - Research Group: <https://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/afin/>

Marisela's academic profiles: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7382-9256>  
<https://uab.academia.edu/MariselaMontenegro>

