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The links between the Buen Vivir and Decolonial Feminism: An approach drawn from experiences in Bolivia and Ecuador

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The links between the *Buen Vivir* and Decolonial Feminism:

an approach drawn from experiences in Bolivia and Ecuador

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SUMMARY

The different theoretical constructions around the conceptualizations of *Buen Vivir* and decolonial feminisms have been the subject of fervent debate at the beginning of the governmental periods of Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006 - 2019) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007 - 2017) when Constitutional Assemblies were installed to develop and approve the new Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions. The Assemblies framed unprecedented dialogues of women's and feminists' movements with other political and social actors who, like them, wanted to see changes in the deeply colonial histories of their countries. This article analyses the way the *Buen Vivir* was translated to specific discourses depending on whether it was presented as an indigenous, modern or postmodern proposal and how these translations addressed (or not) women's and feminists' demands ranging from a radical depatriarchalizing process to the more conventional acknowledgment of their rights in the legal systems. These questions present a fundamental challenge because there is neither one discourse of the *Buen Vivir* nor of feminism, but rather different meanings are attached to them. Rather than deepening into a genealogical or epistemological study of these theoretical and political proposals, this paper explores the contradictions within and between these in the framework of the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador. It concludes that, although *Buen Vivir* and decolonial feminist approaches can be complementary, the conceptualizations of *Buen Vivir* must not be a horizon that postpones women's aspirations indefinitely but a daily reality supported by explicit State policies and actions.

Introduction

The concept of *Buen Vivir* translated loosely as 'Good Life', has been discussed as an alternative to conventional development models since the beginning of the 1990s[1]. Emerging from within ancient local traditions in Latin America, *Buen Vivir* has become a regional aspirational undertaking, an exploration of "alternatives" to the existing forms of "development", both, as a new economic model, which incorporates community life principles, as well as an alternative paradigm to development, which challenges the unlimited growth predicated upon the exploitation of limited nature. *Buen Vivir* recognizes that one cannot live well if others do not live well, that diversity is intrinsic to life and that complementarity and loving relations are essential to everyday interactions. The paramount place accorded to the social essence and existence of an individual in the *Buen Vivir* makes relationships a central focus of transformative practices, whether it is the existential relationship with the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), relationships of production in the economy or human relationships based on solidarity and the fundamental balance between female and male principles in nature.

At present, the *Buen Vivir* is a well-known concept in academic, political and popular discussions, particularly in relation to sustainable development (SD) (Chassagne, 2019), along with similar views that criticise and propose a change of paradigms to the anthropocentric and economists' approach of SD. Among them are *Ubuntu*, a popularised concept from South-Africa, and Degrowth, originated in Europe. The three concepts fall into the post-developmental debate because of their central critique to Eurocentric universalism and their "turn to alternatives, to other models of politics, the economy and knowledge" (Ziai, 2015, 144). The three concepts have encountered scepticism, particularly regarding their practical applicability in the organization of current societies and the intricate prevalence of the market, individualism, and modern economist's premises globally. Despite criticisms to the *Buen Vivir* and *Ubuntu* as backward-looking and romantic, both have found their way into a series of public policies in their region of origin (Pereira da Silva, 2020; Ziai, 2015), while Degrowth has already made its way to the sphere of policy making in Europe since its appearance in the early 2000s (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

This paper focuses on the *Buen Vivir,* which became central to state policies in Bolivia and Ecuador through the constitutional reforms of 2009 and 2008, respectively. Their different conceptualizations can be traced to the 1980s and 1990s, when Latin American thinkers renewed their criticisms to development models based on anthropocentric worldviews and the exploitation of nature (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011; Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). Challenging the colonial aspects of conventional development and the recuperation of indigenous knowledges and world views, the *Buen Vivir* was a novelty that soon captured international attention, particularly among ecological, poststructuralist, socialist, and radical democratic voices (Escobar, 2011).

Despite the relevance of the *Buen Vivir* for public policies in Bolivia and Ecuador, there is a considerable gap between the claims of *Buen Vivir* and its potential to respond to women's specific demands. This paper rests on the affirmation that 'gender' and its implications within the different interpretations of the *Buen Vivir* has so far been insufficiently debated (Lugones, 2010; Paredes, 2013; Ballestrin, 2016)) and it seeks to shed light to the contentious debate of gender, decoloniality and the *Buen Vivir*, from a feminist perspective. Given the myriad of feminist currents, we focus on decolonial feminism because of its close alignment with the *Buen Vivir*. That is, the common vindication of community life, the recovery of indigenous values, and harmonious relations with all living beings and the Mother Earth. The aim of the paper, rather than deepening into a genealogical or epistemological debate of the *Buen*

[1] "Sumak Kawsay" is an expression taken from the Quechua language spoken by the peoples in the highlands traversing the Andes from Ecuador to Chile. The term loosely translates to "good living" in English or "Buen Vivir" o "Vivir Bien" in Spanish. In 2009, the Bolivian constitution also adopted the indigenous Aymara equivalent, *Suma Qamaña*, into its constitution. The term *Buen Vivir* is used in Ecuador and Peru, while Bolivians have adopted the translation *Vivir Bien* from the original words *Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua and *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara.

Vivir or decolonial feminism, is to analyse the enactment of the discourses that claim to bring them together.

The questions we aim to discuss in this paper are twofold: i. Are the shared postulates and decolonial proposals of feminists and protagonists of the *Buen Vivir* sufficient to fulfil a social utopia for both of them? This question presents a fundamental challenge because there is no one *Buen Vivir* and no one decolonial feminism, but rather different constructions around them (Cortez, 2011; Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). ii. Has the inclusion of the *Buen Vivir* in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitution responded to the concerns expressed by women during their elaboration?

Our work takes as an example the Constitutional Assemblies of Ecuador (2006 – 2007) and Bolivia (2007-2008) because they both were unique opportunities for societal changes, but also tensions between feminism(s) and the *Buen Vivir*. The two Assemblies were established with diverse representations, including members of political parties, indigenous organizations, labor unions, women's groups, academia, and other civil society organizations aiming for historical transitions towards new social, political and economic national models. The participants worked in thematic tables and in plenaries during 18 months in Bolivia and nine months in Ecuador. The constitutional texts that were produced in the Assemblies were later voted and approved in national referendums, with 61.4 percent of the votes in Bolivia (2009) and 63.93 percent in Ecuador (2008). Both new Constitutions became critical junctures in the history of Bolivia and Ecuador respectively, not only because of their participatory character but because of the unprecedented inclusion of concepts and notions outside of the conventional Western development paradigms.

We discuss the two questions posed above along the three main distinctions in the way the *Buen Vivir* is interpreted (Hidalgo-Capitan & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014; Palacio Diaz, 2018)): as ancestral/indigenist, modern/socialist and post-modern proposals. This reduces the fussiness of feminist and the *Buen Vivir* relations due to the philosophical nature of the *Buen Vivir* that has been subject to many interpretations in theory, policy and practice. By and large, this is an analytical paper supported by literature review, the authors own experiences working with women's movements, gender and development in Bolivia and Ecuador and their academic experience teaching (and learning) theories on post- and decolonial feminism at the University of Bonn.

After this introduction, Chapter 2 elaborates on the main debates within decolonial feminisms in Latin America and the distinctive features that the realities of mestizaje, ethnicity and class have in these debates. Chapter 3 briefly explains the re-emergence of the *Buen Vivir* concept in Bolivia and Ecuador, its central principle *Chachawarmi* (female and male complementarity) and its description as ancestral/indigenist, modern/socialist, and post-modern proposal. Chapter 4 discusses the three conceptualizations of the *Buen Vivir* under feminist eyes and in relation to the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador when local and national groups, including advocates of the *Buen Vivir* and various feminist groups, coincided to develop the new constitutions. Chapter 5 briefly discusses the extent to which women's movements concerns have been addressed in the Constitutional Assemblies. Chapter 6 closes with the conclusions.

2. Decolonial Feminism(s)

Emerging in the 1980s, decolonial feminism represents an important step in the evolution of feminist theory and practice in Latin America. It was during this decade when post-colonial and Third World feminism denounced that most women in the Global South lacked representation in conventional feminist thinking because this ignored the multiple discriminations suffered by women of indigenous origin and/or low economic status. It was not only that women in the Global South carried the burden of gender discrimination, but many of them lived this experience in relation to being indigenous and poor. These multiple discriminations, currently discussed as intersectional perspectives, evolved in dialogue with theories such as the Dependency Theory, the Liberations Philosophy, the World-System Theory and, most recently, around the influential work of the modernity/coloniality project. It was

within this project that Anibal Quijano (2000) explained 'race' as a category of social classification developed within the colonisation process, a classification that permeates all areas of social existence and perpetuates social, material and intersubjective relations of domination. Lugones (2008), expanded upon Quijano's proposal and previous feminists works to what she called "the modern-colonial system of gender" arguing that colonization altered the indigenous identities and understandings of gender relations. In that way, she explained, coloniality permeates all aspects of social existence not only because it erased the various conceptualizations of sex and gender in pre-colonial societies but also because it enforced a modern/colonial system of gender characterized by biological dimorphism (male/female), the patriarchal organization and the heterosexuality of social relations.

While decolonial feminists agree on the colonial character of our current understanding of gender, there is a myriad of analytical emphases. This derives from the fact that decolonial feminism emerged from different critical feminism(s); among them, the autonomous, black, communitarian, lesbian and Marxists/socialists currents, each of them with its own critical focus. It is the unfolding of feminist praxis and reflections during the last decades in the region that led to the consolidation of the feminist decolonial discourse with common features. One of them is that decolonial feminism establishes a clear distance with 'post-colonial' feminism privileged in other contexts. The former sees colonialism as a continuous process starting in 1492, perpetuating itself beyond the colonial occupation through modern forms of colonization, rather than having a changing turn through national independence declarations (Curiel, 2015; Ballestrin, 2016). For decolonial feminists, the colonisation of the Americas played a crucial role in the oppression of women and this oppression persists through a colonial legacy in which men are still assumed as superior to women. From different standpoints, they place their central argument on the continuity of the colonial system of oppression and the need to decolonize practices, epistemologies, and subjectivities. A common denunciation of decolonial feminists is the patriarchal scientific traditions that have historically not only codified women and nature as inferior but also justified their exploitation.

Decolonial feminists argue that feminism must go beyond fighting patriarchy because this is entangled with the colonial system and; therefore, the elimination of patriarchy must be ingrained in decolonial political and societal projects. This includes the tacit recognition that women are crossed by different intersectional axes of subordination such as ethnicity, generation, and class, among others, forming groups or social clusters that need to talk for themselves in their specific experiences. Their imprint is its autonomy in relation to the State and the political parties and its activism in practice, both aimed at keeping its critical nature vis-à-vis established ways of doing and thinking and to mark a clear distance with the "institutional" feminism entrenched in State and supra-state organizations (Paredes, 2013; Curiel, 2015).

Under this general umbrella, decolonial feminist debates are rich on contentious arguments with important implications for their political projects. Following, we briefly describe three of these debates.

Gender as de/mobilizing concept. The term 'gender' has been criticised as emerged in modernity, a universal, acultural or essential concept imposed on societies in the Global South. Lugones (2010), among others, argued for the eventual dismantling of the concept "gender". She proposes "… the modern, colonial, gender system as a lens through which to theorize further the oppressive logic of colonial modernity, its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic. I want to emphasize categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic as central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality" (p. 742). However, many feminists in Latin America see the anti-system and rebellious potential of gender in that it reveals oppression/subjection relations and, far from being a static notion, is fluid, performative and culturally located. That means that tasks performed are neither universally attributed nor thought as permanent or intrinsic characteristics. In practice, the significance of the concept of 'gender' in strengthening women's claims, including those of indigenous

women, is evident, even if in a reviewed conceptualization.[2] As Paredes (2013), from the Feminismo Comunitario in Bolivia explains:

> *"Gender as a concept and category, from our interpretation, has the possibilities to be used for the transformation of the material conditions of the oppression of women. By becoming **gender equity**, the denunciation of **gender** produced a great deal of theoretical confusion and a political demobilization of women. Gender is a concept coined politically by feminists who, in a political sense, constructed a relational category that denounces and reveals the subordination imposed by the patriarchal system to women... Gender being a relational category is always revealing the position of inferiority assigned by patriarchy to women. We want to make it clear that gender is not a descriptive category or attributive category, nor is it essentially deterministic. In other words, it is not that gender only describes what women do and what men do, or that it only attributes or naturalizes roles to men and women."* (own translation, p.61-62. Bolding added for emphasis).

Without a doubt there is still basic misunderstandings of the term 'gender', which would not stand a close analysis, but are common in political discussions. Lorente (2005), explains it in the following terms: "Discussions of gender theory in the Andean world are often based on an understanding of gender as an anti/men's theory that seeks to break a natural order in personal relationships, an order on which the community is based, an indispensable unit for maintaining the identity of indigenous peoples" (own translation, p.11).

Although under debate, women from the Global South use the term 'gender' to challenge the 'neutrality' of being humans under male models that avoided uncomfortable debates and concealed asymmetric relations. By now, decolonial and more traditional feminist, as well as indigenous leaders, still vindicate the revolutionary possibility of 'gender' to change oppressive relations (Paredes, 2013, Burman, 2011).

Patriarchy as pre-colonial system. Another central debate among decolonial feminists is whether the oppression of women is a product of the colonization of the Americas or whether it is the result of a historical junction between the patriarchal interests of pre-colonial societies and colonizers. This is not a minor debate because it frames the past either within an imagination of ancient equal social value of male and female humans or within a more critical view to pre- and post-colonial patriarchal practices. Feminist positions on this conundrum result in highly politicised discourses on the ancient and current patriarchal practices of indigenous communities in Latin America. One the one hand, some decolonial feminists such as Lugones (2010), propose to reread gender as a colonial imposition of power, initiated with the arrival of European invaders in the *Abya Yala.*[3] Representatives of this current of thought denounce the objectification and instrumentalization of women in the colonial projects and the introduction of asymmetric relationships among men and women in colonised territories, where there had been none. The oppression of women only as a product of the colonial occupation is, however, refuted by other academics and activists such as Ballestrin (2016) and Paredes (2013). Ballestrin states that universalist models to explain asymmetric gender relations, such as that of Lugones, do not show enough empirical evidence and criticises the "declension narrative" implicit in this argument. Chilla Bulbeck (1998), drawing on Shoemaker (1991), states that "Declension narratives of colonialism reverse the story, claiming that colonised women had status and power (which) they lost under the white patriarchal rule of colonists, both male and female" (p.19). Bulbeck claims that the idea of ancient matriarchies and matrilineage has been associated with a greater status of women in ancient societies, but not with equality. She is sceptical on whether some ancient societies where truly matriarchal as claimed and, drawing from several studies in Africa and Asia, affirms that "today

[2] For example, the Primera Cumbre de las Mujeres Indígenas de América en Oaxaca was titled: "Género desde la visión de las mujeres indígenas"

[3] Word in Kuna language that refers to the American continent and opposes foreign names given during colonial times.

women from colonised cultures are more likely to accept that women have been dominated, if in different ways, both before and after culture contact." (p.21).

Along the same line, Paredes (2013) criticises the pre-post divide in the patriarchal rule where precolonial societies are thought of as free of *machism* and oppressive practices against women. Moreover, to expect women to rely only upon the pre-colonial principle of complementary of the male-female duality (*Chachawarmi*), without drawing on the concept of gender as denunciation and disclosure tool leads to the concealment and naturalization of the subjugation of women. The issue at stake here is, therefore, not anymore whether women's oppression existed or not in pre-colonial times, but to which extent a mixed form of pre-colonial and colonial oppressions of women were and are constantly recreated. Furthermore, it is still to be closely studied how other forms of living female-male sexuality and relations have been lost or transformed and in which specific contexts (see for example Espinosa Damián, 2014; González Gómez, 2014).

Depatriarchalization and Decolonization. A third and last debate among decolonial feminists to be discussed here is the significance of 'patriarchy' either as the main system of oppression to be fought against or as a distraction from the real objective, which would be the dismantling of the colonialist system. On the one hand, some decolonial feminists argue that patriarchal societies in which all men hold the power, do not exist. Instead, they argue that as many women, men are also largely excluded from socio-economic and political power. Therefore, the universal dichotomy between women and men implicit in the term patriarchy, which depicts ones as victims and others as perpetrators, represents a misunderstanding. On the other hand, there is the argument that the term patriarchy is a political statement of subversive force that has not been replaced by any other that could better convey the system of oppression expressed in social, political, or economic mechanisms that universally evokes male dominance over women. Moreover, decolonization itself cannot occur without a process of depatriarchalization of all the social, economic, politic and cultural realms (Galindo, 2013; Curiel 2015).

We argue that the three debates presented above and the evolution of decolonial thinking as critical and alternative to the current economic and social system does not steam from theoretical or academic discussions as much as from day to day situated tensions and reflections. Since the 1990s, middle-class feminists in Bolivia and Ecuador, for example, problematize the care work support received from indigenous women, work that freed them from household chores and enabled them to work outside their homes. The subordinated and exploited position of the help, mainly female of indigenous origin, confronted positions beyond gender solidarity to those of class and ethnicity and evolved only slowly to the understanding of colonial relations entangled in women's oppression. Another entanglement of daily reflections among Bolivian and Ecuadorian feminists is the implication of mestizaje in women's dominance/subordination positions. Middle-class feminists of mestizo origin enjoy some privileges as non-indigenous and non-poor women while are denied others as non-white, non-male subjects. The 'whitening' of the mestizas that originates in the degree of education, place of residence or way of dressing, conceals a series of nuances of privileges, discriminations, and dilemmas in day-to-day encounters with men and women from different ethnic and social groups who assume positions of superiority or inferiority, questioning feminists to what extent are also unaware of the colonial subjectivity behind these assumptions. The discussion on the mestizaje, often and unreflectively equated with the "white and hegemonic", is still a pending issue for feminists in the region (Lugones, 2008; Garzón Martinez, 2018)) as a still pervasive and false indigenous-white dichotomy.

In the same line, there is no dichotomy between indigenous and 'white' feminisms. We argue here that the historical dialogue of Latin American feminisms with regional critical theories and with western feminisms as well as the experience of their local situated social tensions and contradictions could not result in a simple assimilation process of Western ideas among mestizo women (criticized as 'white' feminists). Rather than simply adopting western feminist concepts into local contexts, the development of the feminist debate has been fed by a mixture of western influences, local indigenous

world views, historical debates on class and colonial heritage, and the different shades of daily privileged/subordinated positions (Paredes, 2013; Vega, 2014; Curiel, 2015). Therefore, we could talk of a 'mestizo' form of feminism that often overlaps with female indigenous demands. The current debate of decolonial feminists, as lived in Bolivia and Ecuador by the women's and feminist movements is the continuity of a constant epistemological and active resistance to both male and Western domination. As such, it is a hybridization of postulates and conceptualizations, such as gender, patriarchy, equity, women's rights, multidimensional discrimination (intersectionality if you prefer), and the appreciation of its indigenous roots and wisdom. In this line, Hernandez-Castillo (2017, p.41) proposes the idea of an ecology of feminist knowledge that does not reject Western knowledge but it contextualises its origins and "their space of enunciation while destabilizing their hierarchical relationship with the emancipatory knowledge of indigenous women, Muslims, peasants."

We close this section by highlighting that, among the region's decolonial feminists, community feminism is closely aligned with the discourse of the *Buen Vivir*, particularly in the common vindication of community life, the recovery of indigenous values and harmony with the mother earth. They have distanced themselves from the 'traditional feminisms' —considered by them as centered on a white, middle-class subject— and have given space to female peasants and indigenous voices. As the *Buen Vivir* advocates do, decolonial feminists vindicate a pluricultural and multilingual reality. However, the postulates of the *Buen vivir* are also shared by other feminist currents in Latin America and, as many authors have shown, the *Buen Vivir* finds bridges with other feminist approaches that question current notions of economy and wealth (Leon, cited by Vega, 2014; Martinez Martinez, 2018). Examples are the valuation of 'caring for others' (economic feminism), life in harmony with nature (eco-feminism) and, moreover, the fight against hierarchical and oppressive relations among human beings that mobilize feminist movements as a whole.

3. Buen Vivir: An ancestral philosophy introduced into political arenas

The first actors who introduced the *Buen Vivir* concept in public debates in Bolivia and Ecuador were a "heterogeneous group of civil society leaders and intellectuals, where some of them came from indigenous movements" (Gudynas, 2014 p.27, own translation). Altmann (2016) affirms that the political concept of the *Buen Vivir* appeared at the forefront of the debates in Bolivia in the year 2000 as a result of a series of workshops organized by the German international development cooperation agency GTZ (now GIZ). The events aimed at the analysis of the cultural elements of poverty under the name "*Suma Qamaña" (Vivir Bien)*. Next, GTZ, together with the Bolivian Federation of Municipal Associations, produced a series of publications introducing the term *Suma Qamaña* and its translation in several other indigenous languages and in Spanish: "*Suma Qamaña, Ñande Reko, Suma Kawsay, la Vida Buena Municipal*" (Medina 2011, mentioned by Altmann, 2016). For the case of Ecuador, Altmann affirms, the public discussion around the *Buen Vivir* was imported from Bolivia in the same year by the Amazonian Kichwa and journalist Carlos Viteri Gualinga, who characterized the *Buen Vivir* as an alternative to the Western vision of development. However, it was only until the establishment of the Constitutional Assemblies of 2006 – 2008 in Bolivia and 2007 – 2008 in Ecuador, when the meanings and practical implications of the *Buen Vivir,* were more widely debated.

Since it first gained attention in the development debate, those promoting the *Buen Vivir* concept have attributed different meanings to it to the extent that it has been conceptualized as an "empty significant" (Palacios Diaz, 2018), an "omnibus concept" (Cubillo-Guevara, 2016) and a "nacked name" (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015) to be filled with meaning in the discourse. In practice, and as many authors have shown, some ways of life and expressions of the *sumak kawsay* survive among Quechua, Aymara and Amazonian populations (Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015; Cardoso-Ruiz et al., 2016)). A series of disagreements point to the questions on whether the *Buen Vivir* is still practiced among people in the Ecuadorian Amazon or in Andean communities, whether it has been included in the political arena by indigenous movements or by intellectuals, and, more importantly,

whether it is a response to a “civilizatory crisis”, or it is only a new concept instrumentalized by hegemonic discourses.

Despite these debates, the principles of the *Buen Vivir* are widely acknowledged among different narratives, namely to live in harmony with nature from which humans are only a part, to respect the natural cycles of Mother Earth (*Pachamama*), the cosmos and life and to live in balance with all forms of existence. The *Buen Vivir* points to the notions that one cannot live well if others do not live well, that diversity is intrinsic to life and that complementarity and loving relations are to be part of everyday interactions. These notions are associated to indigenous views, to a philosophy of life based on harmonious relationships where, rather than being at the centre, humans are part of nature itself. Currently, the *Buen Vivir* is generally accepted as a concept still under construction based on indigenous and alternative ideologies that include plural visions from social, political, economic and philosophical dimensions (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011; Hidalgo-Capitan & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014).

At this point, it is relevant to highlight that, in the Andean world, the *Buen Vivir* is closely linked to the notion of a flexible relation of opposition and complementarity of genders, without hierarchies and dichotomy (Tapia, 2016). The Aymara word *Chachawarmi*, captures the ideal of harmonious balance between the feminine and masculine in various indigenous traditions. The term represents an ideal of complementarity between *Chacha* and *Warmi*, the masculine and feminine principles, respectively (Harris, 1978; Burman, 2011; Blumritt, 2013).

The notion of *Chachawarmi* is, however, problematic in its interpretation. Although it carries a decolonial potential to critically view and change the strict division of roles and hierarchies between men and women, it has been also seen as an idealized reflection of reality. The idealization of the C*hachawarmi* has been supported particularly by those who consider patriarchy as a by-product of the colonisation of the Americas and claim its inexistence in pre-colonial societies. In this sense, its use has been hardly criticized from different feminists’ currents because indigenous notions of a non-hierarchic complementarity between men and women, as promoted by the indigenous movements and many intellectuals, are idealized and romanticized, with the risk of concealing current strict and hierarchical division of labour and even violence within indigenous households and communities (Burman, 2011; Maclean, 2014; Morell & Roura, 2014). The implications of the indigenous notion of male/female harmonious complementarity within the *Buen Vivir* is discussed later on this paper.

Since its appearance in the public debate, the emphasis and conceptualizations given in the political discourse to the *Buen Vivir* is linked to different currents of thought and forms of doing in the world, and not only in the Andean region (Cardoso-Ruiz et al., 2016). By now, several authors (Le Quang & Vercoutère, 2013; Hidalgo-Capitan & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014; Cardoso-Ruiz et al., 2016; Palacio Diaz, 2018) have identified three main perspectives from where the *Buen Vivir* is understood, namely the ancestral/indigenist, modern or socialist, and post-modern.

3.1. The Buen Vivir as an ancestral/indigenist proposal

In general terms, the indigenist perspective focuses on the spiritual elements of the Andean cosmovision, passed down from generation to generation, and it is strongly linked to indigenous traditions and representations of nature. The Buen Vivir in *Abya Yala* finds its roots not in concepts or philosophies, but in ancestral and archaic ways of life. To understand the notion of archaic in this case we refer to Morocho Ajila (2017) who, based on Mosterín's work, characterizes it by 1. the no separation between object-subject, 2. the subject's emotional subjection to phenomena as part of a "you" personal, 3. the belief in supra entities behind phenomena or impersonating them, 4. the elaboration of myths as opposed to a rational explanation of phenomena, 5. offerings and cults to the gods in order to obtain their favours and, 6. the resolution of future uncertainty through divination and not science.

All these characteristics place the *Buen Vivir* as a different ontology than ours, because in its origin was populated by forces and entities currently not recognized in daily life by most people, such as the

serpent that represents the courses of rivers and stream or the spirits of the mountains still revered only in some indigenous communities. This means that the subjective "knowing" of ancient indigenous populations is difficult, if not impossible, to translate into discursive interpretations.

3.2. The *Buen Vivir* as a modern proposal

The second perspective comes from socialist currents that leave cultural and environmental dimensions of the *Buen Vivir* to a second place and emphasize the control of the state to promote a new socio-economic system towards the distribution of the wealth generated by the exploitation of natural resources among historically marginalized populations. It is sometimes called *"socialismo comunitario", "revolución ciudadana*" or neo-marxist thought. As a modernist and socialist proposal, the *Buen Vivir* has been framed within the Western and modern culture, and gender relations were no exception. Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara (2014) argue that, if one considers the rational proposal of social transformation sought by most intellectuals and politicians who reflected on the *sumak kawsay*, then this could be framed within the Western and modern culture. That is, within the positivism characterized by rational human thinking without the intervention of deities or spiritual entities.

3.3. The *Buen Vivir* as a post-modern proposal

The third view approaches the *Buen Vivir* as a post-modern or post-development alternative. It focuses on harmonic relations with others and with nature, a proposal beyond the current dominant development model, where there is space for indigenist, peasant, feminist, ecologists and, particularly, local communities, to build a multiplicity of societies, without ontological or epistemological hierarchies (Hidalgo-Capitan & Cubillo Guevara, 2014; Cardoso-Ruiz et al., 2016; Palacios Díaz, 2018). The *Buen Vivir* has also been conceptualized as a post-modern proposal mainly because of its promise of containing diverse sources of thought in a participatory process of construction and a non-hierarchical inclusion of popular and rational thought (Cortez, 2011, Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). Its critic of universalism and rejection to absolute truths and ideologies situate it as an alternative to current development paradigms and ways to understand human existence; therefore, as decolonial feminism itself, it is a way of resisting.

In the next chapter, we discuss these approaches under feminists' views, taking the examples of the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador.

4. The *Buen Vivir* in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions under feminists' eyes

The *Buen Vivir* opposing principles to modern development paradigms found resonance as an alternative paradigm to the overexploitation of natural resources and its devastating effects on local communities in the Andean region. By the middle of the 1990s', it was evident that the hegemonic development model based on constant economic growth did not fulfil its promises of providing basic services as well as to ensure social inclusion for the majority. That explains why the *Buen Vivir* flourished within deep political crises in both Bolivia and Ecuador. In Bolivia, between 1995 and 2005, the political parties in the country had lost all support from their electorates and the civil society organized their demands around economic, gender, environmental, social and ethnic movements (Buitrago, 2006). Evo Morales' own indigenous origin and his critics towards ethnic exclusion and a development model based on the exploitation of nature attracted a wide range of followers and allowed his political party, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), to win the national elections in 2005 with both moderate and radical votes from people looking not necessarily for an alternative model of development, but for an alternative political model.

Likewise, in Ecuador, the *Movimiento Alianza País* of Rafael Correa took power in 2007 within a crisis marked by an accumulated discontent against the political and socio-economic strategies of five presidents and their three successive governments between 1996 and 2005. Although democratically elected, these governments had fallen under accusations of corruption and of serving foreign capital to the detriment of the majority of the Ecuadorian population. Massive protests of diverse social movements and those called *Los forajidos* (the outlaws), preceded the election of Correa. As in the case of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* in Bolivia, the *Movimiento Alianza País* in Ecuador developed an ethnically inclusive discourse, focused on the need to pay a historical debt to the socially and economically marginalized (Paz & Cepeda, 2006). They framed themselves as anti-neoliberal and *anti-partidocracia*, meaning anti-democracy dominated by self-serving political parties (Hernández & Buendía, 2011).

For discussion purposes, we take up the distinction made on the *Buen Vivir* in Chapter 3 as discourses constructed from three main currents: ancestral/indigenist, modern/socialist and post-modern. The distinction among the three is not one of rigid borders; occasionally, one current takes meaning from the others, adapting, mixing and accommodating.

4.1 The ancestral/indigenist proposal

The centrality of the ethnic question during the Constitutional Assemblies in both Bolivia and Ecuador meant a difficult balance for indigenous women to develop autonomous voices, distinct from their own indigenous organisations as well as from feminists' views. For example, most indigenous women supported specific measures to increase women's rights (e.g., to land), but opposed mestizo feminists' proposals on the freedom over decisions that affect their own bodies (i.e., termination of pregnancy, access to sexual education) and the right to different sexual identities. The indigenous communities, and in particular women, in Bolivia and Ecuador approached *Buen Vivir* as a possibility for a necessary and long-overdue change in the pervasive colonial relations, and found space in their respective Constitutional Assemblies to contribute to draft their Constitutions. In the case of Ecuador, the final draft ended up with the same references and use of developmentalist language, which some participants of the process attributed to the interventions made by international advisors and consultants (Morocho Ajila, 2017). The Bolivian Constitution showed a closer alignment to the *Buen Vivir* discourse, but the intervention of political parties resulted in more than 100 articles approved by the Assembly changed by political representatives in Congress (Schilling-Vacaflor, 2011). Since then, despite the appropriation of the *Buen Vivir* discourse in public policy design, the exclusion and racialization of indigenous women persists. The fact that matters of importance to indigenous women were translated through a 'developmental' language has led to interventions that have neither improved their general conditions nor helped them to change local patriarchal practices, such as inheritance customs or discrimination in political representation. Moreover, violence and dispossession against indigenous peoples, with women enduring the most, continues as does their characterization as obstacles to national 'development'.

In Bolivia, Paredes (2013), a communitarian feminist, states that women have fought patriarchy long before colonial times and advocates for the demystification of the *Chachawarmi*: "even if we want to, force and try to hide, the *Chachawarmi* is not the starting point that we want" (p.81). Moreover, she explains, the C*hachawarmi* has been interpreted as a hierarchical complementarity between men and women and as an artificial interpretation of a heterosexual couple. Anarcho-feminists go further, affirming that there is no emancipatory potential whatsoever in the concept of *Chachawarmi*, but "(H)ere, colonialism loses all its explicatory value and surrenders entirely to patriarchy" (Burman, 2011, p. 89). During the Assembly discussions in Bolivia, the argument that the the *Chachawarmi* principle does not recognize a patriarchal system often hidden critics to patriarchy. As a result, and as Burman (2011) reports for the case of Bolivia, communitarian feminists and some non-indigenous middle-class advocates for gender equality exceptionally agreed on one point: that *Chachawarmi* as a social reality

is an ideological notion (in the sense of covering up social injustices), which serves the indigenous patriarchy and deceives indigenous women.

Female indigenous groups in both Bolivia and Ecuador found in the debate on the *Buen Vivir* the discursive space to reflect and build their proposals from principles assumed as their own and not imposed from outside. They did so even in opposition to their indigenous movements that saw a threat to their collective struggle in their particular claims as women. This has increasingly led indigenous women to raise their voices against discrimination and violence within their own communities without abandoning their collective voices for collective rights. In this way, "indigenous women have had to confront both the "silences" and ethnocentrisms of hegemonic feminisms, as well as the essentialisms and rejections of some sectors of the indigenous movements in their countries" (Hernández Castillo, 2017, p. 31).

Indigenous women have adopted and adapted much of the notions coming from mainstream feminism, such as gender equity and women's right, to raise their grievances. An example of this is the document prepared collectively, "Gender from the perspective of indigenous women", during the First Summit of Indigenous Women in America (December 2002). The document provides guidelines for tracing the roots of ancestral worldviews, as well as for revising the re-conceptualizations and resignifications of certain feminist terms that indigenous women are making. Furthermore, the debate expanded to issues not considered as traditionally addressed by indigenous women, such as the fight against forced commercial sex and the rights of sex workers (Paredes, 2013).

4.2 The modern proposal

In Bolivia and Ecuador, contributions to the Constitutional Assemblies from the civil society favoured the debate framed by the principles of the *Buen Vivir* and, thus, the possibility to translate them to specific legislations and development policies. In Ecuador, the National Agenda for Women and Gender Equality 2014-2017, promoted a conceptual discussion that intertwines the notion of gender equality, *Buen Vivir* and women's rights. Similarly, in Bolivia, the government passed the law of Depatriarchalization in 2012 (Law 243, 2012), and created a Department of Depatriarchalization taking up the women's rights approach with the aim to leading the fight against violence and discrimination against women.

The ambiguity of the texts included in both of the Constitutions (Franco & Balaudo, 2019, Barié, 2014) made possible the adoption of the *Buen Vivir* principles as well as proposals coming from the feminism and development language, such as gender equity and women's rights. In Ecuador, however, the proposals of indigenous people, ecologists and feminists were practically ignored in the final wording of the constitutional text (Carmel Rivera, 2014). Thus, in the final text, proposals such as an economy based on ecological balance and depatriarchalization were disregarded in favour of the postulates of social justice for the marginalized (Cubillo-Guevara, 2016). In other cases, the general terms of the text of the two new Constitutions gave place to contradictory interpretations. For example, the acknowledgment of jurisdictional functions and customary law of indigenous peoples, communities, and nationalities "with the guarantee of women's participation and decision-making", point to contradictory practices in Andean contexts where traditional male authority and representation prevails (Rosseau, 2011; Morell & Roura, 2014).

The wide use of mainstream terms such as 'equal rights' and 'gender' in the Constitutional Assemblies meant that the *Buen Vivir* and women's and feminists views were marginal in the discussions about women's positions (Rosseau, 2011). The resistance to discuss the roots of women's subordinated positions in-depth unavoidably reminds us of the assumption made by the Latin American political left that socialism was going to solve women's subordination. This time, it was argued that decolonising society as a whole was going to result on the abolition of the patriarchal system.

After the constitutions were passed, implementation concerning women's and feminist demands started with a different focus in both countries. In Ecuador, the government linked women's demands

with traditional notions of gender equality and women's rights, while Bolivia opened a new approach towards depatriarchalization and decolonization (Vega, 2014; Zaragocin, 2017). In the case of Ecuador, this is clearly shown in the National Development Plan dominated by the focus on gender equality as a transversal axis (Vega, 2014 and Zaragocin, 2014, cited by Varea & Zaragocin, 2017) and in the National Agenda for Women and Gender Equality 2014-2017, generating a conceptual discussion that intertwines the notion of gender equality, *Buen Vivir* and rights (Zaragocin, 2017).

In Bolivia, the government passed the law of Depatriarchalization (Law 243, 2012), and created a Unit of Depatriarchalization as well as a Plurinational Service of Women and Depatriarchalization (2019), taking up the women's rights approach and the fight against violence and discrimination against women. The law 243 was passed to fight "…the system based on subordination, devaluation and exclusion based on power relations that exclude and oppress women socially, economically, politically and culturally", but the governmental unit in charge ended up under the Vice-Ministry of Decolonization, which in turn depends on the Ministry of Culture. This low priority given to the unit responsible of Depatriarchalization in the governmental structure mirrors the low priority given by former governments in Bolivia to gender and women's services and, like them, was not provided with enough human or economic resources to make a real impact (Cárdenas et al., 2013).

A few years after Morales and Correa took power, the cracks in the model became evident in the restrictions in access to reproductive health services (Human Right Watch, cited by Cortez, 2011), lack of equitable access to education, low quality of social services and political participation (Vega, 2014, Varela & Zaragocin, 2017, Futuro Fundation and Faro Group, 2017), and through the pervasive violence exerted against women.

Several authors conclude that the *Buen Vivir* has been instrumentalized to maintain the modern paradigm of development based on economic indicators, and even to deepen it (Cortez, 2011; Morocho Ajila, 2017; Palacios Díaz, 2018). For example, in both countries, developmental organizations maintained conventional denominations, in Ecuador the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (SENPLADES) and in Bolivia the Ministry of Planning and Development. The *Buen Vivir* was "filled" with old postulates and development paradigms to feed a curious conceptualization of Socialism of the XXI Century, based on the exploitation of nature for the payment of a "historical debt" with the always marginalized. In doing so, the implementation of the *Buen Vivir* did not escape the framework of the conventional development paradigm. Moreover, the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador were not only far from operationalizing the debates around the *Buen Vivir* on fighting patriarchy and *machismo*, but also failed in their own terms by not substantially improving women's rights. This does not deny the positive and unprecedented effect of the political measures taken through progressive laws on the self-appreciation of indigenous people and women, nor the symbolic fact of having indigenous and afro-descendant women in the National Assemblies in both countries. Rather, it points out to the resistance to challenge the entrenched roots of women's oppression to achieve the *Buen Vivir.*

It is possible to affirm that the *Buen Vivir*, within the framework of rational modernity, has been made captive by governments to create a horizon of harmonious relationships whose formation is no longer in the hands of women or men, but of an abstract process of decolonization and depatriarchalization led by the State. In the absence of concrete tools for its implementation, since this is still a pending task, the state bureaucracy up-took the same concepts criticized from the anti-colonial discourse. These contradictions were bound to arise within a multifaceted process fueled by divergent forces, including indigenous women, feminists, conservative groups, and others. This was particularly evident in the persistent pursuit of 'modernity' as a political aspiration within social and leftist movements. (Gómez Correal, 2012).

4.3 The post-modern proposal

Many feminist authors see the *Buen Vivir* in coincidence with feminist proposals given their potential as a component of civilizing change to confront climate change, as a proposal for community life and as a challenge to the current capitalist model (Varea & Zaragocin, 2017). During the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador, feminists, women's organisations and most Assembly delegates had joint central motives and understandings; for example, the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of social realities and the need for a more environmental and human focus in public policies. Another coincidence between feminists and most delegates resulted in a historical step for women's movements: the reduction of religion's influence on day-to-day life, as Bolivia and Ecuador were declared secular states. The Assemblies were also spaces of questionings to the patriarchal character of both societies and to the colonial burdens still bore by the social, economic and judicial systems.

In spite of these convergences and the formal approval of the both new Constitutions through referendums on 2009 and 2008 in Bolivia and Ecuador, respectively, the put in practice of the *Buen Vivir* hit sharp contradictions with decolonial feminism's claims. The most notorious one is the discussion of sexual diversities and the possibility of the deconstruction of male dominance in society. The notion of sexuality as a mean of reproduction within marriages comprised by a man and a woman has not been challenged in the 2009 Bolivian Constitution, where neither heterosexuality as an obligatory sexual practice (Ochy Curiel, 2015), nor socialization of children within gender constructions (Paredes, 2013) have been touched upon.[4] In Ecuador, even when feminist and the GLBTI community achieved the inclusion of the rights of people independent of their sexual orientation and homosexual marriages, they denounced Correa for their homophobic comments (Emeequis, 2012; El Universo, 2015). Additionally, in a 2015 survey led by the Statistics Institute of Ecuador, more than 50 percent of the GLBTI population declared to be still excluded and discriminated against, with more than 45 percent of these aggressions committed by security forces. In Bolivia, government representatives, male and female, of the MAS political party, had accustomed Bolivians to *machista* and homophobic expressions regularly, so contributing dangerously to their normalization.

Very often, the use of the *Buen Vivir* concept has relativized women's protests against political and domestic violence using the argument of culture and tradition and, sometimes, arguing that the *machista* culture was going to disappear along with processes of decolonization. Meanwhile, indigenous women from different countries in Latin America questioned gender-based violence and State violence taking up the concepts of dignity and communal relations under the *Buen Vivir* (Hernández Castillo, 2017). The painful contradiction in Bolivia and Ecuador concerning the violence exerted towards indigenous people in the search for the developmentalist utopia has been largely documented and debated, but less so was done on the daily reality of violence against women. In 2019, Bolivia was the country with the most feminicides in the South American region and Ecuador occupied the third place, with 2 and 1,2 per 100.000 thousand inhabitants, respectively. In 2022, the rate of feminicides decreased in Bolivia to 1,5 and in Ecuador to 1,0 per 100.000 thousand inhabitants; however, the countries still occupy the second and fifth places, respectively (CEPAL, 2023). Bolivia and Ecuador have no civil wars or violent conflicts, but indigenous and mestizo males continue the work initiated by colonizers in dehumanizing women in symbolic and concrete ways.

Another central topic of debate and resistance in both Constitutional Assemblies was women's access to land. In Bolivia, rural-urban and ethnic divides were evident, mutual and sporadic accusations of discrimination receded and gave place to a strong gender-interest representation based on the "collaborative stance that mobilized indigenous women and feminist organizations adopted during the constituent assembly" (Rosseau, 2011, p.25). Both groups of women negotiated and succeeded in including the right of women to land "without discrimination" in the new constitution (Paz, 2009; Sánchez & Uriona, 2014). However, Sánchez and Uriona (2014) affirm that many other proposals made

[4] Bolivia's civil registry authorized for the first time a same sex civil union in December 2020, following a two-year legal battle.

in the Constitutional Assembly faced strong resistance from different fronts, some of them stemmed from a male-privilege bias, and others from actors who mistrusted middle-class women's agendas. The termination of pregnancy and the acknowledgment of the economic contribution of care work faced strong opposition. Sánchez and Uriona (2014) recall that the debate over depatriarchalizing Bolivian society did not prosper to a specific article under the argument that the dissembling of the colonial system would bring the elimination of the exclusion and subordination of women. Additionally, some delegates of the Constitutional Assembly, including those of indigenous and peasant origin, contended that the complementarity between female and male universal principles among indigenous people invalidated the feminists' denunciation of a patriarchal system in Bolivia.

The above debate points to the risks of a discourse made up of a collage of theoretical sources and labelled as 'indigenous' or 'postmodern', that in practice has demobilized many women and questioned critical concepts, such as 'gender', without replacing them with new specific analytical tools. In this line, the ambiguity of the term 'gender', particularly in Bolivia (Barie, 2014), has had a perverse effect of dismissing feminist critical claims as cultural differences. In her exploration of the implications of the different discourses on colonialism, decolonisation and women's subordination Burman (2011) warns about the "impressive capacity for semantic and political stretching of the 'decolonisation' concept" in the official discourse. The same can be said about the concept of depatriarchalization, which the MAS government (2006- till present, except 2020) continues coupling under the phrase "it cannot give decolonization without depatriarchalization". Nevertheless, Bolivia is the country with more progress in the region regarding women's access to land thanks to regulations that started in 1996, and were reinforced between 2005 and 2010. Indigenous women's participation was relevant to rule women's ownership of access, distribution and redistribution of land without discrimination based on marital status or marital union. During 2006-2010 women in Bolivia received 24.1 % of legal titles and men 37.2 %. For land titles given to couples the difference between women and men closed to 45,3% and 54,7% respectively (Deere, 2011).

In Ecuador, women's and feminist groups framed their proposals within the 'gender equity' approach, a notion entrenched in the SDG development agenda (Goal 5). The mix of narratives coming from both conventional development agendas and criticisms to the same could be interpreted from outside viewers as a contradiction. However, it was to a great extent, the result of decades of reflection on the decolonial and postmodern discourses in Ecuador aligned to the *Buen Vivir* principles by women working in development agencies. León, mentioned by Cortez (2011), for example, acknowledges that the debate on the *sumak kawsay* take up fundamental proposals from feminist economists, such as equal pay for equal work, and coincides with postulates of ecologist and women's movements on environmental sustainability. Rather than having a negative connotation, the encounter of different perspectives between conventional development agendas and more critical and transformative views was desirable and could have been even functional to the transition from colonialism to self-determination. But, instead, the drafting of the new Constitution in Ecuador became an arena of contestations and, in some cases, a confirmation of conventional development agendas led by conservative views, including from those advocating for the *Buen Vivir*.

Two examples show clashes between feminists and female indigenous groups in Ecuador: demands on sexual rights and the urban/rural divide. First, the Constitution negotiation processes met great resistance on sexual health and rights, such as demands on abortion and sexual education (Cayetano, 2008). This gave place for feminists' groups to join forces with indigenous groups and political actors advocating for a secular state to reduce the religious influence on public life (Palacios Jaramillo, 2008; The Carter Center, 2008).

The second example from Ecuador did not find a good end because of a division between rural and urban women, groups crossed by different historical paths in their dissimilar agendas (Palacios Jaramillo, 2008; Cucurí, 2009; Santillana, 2011,). Women of Kichwa indigenous origin advocated for a solidary economy, food sovereignty and a life free of violence, themes aligned with the proposal of the indigenous people along with discourses of plurinational state and an intercultural society (CONAIE-

ECUARUNARI, 2007). These claims reflected their conditions not only as women, but as indigenous and peasants, as well as their historical fight side-by-side with men; for example, for land reforms and territorial autonomy. Therefore, indigenous women aligned their claims to those of indigenous movements denouncing the colonial and post-colonial order, while urban groups framed their proposals on the more conventional concepts of gender equity and women's rights (Palacios Jaramillo, 2008; Fernández & Puente, 2012). This distance, sometimes expressed in rough debates in the Constitutional Assembly, hindered the possibility of supporting each other's demands. The liberal approach of feminists' groups advocating for individual rights clashed with the indigenous and peasant reality within communal life and, of equal importance, with the historical debacle of indigenous oppression by mestizo and white male and female. This could explain that the progress on women's access to land in Ecuador was only slow (Deere, 2011) and reflected on only dispersed regulations subordinated to other national priorities, such as food sovereignty and financial assistance (United Nations, 2022).

5. Discussion

The modern interpretation of the *Buen Vivir* and the attempt to operationalize it shows, more than in any other scenario, that feminist resistance in practice does not align with locked denominations such as "modern", "western" or "indigenous" but, in resisting the burden of gender-, race- and class-related oppression, women in the Global South have adopted and adapted diverse notions and practices. As Bulbeck (1998, p.20) already affirmed two decades ago: "Thus, rather than choosing between the 'either' of tradition and the 'or' of development, women in ex-colonised nations produce hybrid practices which combine elements of each". In doing so, a series of paradoxes within feminists' discourses are evident. For example, Lugones (2010) explains that the cognitive needs of capitalism, such as measurement, quantification, externalization (or objectification) of what is knowable, was imposed on the whole capitalist world as the only valid rationality and as emblematic of modernity. However, at least two generations of feminist have promoted, and still do so, the measurement and quantification of all aspects of discrimination as a central strategy to make them visible (such as levels of poverty, number of women murdered by their partners per year, percentage of women who work the land but do not own it, and every significant or minor detail that impact their everyday life). In fact, the commitment of countries to quantify social, economic and political conditions was one of the major breakthroughs of the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City. Beyond this, and despite the lack of information by issue and by region, comparative statistics are one of the most effective tools for monitoring the status of women and used widely by decolonial and other branches of feminists. During the 1980s and 1990s, particularly, women's movements lobbied to politicians and policy makers alike for national statistics to be segregated by sex, to bring light to specific exclusions and oppressions; every vulnerability had to be shown in numbers to prove it exists. Nowadays, these numbers continue to be the basis for the governments in both Bolivia and Ecuador to evaluate changes and, more importantly, for women to claim spaces and subordinated identities. These efforts are often tagged as characteristics of liberal feminist currents, proposed by white feminists of middle and high social classes working in development organisations. This is not to deny the well-funded critics to the bias existing when choosing what to measure and how. However, the modern interpretation of the *Buen Vivir* did not bring any change in making visible, for example, the incidence of domestic violence among rural communities, indigenous population's access to health services, or the incidence of climate change on indigenous communities. The old status quo on how and what to measure has not been challenged, in spite of its great importance.

The adaptations of the *Buen Vivir* to mostly traditional public mechanisms and structures take us back to the concept of "empty significant" discussed in Chapter 2. Ernesto Laclau (1996) mentioned by Palacios Díaz (2018), argues that a signifier without meaning is a condition of the hegemony and it acquires sense and identity in the political discourse. That is, it acquires significance and meaning within a hegemonic discourse, a variety of national interests organised around a group that acts as an

engine of the expansion of the ideology of the same group. In this line, the *Buen Vivir* as empty significant is filled with content depending on the discourse, the subject and the purpose of use (ibid).

The *Buen Vivir* was mostly a discursive strategy encompassing public policies that, particularly during the second government periods (2010-2014 in Bolivia and 2013-2017 in Ecuador), collided with the principles of environmental conservation and indigenous rights (Palacios Díaz, 2018; Solón, 2018). As a discursive political tool, the extractivist-based economies of both governments did not differ much from the developmental focus of previous governments, but it justified the need to exploit natural resources to reach the *Buen Vivir* for all. This reinterpretation of the *Buen Vivir*, in turn, justified an increased centralization of power as necessary to carry on the new foundation (*refundación*) of the States.

In the absence of concrete tools for its implementation, the ideal of equality and harmony between men and women was completely overtaken by contradictions between laws and practices and failed to take off. The inclusion of indigenous and non-indigenous women's claims in the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador, followed by the evaporation of their proposals in the text of the final Constitutions, was an announcement of what was to come. While, a few of the proposals coming from different groups contradicted each other, particularly those on reproductive rights, others such as the elimination of patriarchal and colonial practices raised hopes among the majority. By now and despite the appropriation of the *Buen Vivir* discourse in public policies, the persistence of exclusion and racialization of indigenous women persists (Varela & Zaragocin, 2017), showing the lack of self-critical debates and assessments at individual and collective levels. During the last decades, the essentialist discourses about indigenous women and the translation of their situation through a "developmental" language have justified mainstream interventions, such as the provision of credits and political quotas, that have neither delivered in improving their general conditions nor helped them to change local patriarchal practices, such as inheritance laws or care work-distribution. As we are witnessing violence and dispossession against indigenous peoples and their characterization as obstacles to extractivist development (Hernández Castillo, 2017; Morocho Ajila, 2017), the struggle for collective rights becomes relevant again, ironically, postponing indigenous women's demands to live well outside and within their communities. Moreover, and in spite of occasional dialogues, mestizo women of middle-classes and indigenous women still tend to navigate between common subordinations and resistances, disconnected in reciprocal mistrust for the 'other', seen as homogeneous and static.

6. Conclusions

This paper provides a critical view of the conceptualisation and enacting of the *Buen Vivir* in relation to women's and feminists demands and shows that neither the *Buen Vivir* nor (decolonial) feminism has one definition, but many constructions around them. The paper emphases on the examples of Bolivia and Ecuador, particularly on their Constituent Assemblies where the *Buen Vivir* was put forward for the first time as basis for public legislation. From the arguments presented in this article, it can be concluded that none of the theoretical constructions around the *Buen Vivir*, whether conceptualized as ancestral, modern or postmodern , has been made operational to remove the roots of patriarchy. On the contrary, in some cases they have been used to construct a discourse of what "should be", hiding daily and urgent issues for women, such as gendered violence or the need for sexual education.

While exploring the question on whether the *Buen Vivir* and decolonial feminisms could build a common decolonisation utopia alternative to the current development model, we have argued that neither *Buen Vivir* nor decolonial feminists offer monolithic or 'pure' standpoints, particularly when the theoretical proposals need to be translated into real public policies. The attempt to translate the *Buen Vivir* to public policies cannot be done without influences and elements coming from 'modern' thinking, in its unavoidable mix with other alternatives to hegemonic visions of development (Gudynas & Acosta, 2011; Hidalgo-Capitan & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). Likewise, the proposals coming from

feminists and women 's movements, cannot be framed as only responding either to decolonial or to westernized views on gender relations, but as a hybridization of local cultural views, including indigenous and colonial influences; evolving critical thoughts; and developmental concepts about women's right and gender debates.

This paper underlines the progressive and varied character of feminist perspectives, in opposition to the binary depiction of 'modern vs. decolonial', as if the latter would be unrooted from modernity. The construction of feminisms feeds from old and new reflections and is fluid to a point that is almost impossible to identify when critics to both, modernity and colonialism, became decolonial feminism. One can argue deep epistemological differences between the two, as they exist without doubt, and as this paper has shown, but it has also become clear that decolonial feminism in practice is lived by active women's movements that use a hybrid discourse between modernity and defiance to modernity.

The *Buen Vivir* and the decolonial feminisms question colonial paradigms of economic and political nature. But mestizo feminists have also done so even from their 'institutionalized' spaces. It could not be otherwise because they are immersed in a reality that permanently confronts them with a duality of class privileges and subordinations and, more importantly in this case, with a gradation of indigenousness and, therefore, of discriminations. Likewise, indigenous women's movements that identify themselves with the decolonial discourse, take up concepts criticized by some decolonial feminists, such as gender or gender equity and women's rights.

Decolonial feminism is the most relevant feminist approach to emphasize the utopian and political potential of *Buen Vivir* because of their shared common ground that goes beyond proposing a different way to see the world and act upon it. But this may not be enough to answer the original question of this text on whether it is possible for the *Buen Vivir* advocates and decolonial feminists to build a common utopia. On this, we coincide with Zaragocín (2017, p.23) when she expresses that "the construction of the *Buen Vivir* and decolonial feminisms are complementary and reach a mutual enrichment by their conceptual similarities, but require physical and material approaches". However, a maturation process within each of them is a requisite towards the realization of a common utopia. For example, by revising and avoiding dualist thinking and considering the reality of hybridization, adoption and adaption of conceptions to cope with women's daily struggles. Likewise, the attribution of women's subordination only to colonization as a universal true must be demystified because it has led, through to the misuse of the *Chachawarmi* principle, to conceal subordination of women and even physical violence against them in indigenous communities as well as in urban and sub-urban spaces.

The *Buen Vivir* understood as a powerful paradigm towards decolonisation must not be a horizon that postpones women's aspirations indefinitely. Instead, it could be a daily reality supported by explicit public policies and actions, and it is in building realities that feminist, indigenous and non-indigenous women must dialogue and strengthen each other. This means, in practice that the gender, class and ethnic tensions debated by indigenous and no-indigenous feminisms in Bolivia and Ecuador find a space in the *Buen Vivir* to find common ground and enrich their resistances, but it is far from encompassing the complexity and potential of contestation to the many forms of domination/subordination lived by women. Instead of an obliged marriage, we can see the convergence of *Buenos Vivires* and decolonial feminisms as a conversation around their common process of dismantling the colonial system and its translations.

From a decolonial feminist perspective, very often has the interpretation and implementation of policies of the *Buen Vivir* contradicted common ground and risked to reverse progress achieved in decades of feminist resistance. For example, in two of the most relevant axes debated in the Constitutional Assemblies in Bolivia and Ecuador: gender-based violence and access to land. Advances for women are reported only on individual and couple-based land titling in Bolivia, while Ecuador has showed only slow progress. More worrying of all, Bolivia and Ecuador are among the first five countries with the highest rate of femicides in South America in the last decade, mirroring a patriarchal system deeply rooted in indigenous and colonial norms and traditions alike. In both countries, patriarchy and coloniality have not been defeated despite the implementation of new constitutions based on

principles of solidarity and complementarity. Far from being a critique of these attempts at societal change, these reflections invite us to self-criticism and the need for the formation of strategic alliances between urban and non-urban, indigenous and mestizo women and those who promote the *Buen Vivir* as a real alternative. We share Morocho Ajila's concern when he asks: "If the *Sumak Kawsay* is a process under construction, it is necessary to have clarity of who is building it? And for what purpose?" (2017, p. 195. Own translation).

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