

The Situation of Afro-Descendant Women in Latin America

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The poverty, exclusion and racial discrimination that Afro-descendant women in Latin America have historically faced are structural problems that should be of concern not only to academics and NGOs interested in women's rights, but also to governments and international institutions. There is no doubt that economic and social benefits for the region that would accrue from the implementation of strategies to end such problems are far from insignificant.

This need is in keeping with the Millennium Development Goals proposed by the UN. The region urgently needs its (excluded) minority women to have equitable access to the education system and health services, as well as to loans and labor markets in order to stimulate social development and the struggle for ethnic and women's rights.

The social and economic situation in countries such as Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and Honduras, shows that Afro-descendant women are the poorest of the poor. In fact, most Afro-Latinas live below the poverty line. This situation suggests that there is a socio-political context in which Afro-Latinas suffer permanent violations of their rights, although many public and private institutions in the region tend to disregard the existence of problems affecting Afro-descendant women.

My presentation's main objective is to serve as a reference point in the promotion of women's rights and ethnic-oriented social programs and projects that aim to improve the situation of Afro-Latinas, focusing on the improvement of the education systems that have been largely-responsible for their systematic exclusion throughout the region.

As the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination would say, there are some forms of racial discrimination that have a unique and specific impact on ethnic minority women. This is why governments must take into account, in social policies and programs planned and implemented, the disadvantageous situation of women who are victims of multiple discrimination. The process must include well-documented reports on concrete measures taken to implement both national and international mechanisms that seek to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women of African ancestry.

Before proposing feasible solutions and mentioning practices that help overcome the complex situation of Afro-Latino women, I want to briefly explain critical aspects of their history as well as cultural, political and socio-economic factors affecting them.

In the course of my research as an academic, activist and ethnic rights advisor for the *Afro-Latinos Project*, which I strongly encourage you to explore, www.afrolatinos.tv, I have turned to materials from historical archives and documents to explain the causes and characteristics of racism, gender discrimination and exclusion in Latin America, and why such problems have not been eradicated. Based on these materials, one can conclude that once slavery was abolished, the majority of Afro-Latino women found themselves in the same multiple-discrimination environment they faced as slaves, suffering the negative consequences of denigrating discourses and extremely-offensive actions that were spread through the education system and beyond.

Our audiovisual materials have also documented the reproduction of the so-called socio-racial structure that comes from colonial times and institutionalized abuses against Afro-Latinas, despite Constitutions and laws promoting the existence of a society formed by free men and women living under the same judicial and human rights conditions.

The permanence of this socio-racial structure and gender discrimination practices has undoubtedly fed systematic human rights violations against Afro-descendant women all over the region. It should be noted that as a direct result of still-highly Eurocentric and men-oriented education systems, these abuses begin at the family level. Sending only the men in the family to college, when this can be done, of course, is still a common regional cultural practice. People need to eradicate such behavior. Afro-descendant boys and girls, men and women, must have the same right to education without obstacles of any kind in practice. Moreover, as some studies have emphasized, Afro-Latinas, as the vast majority of women, play the most relevant role in strengthening the children's education process.

Afro-Latinas are largely excluded from loans and scholarships to pursue advanced studies. In Latin America, some private universities have sufficient financial resources to create affirmative-action programs or promote the education of Afro-descendant women, but most of these academic institutions are not interested in doing so, as they neither see racism as a structural problem nor as a grave human rights violation.

Despite national, regional and international mechanisms that defend Afro-Latinas as a vulnerable group, Latin American new generations continue being "educated" under the influence of education systems that reproduce racial stereotypes against Afro-Latinas. There have been many cases of Afro-Latino girls who have been direct victims of gender and racial discrimination in their schools. Their own classmates and teachers insult them by using racist expressions, which frequently produce self-esteem problems. This racist ideology affecting the nations is also fostered by families. What makes the Afro-Latinas' case more complex is precisely the fact that most people in the region do not see all those abuses as human rights issues. Distinct stereotypes against Afro-Latinas have easily been perpetuated, reinforcing their exclusion and lack of empowerment at all levels.

It should be pointed out that the media have been one of the main reproducers of racism and gender discrimination in the region. This has happened since the Nineteenth Century, when the press wrote racist texts on Afro-Latino women and their descendants. Today, most newspapers and television channels still utilize discriminatory and offensive words to describe Afro-descendant women. Many people (including some Afro-Latinos) repeat those expressions used in commercials and soap-operas, without considering them, at all, deplorable. In short, the media have promoted the use of a discriminatory language against Afro-Latinas, and there is no evidence indicating that such use will be eliminated soon, thus representing a constant violation of most countries' human rights laws.

There is a need to transform the public perception of Afro-Latino women through changes in the formal education curriculum and media system, to incorporate an accurate history that includes the crucial socio-economic and cultural contribution of Afro-Latinas to the region. Yet, apart from supporting bilingual education curriculums in a few places, effective efforts are not being made by governments to change attitudes about racism and gender discrimination in Latin America. For instance, in countries like Colombia, women have the right to have quotas at the public institutions level. How many of those women who are selected to hold influential positions at public institutions are of African origin? Although Afro-Colombians comprise 30% of the total population, the answer is 0.01% or sometimes less. Legislation has not been sufficient. There is still much work to be done.

The aforementioned situation has produced more racial marginalization, poverty and exclusion, weakening not only Afro-descendant women's empowerment processes in the region but also its productive potential. Based on key recommendations from regional ethnic rights forums and good practices, the *Afro-Latinos project* supports the following five strategies to help overcome the current education situation of most Afro-Latinas:

First, government institutions have to find effective ways to educate Afro-Latino women in the evaluation of public policies regarding minorities; second, it is important to strengthen Afro-descendant networks in order to design and implement inclusion projects and programs; third, both governments and Afro-descendant organizations must establish priorities in the face of structural problems such as unemployment, poverty, social and political exclusion, gender discrimination and institutionalized racism; fourth, it is urgent to make effective laws regarding Afro-Latino women's issues; and fifth, Afro-descendant NGOs should create partnerships with public and private institutions, including the media and universities, to secure a big labor force of Afro-Latinas with a high education level.

These strategies make us suggest the following development initiatives, in order to not only eliminate the poverty that most Afro-descendant women face, but to achieve more economic growth and respect for ethnic and women's rights in the region: First, governments and Afro-Latino NGOs have to work on the implementation of programs regarding Afro-Latino women's enterprises and small businesses; second, they also have to promote the creation of working groups on social services for Afro-Latinas; third, they have to support regional events on Afro-Latino women to obtain a clear comprehension of policies regarding Afro-Latinas as a specific ethnic population; fourth, they need to create a political culture that allows them to promote policies that benefit them directly; and fifth, governments and Afro-Latino NGOs have to support affirmative action policies to enhance the access of Afro-Latinas to higher education and well-paid jobs.

To sum up, educating Afro-Latinas is crucial, but it is not enough. Governments, Afro-descendant NGOs and the UN System itself should work together not only to make effective the recommendations that have been produced by this Forum but also to defend ethnic and women's rights throughout Latin America.