

Conexión Queer: Revista Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Teologías Queer

Volume 6 *El Escandalo de las Teologías Queer/ Cuir*

Article 3

12-10-2023

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Recommended Citation

Mena-López, Maricel and Ramírez Aristizábal, Fidel Mauricio (2023) "The Discursive Fallacies Surrounding «Gender Ideology»," *Conexión Queer: Revista Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Teologías Queer*. Vol. 6 , 105-126.

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/conexionqueer/vol6/iss1/3>

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The Discursive Fallacies Surrounding «Gender Ideology»

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Resumen



Los discursos en torno a la «ideología de género» en América Latina presentan matices regionales, infiltrándose en diversos estratos sociales. En Colombia, la desinformación contamina la narrativa, exacerbada por la ausencia de un contramovimiento robusto que desenrede el intrincado discurso. Este artículo sigue la evolución del concepto y examina su impacto en el fundamentalismo religioso colombiano y latinoamericano en general. Al exponer las falacias discursivas prevalentes, el objetivo es contribuir académicamente al debate sobre una potente estrategia que —en los últimos años— ha buscado obstaculizar el progreso y erosionar los derechos de las mujeres y de la comunidad LGBTIQ+. El análisis ilumina un importante desafío que impide el avance de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Género, Fundamentalismos religiosos, Falacias discursivas, Movilización social, «Ideología de género».

Resumo

Os discursos em torno da «Ideologia de Gênero» na América Latina apresentam nuances regionais, infiltrando-se em vários estratos sociais. Na Colômbia, a desinformação mancha a narrativa, exacerbada pela ausência de um contramovimento robusto para desvendar o intrincado discurso. Este artigo traça a evolução do conceito, examinando seu impacto no fundamentalismo religioso colombiano e latino-americano em geral. Ao expor as falácias discursivas predominantes, o objetivo é contribuir academicamente para o debate sobre uma estratégia potente que —nos últimos anos— tem como objetivo impedir o progresso e corroer os direitos das mulheres e da comunidade LGBTIQ+. A análise esclarece um desafio significativo que impede o avanço da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo e género, Fundamentalismos religiosos, Falácias discursivas, Mobilização social, «Ideologia de género».

Abstract

Discourses surrounding «Gender Ideology» in Latin America display regional nuances, infiltrating various social strata. In Colombia, misinformation taints the narrative, exacerbated by the absence of a robust counter-movement to untangle the intricate discourse. This article traces the concept's evolution, examining its impact on Colombian and broader Latin American religious fundamentalism. By exposing prevalent discursive fallacies, the objective is to contribute academically to the debate on a potent strategy that—in recent years—has aimed to hinder progress and erode the rights of women and the LGBTIQ+ community. The analysis illuminates a significant challenge impeding societal advancement.

Keywords: Feminism and gender, Religious fundamentalisms, Discursive fallacies, Social mobilization, Gender ideology.

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Introduction¹

Since July 2016, alarms have been triggered in Colombia among the most conservative sectors of national politics and religion regarding the so-called «gender» ideology. According to them, it has been promoted by a *gay lobby*² to exert influence in the process of revision of coexistence manuals of elementary and middle school educational institutions in the national territory.³ Concurrently, it has been inserted in the agreements reached in Havana between the federal government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to put an end to the armed conflict. It is noteworthy that the armed conflict has lasted for more than five decades in the national territory, leaving more than 5 million people displaced and 220 thousand deaths (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

In response to perceived threats from the so-called «gender ideology,» a coalition emerged, bringing together diverse organizations, religious leaders, and individuals with political influence. Their collective aim was to pressure the Ministry of National Education to halt the revision of coexistence manuals and renegotiate the peace agreement. The goal was to eliminate any manifestation of the gender approach previously championed

¹ Originally published as Mena-López and Ramírez Aristizábal (2018). Translated, adapted, and published in English with permission. Translated and adapted by Hugo Córdova Quero.

² The term was coined in the late 1990s to refer pejoratively to the participation of gays and lesbians in political decision-making spaces on civil rights for people with non-heterosexual or binary gender orientations and identities.

³ The revision of the Coexistence Manuals was ordered by the Constitutional Court of Colombia (2015) in Ruling T-478/15, 2015, in order to avoid acts of discrimination and violence against sexually diverse students that have unfortunate outcomes such as the suicide of young Sergio Urrego, which gave rise to this ruling.

by organizations dedicated to safeguarding the human rights of women and individuals within the LGBTIQ+ sectors.

In this context, religious fundamentalisms were exacerbated (Wirherup, 2009: 11),⁴ which, together with the extreme right-wing sectors in the country, reactivated the debate on the advances in sexual and reproductive rights of women and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and carried out a real crusade in favor of the hegemonic model of patriarchal and cis-heterosexual family.

In political debates, the Bible was used to sustain and support homophobic behaviors and to reject any relationship understood as «unnatural.» Thus, it generated what we could call a «holy war» against those people with expressions and practices considered as depravity due to a reductionist biblical hermeneutic. Such hermeneutics ignores essential works that have questioned the univocity with which some biblical passages used to condemn homosexual practices or prevent the emancipation of women have been understood (Lings, 2011: 28).

For this reason, among others, feminist theologians today feel challenged mainly by the use of the category gender in the current religious context. This is because of the rejection and political and religious polarization of the term in Roman Catholic and Evangelical sectors, which see gender as an ideology that endangers the constitution of the binary structure that has characterized humanity for centuries. In this way, the asymmetrical way in which relations between men and women are established, based on biological characteristics thought of as a fixed nature, is ignored (Scott, 1990: 23).

⁴ When we speak of fundamentalism, we immediately identify it as an ultra-conservative movement, but in reality there are various forms of fundamentalism, even in the so-called liberal sectors there is evidence of fundamentalism as rigid and inflexible as that of the conservatives.

For all these reasons, the question that arises from the current Colombian situation is how to build peace if the Christian churches, as the primary guarantors of peace, are promoting a real discursive war. This is from what happened in the recent demonstrations against the visit of Judith Butler⁵ to Brazil in 2017 concerning her contribution around a de-configuration of the traditional concepts of gender, which has become a banner for the LGBTIQ+ movements that assume the identities in transit as a political bet of social and religious inclusion, as warned by Gabriela Castellanos Llanos (2007) quoting Butler:

Judith Butler raises the possibility of abandoning the differentiation between the two concepts, or, at least, of inverting the primacy attributed to sex over gender: sex is not the natural, fundamental, and invariable biological basis on which each culture constructs its conceptions, its roles and styles of gender, but rather it is cultural gender that allows us to construct our ideas about sexuality, our ways of living our bodies, including genitality, and our ways of relating to each other physically and emotionally (p. 226).

In this article, we intend to question the use and abuse of the ecclesiastical discourse against the role of women and LGBTIQ+ groups in the current Colombian situation. Not without first situating this category of gender as an analytical tool within critical feminism, in the framework of the social struggles for women's civil rights, the Afro-discrimination movement, the workers' movement, in short, of these and other movements that problematize social asymmetries. These movements question the fundamental categories of Western science, theories, and methodologies (Ramírez and Mena-López, 2014). Thus, the

⁵ Judith Butler is an American philosopher whose contributions to feminism have generated controversy, especially in the theoretical formulation of Queer Theory. Her most controversial work in relation to sexual freedoms is *Gender Trouble* (1990).

gender category is a fundamental dimension in constructing social hierarchies. Therefore, it is important to unveil not only sex-gender asymmetries but also social asymmetries, which is why it is almost always studied, considering *race/ethnicity* and class variables (Aguilar, 2007).

This category within the feminist movement aims to deal with differences and place them in context. It is used to question the hierarchical relations between men and women. Gender designates the symbolic meanings associated with sex, which were treated as «natural» and which justified the subordination of women as natural.

Considering the above, we assume the term feminist as a line of thought widely recognized in the academic and ecclesial worlds, especially for its recognition in biblical studies. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) addressed the issue of the contextual reading of the Bible in its text *L'interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église* [the interpretation of the Bible in the Church]. In that document, the Commission recognizes the value and contribution of gender as a category of analysis within contemporary feminism insofar as it evidences the social asymmetries between males and females (Mena-López, 2015). That is important since the Bible has been manipulated and used in favor of fundamentalist and exclusionary readings.

Drawing inspiration from critical feminism, we view it as a reflection intended not exclusively for women but equally relevant to individuals of all genders who are invested in justice, truth, and social transformation. We acknowledge our limitations in addressing such a broad, rich, and complex topic. Those who use gender as an ideology base their judgments and postulates on decontextualized biblical readings. In this sense, it is worth reflecting on the danger of fundamentalist readings of the Bible today, but not before making some conceptual approaches to gender as an ideology.

What Is «Gender Ideology» Itself?

According to scholars such as Rogerio Diniz Junqueira (2017) and Enric Vilà i Lanao (2016), the term «gender ideology» is attributed to a Vatican invention. However, it gained considerable traction among conservative factions outside the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in the early years of the current century.

The concept has served as a platform for various forms of discrimination, including classism, racism, machismo, sexism, and xenophobia. It seemingly functions as a strategic tool reshaping the political agendas of Christian groups and other conservative sectors, aiming to counter societal progress in terms of rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights.

Origin of the Concept

In response to the debates for the approval of the documents of the International Conference on Population in Cairo in 1994 and the World Conference on Women in Beijing the following year, the Vatican convened dozens of «experts» to mount a counter-offensive to reaffirm Roman Catholic doctrine and the naturalization of sexual order.

In parallel, dissenting voices mainly emerging from the same conservative sectors of the Roman Catholic Church were rising worldwide, as is the case of Christina Hoff Sommers, an anti-feminist academic from Clark University, who 1994 published the book *Who Stole Feminism from Us?* (1994), who, with the help of a think tank from the U.S. right-wing, refuted «gender feminism,»

pointing out that this movement, instead of seeking equal rights for men and women, came to antagonize historical inequalities based on sex, speaking of patriarchy, male domination, and the sex-gender system.

Another critical representative against social progress is the U.S. journalist and writer Dale O’Leary, a member of Opus Dei, the Roman Catholic Medical Association of the United States, and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, which promoted reparative therapy of homosexual behavior. Among O’Leary’s works is the book *The Gender Agenda: Redefining Equality* (1997). That and other materials on the defense of morality and the traditional family are disseminated and replicated online by Roman Catholic media and are held as references.

In *The Gender Agenda*, O’Leary (1997) took on gender feminists, accusing them of being Marxists and promoters of an «ideology» that disrespects biological differences and calls for a «war of the sexes.» He also pointed out that the idea of the social construction of gender roles is aimed at «abolishing human nature» and preventing women from fulfilling their role as caregivers.

According to the author, the «gender agenda» aims to build a world with fewer people, more sexual pleasure, without differences between men and women, and full-time mothers. To achieve these objectives, it seeks to guarantee:

1. Free access to contraception and abortion,
2. Promoting homosexuality,
3. Offer sex education to children and young people to stimulate sexual experimentation,
4. The abolition of the rights of parents to educate their children,

5. Establishing parity between men and women in the workplace, promoting the insertion of women in the labor market, and

6. Discredit religions that oppose this project.

As can be seen, O’Leary’s arguments continue to be the foundation of anti-rights movements, which constantly take up the idea that the gender agenda is promoted by radical feminist, populist, sexual liberation, homosexual activists, environmentalists, neo-Marxists and postmodern deconstructionist movements, whose main objective is to dominate international organizations, universities, and the State. The UN —according to Monsignor Michel Schooyans (2001)— would already be under their domination, finding itself adrift under the interest of subversive minorities that promote an «anti-family» culture, «sexual colonialism,» and «the ideology of death.»

In 1997, Monsignor Schooyans published the book *L’Évangile face au désordre mondial* [The Gospel in the face of global disorder] (1997), with a preface written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and later Pope Benedict XVI. In that book —as in other texts— the Belgian prelate makes a strong criticism of abortion and the use of contraceptives; likewise, he dedicated ample space to denounce the «gender ideology.» This is possibly one of the first works —if not the first— in which the expression was used.

In April of the following year, the term «gender ideology» appeared for the first time in an ecclesial document of the Peruvian Episcopal Conference (1998). In the text entitled: *La ideología de género: Sus peligros y alcances* [Gender ideology: Its dangers and scope], Archbishop Oscar Alzamora Revoredo —of the *Ad Hoc* Commission for Women and Auxiliary Bishop of Lima — denounced that «gender ideology» promotes «the differences between men and women, apart from the obvious anatomical

differences, do not correspond to nature.» As the Bishop states at the beginning of the text, he based himself on the report «Gender: The Deconstruction of Women» by O’Leary (1995).

Shortly after that, the expression «gender ideology» appeared in the writing of the Roman Curia on the occasion of the publication of the document *Family, Marriage and “de facto unions”* of July 26, 2000. In that document, the Pontifical Council for the Family (2000) pointed out that: «In the process that could be described as the gradual cultural and human de-structuring of the institution of marriage, the spread of a certain ideology of “gender” should not be underestimated» (§ 8).

In 2003, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family, arguably the most comprehensive, incisive, and controversial document was published: *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2006). It included ambiguous and contested terms on family, life, and ethical issues. The document was coordinated by Colombian Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, a staunch opponent of liberation theology, the use of condoms, homosexual marriage, and stem cell research, among other topics. The *Lexicon* had two more editions, the second published in 2004 and the third in 2017, in which more than seventy authors prepared 103 apologetic articles around gender, sexuality, and bioethics.

The writing *¿Qué quiere decir género?* [what does gender mean?] by Jutta Burggraf (2001) —a German theologian and numerary of *Opus Dei*— became the ideological apparatus that today circulates and supports the movements against «gender ideology,» an apparatus that has as its matrix the work of Dale O’Leary.

Finally, in 2011, the priest Juan Antonio Montes of the *Acción Familia por un Chile Auténtico, Cristiano y Fuerte*, published a book against eco-feminist theology entitled *Desde la Teología de la*

Liberación a la Teología eco-feminista [From Liberation Theology to eco-feminist theology]. The author presents —according to his criteria— the main postulates of the «eco-feminist neo-revolution,» where the criticism of the intrinsic relationship between the domination of nature and women in a patriarchal society contributes to the generation of an androgynous society. In his words, «such aberrations can only occur in the heads of poor misguided people who, from so much reading and sophistry, reached these conclusions» (Montes, 2011: 12). Given this assertion —as Ivone Gebara (2017a) would say— still in the twenty-first century, «we go to the extreme of destroying each other, to maintain the nefarious hierarchies that enslave us to each other» (p. 10).

Current Emergence of the Debate

Although «gender ideology,» as noted, emerged in the ecclesiastical environment and from the ultra-right sectors of Roman Catholicism, it is also true that it was not until 2012 that the debate was ignited in the public sphere.

The initiative of the French movement *Manif Pour Tous* [demonstration for all] (MPT) to halt advances in the rights of LGBTIQ+ sectors is a milestone in the processes of social mobilization that have been seen in America and Europe, as David Paternotter (2016) points out in the book of memories of the *Habemus Gender* event, held at the Université de Bruxelles. Although the initiative was presented as a civil initiative and not a religious one, it is essential not to lose sight of the prominence of the conservative sectors of the Roman Catholic Church regarding that. Especially since one of the staunchest detractors in the 1990s of the policies that favored the advancement of LGBTIQ+ rights was the French bishop and psychoanalyst Tony Anatrella, and, significantly, the seemingly civil arguments of MPT coincided with those proposed by the French monsignor.

But how did the movements against «gender ideology» reach Latin America? The Spanish movements Hazte Oír and CitizenGo⁶ and organizations based in Latin America, as is the case of the Organización para el Bien Común [organization for the common good], or *Yunque* —as it is better known— entered Latin America with a radical stance against equal marriage, abortion, and secularism of the State. Extreme right-wing movements with political, social, and religious influence radicalized these positions.

The common elements of these organizations are their agendas, focused on halting social advances in the area of rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights, as well as the linkage of extreme right-wing individuals with large economic capitals. Although they had long attempted to impede progress in various areas, opposing women's access to contraceptives, abortion, stem cell experimentation, and sex education in schools, it was not until 2012 that they successfully identified an adversary capable of provoking public indignation: the alleged corruption of children to promote homosexuality. That strategy aimed to undermine the family structure and eliminate any prospect of the continued existence of the white human species. Notably, the mass sterilization of women from native peoples and Afro-descendant communities —dating back to the 1950s— had occurred without widespread public outcry.

However, in Latin America, it was necessary to wait until 2016 for this monster to make its entrance and terrorize families with the idea of a dreadful strategy to end the family and, with it, society. In Colombia, since 2013, the former Attorney General of

⁶ Hazte Oír and CitizenGo are two movements that promote anti-civil rights initiatives in Spain that have gradually made their presence felt in Latin America, with strategies such as the orange bus, which was present in the main Latin American capitals protesting against gender identity policies, whose slogan was «los niños tienen pene, las niñas tienen vulva, que no te engañen» [boys have penises, girls have vulvas, don't be fooled].

the Nation, Alejandro Ordoñez, has been advancing different strategies to stop equal marriage and block any process of progress in terms of sexual and reproductive rights.

For the first half of 2016, the Ministry of Education—together with the organization Colombia Diversa and the support of UNESCO—prepared a booklet to guide teachers and school administrators in the process of evaluation and updating of coexistence manuals to comply with the Ruling T-478/2015 (Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2015)—known as the Sergio Urrego ruling—⁷ due to the case that gave rise to it. Said Sarquis Saad (2016) stated that before the primers were circulated, images of the comics *In Bed with David & Jonathan*—whose author is the Belgian illustrator Tom Bouden (2006)—were shown through social networks, asserting that they were parts of the primer. Interestingly, the scandal reached such magnitudes that a young deputy from Santander gave political control to Minister Parody⁸ because of these primers.

Ángela Hernández—who at the time was a young woman from Santander affiliated with the U Party and practically unknown—started to assert that the Ministry of National Education was pursuing a policy of promoting homosexuality. Suddenly, the debate escalated, prompting parents' movements to mobilize and protest. Such a development, manipulated by certain factions led by Mr. Ordoñez through political maneuvering, became

⁷ Sergio Urrego was a young man who decided to take his own life due to the different forms of violence he had to face in the educational institution where he was in his last year of high school, because of his sexual orientation. Sergio Urrego's suicide had an important media coverage and follow-up by the authorities.

⁸ Ginna Parody is a lawyer and politician from Colombia, minister of education from 2014 to 2016, who had to resign from her position following the education sector scandal over the primers and, more specifically, after the victory of the no vote in the national plebiscite.

intertwined with the endorsement process of the Havana Peace Accords. It was exposed that, beyond the Ministry of Education, the influence of the Gay Lobby had infiltrated various government agencies. Furthermore, allegations surfaced that this ideology had permeated the agreement itself, exploiting the recognition of LGBTIQ+ sectors as victims of the armed conflict.

That is how Congresswoman Ángela Hernández and former Attorney General Alejandro Ordoñez ended up allied in the organization of nationwide marches to protest against the policies of the Ministry of Education and specifically against Minister Parody, whose known lesbian sexual orientation was used to attack her. The rallies —mostly scheduled for August 16, 2016— invited protests against «gender ideology,» the president, and the peace agreement. In short, it was possible to capitalize on the citizen indignation against the misinformation generated by some political sectors —especially Uribism—⁹ around the Havana Agreement, resulting in a massive mobilization of Colombians in different cities.

The protagonism of the Christian Churches was evident in the organization and diffusion of the marches. However, it was not merely a space for Christians but for all those who disagreed with the so-called «gender ideology» that was to be imposed in schools, as well as for those who supported the No to the endorsement of the peace agreements between the Government and the FARC.

Following the triumph of the «No» vote in the subsequent polls, Christian sectors gained influence as a formidable electoral bloc, establishing themselves as crucial players in renegotiating the Havana Agreements (High Commissioner for Peace, 2016). To the extent that —after the endorsement vote— the president held a

⁹ Uribismo is the name given in Colombia to the political support that citizens and some political sectors give to former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, founder of the U party.

private meeting with Christian leaders. They —citing their demands based on their newfound electoral strength— insisted on the resignation of Minister Parody, the acknowledgment of Christian churches as societal actors in the peace process, and the exclusion of «gender ideology» from the Agreements. The principal beneficiaries of the Havana Accords ratification process were the Christians, who henceforth garnered substantial media attention to the extent that some even dubbed them the potential new electoral prize for 2018.

Currently, the debate around «gender ideology» continues to focus on the agenda of homosexual sectors to impose a gay culture. However, along with this debate, others that are ideologically characteristic of conservative groups have begun to emerge: the prohibition of sex education in schools, the criminalization of abortion, and the limitation of access to anti-conceptive methods.

Nevertheless, these debates have occurred in Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, and more recently in Ecuador. The argument is raging, with the same characteristics of the processes carried out in Colombia.

It is essential to point out that Christian groups were able to unite the most diverse agendas of conservative sectors of churches and society in general, groups that see in gender ideology the convergence of their fears about sexual liberation and its political implications. Thus, it is also possible to identify in the discourse a kind of association of pro-choice groups with Marxist leftist ideological movements. It is not uncommon to hear of the «Castro Chavista» dictatorship promoted by LGBTIQ+ groups.

Discursive Fallacies under the Cloak of «Gender Ideology»

In the preceding recount, we illustrated how —despite the current focus on the so-called «gender ideology» aimed at impeding progress in the civil rights of individuals with diverse sexual orientations and non-hegemonic gender identities— the underlying agenda persists. It seeks to exert control over bodies, sexual pleasure, the right to make decisions, and various other issues. The struggles of Christian feminists are not struggles of comfort and emotional security (Gebara, 2017b). They disturb the existing religious order while inviting to think and generate new understandings of life. In the face of this reality, we note:

1. The reinforcement of a gender hierarchy that has power and that undervalues reason as being of a masculine order and that also dominates the sacred;
2. The use of twenty-first-century neologisms to interpret controversial texts on sexuality in the Bible;
3. A return to religious, political, and economic fundamentalisms and exclusivism (Cardoso Pereira, 2016) to maintain the *status quo* of ecclesial Christian morality transplanted to the family and the school, the two fundamental institutions of instruction;
4. It is a removal of the body and emotions because it is subversive and dangerous;
5. It is a return to monoculture and universalisms that hide our advances in terms of the experience of women based on their race, class, sex, generation, daily life, etc. Categories that have accompanied gender analysis;
6. There is a return to the patriarchal father, to the one who validates the limits and scope of feminism. It even seems

that we need this recognition to continue. In the encyclical *Amoris Letitia*, Pope Francis (2016) reflects on «woman» and «gender ideology.» In paragraph 54, he begins by affirming the rights of women and their importance in their participation in public spaces while describing the forms of feminism that seem to be adequate, while he confirms in paragraph 56 that «gender ideology» denies natural reciprocity, without explaining what he means by this;

7. The resurgence of new definitions of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman based on gender hierarchy and normative cis-heterosexuality;

8. There is no openness to theoretical discussions, such as the differences between theory and ideology, natural and unnatural, cultural constructions, rules, symbolic codes, and plural identities, neither in the encyclical nor in the church, given the challenges that the contemporary world demands.

In the face of all of the above, feminists feel like orphans, strangers, foreigners from the world that educated us. We feel indignation, pain, and humiliation. The great paradox is that while some are humiliated, others are exalted. It is unbearable when thinking about social rights and the common good.

Hence, an ethical imperative for a church aspiring to be inclusive and liberating today is to reconnect with the divine as revealed in the everyday experiences of the marginalized. In other words, to return to the principle of mercy incarnated and committed not only to human pain but also to the return of hope to its followers and to embrace diversity. That also means recovering the fullness of life, the transcendent, the spiritual, and the sacredness of sexed bodies.

In this sense, as long as men and women continue to be thought of as binary, and the place of one or the other is related to biological characteristics, inequality will continue to be

perpetuated. It will be impossible to think of a process of equality between men and women if the traditional views of what it means to be a man and a woman are maintained. That is why, from queer perspectives, identity is not something fixed and permanent but transitory. Beyond genital biological characteristics, the place in society is a personal construction that can even migrate.

Women can no longer be seen, appreciated, and respected in terms of motherhood and the role of the caregiver but must have the freedom to determine themselves with no constraint other than their own will. Similarly, men should not be measured by their vigor, strength, and capacity for protection but should have the freedom to determine themselves. In this sense, masculine and feminine identity is no longer a fixed category but allows transits. Transits that should not be synonymous with inequalities and subjugation, much less with a fashion that deviates from the behavior of others. It is a right to be and to exist. It is, above all, an evangelical commitment to respect, love, and the possibility of living in a harmonious and happy land, free of preconceptions.

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