

THE HARSH REALITY OF SOME CARIBBEAN DIASPORAS IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC

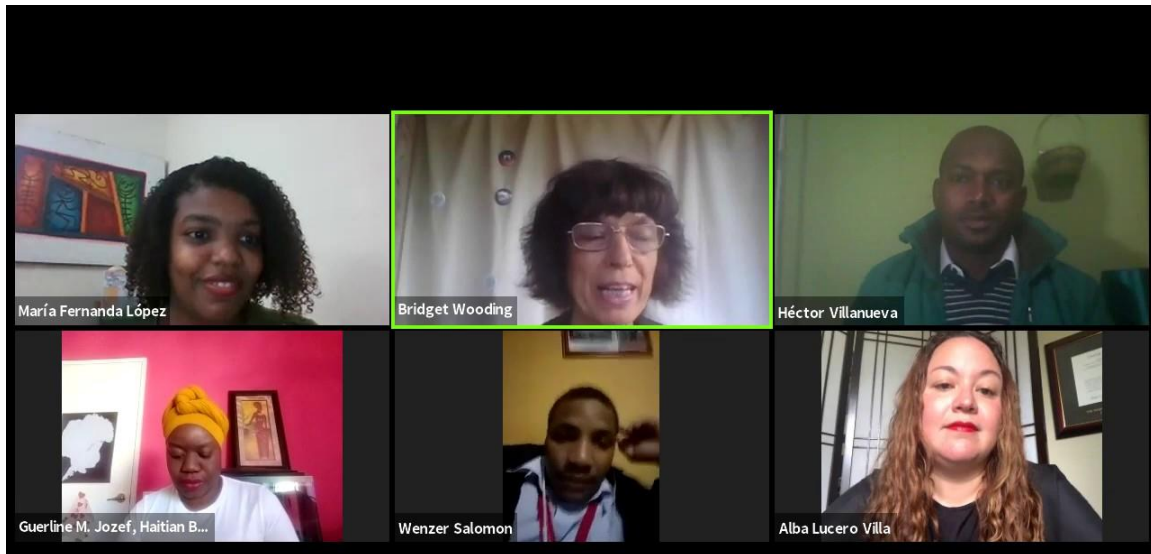


Photo caption: FES and the four panelists moderated by OBMICA, on June 18.

The cry of a baby heard softly in the background while the first speaker begins his presentation seems ironically appropriate to present and represent the harsh reality of the Dominican and Haitian diasporas in Chile and the United States (US) during the pandemic. The OBMICA and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) webinar, entitled "The New Challenges of Transnationalism: Haitian and Dominican Diasporas in the US and Chile in the Covid-19 Era" delved into this reality on June 18, 2020.

From Santiago de Chile

Wenzel Salomón, from the Platform of Haitian Organizations in Chile, stated: "Migration is a way of living, it's crying out for help in a different way." The need for help comes from the immigrants themselves who migrate for better opportunities and at the same time from family members in the country of origin who wait for the monetary assistance that members of the diaspora can send them. However, with the pandemic, the diaspora's help is inverted: Héctor Villanueva from the Dominican Society in Chile (SODOENCHI) points out that the situation is so difficult that the Dominican diaspora is now asking for help from their relatives in the Dominican Republic (DR). Those Dominicans and Haitians who have not regularized their immigration status in Chile are being hit the hardest. Some are on the street, others who manage to stay with friends often find themselves living in crowded conditions and others do not have anything to eat. All of them are in a situation of greater vulnerability under Covid-19. Furthermore, Mr. Villanueva adds that there are undocumented immigrants who have positively tested for Covid-19, but have been rejected by hospitals and clinics because the beds are reserved for Chileans.



Photo caption: Doctors in the US advocate the closure of detention centers due to Covid-19.

Other threats

However, this nationalistic discrimination did not develop on its own. The Chilean newspaper *La Segunda*, which illustrated the theme of the expansion of the coronavirus with a photograph of an Afro-descendant and her son on its cover, demonstrates this exceptionally well (*Cátedra de Racismos y Migraciones Contemporáneas* 04/08/20). Acting against racial nationalism in the midst of the pandemic has not been easy in Chile for immigrants from the Dominican and Haitian Diasporas. The complex links between nationalism and racism have long been investigated. Researchers affirm that: "In Chile, as in most migrant-receiving societies, racism is strongly conditioned by nationalist ideology and by mechanisms and representations of class hierarchy" (Pedemonte 2015). The Dominican and Haitian diaspora deplored how this conglomerate of race, nation and class has facilitated the exploitation and subordination of immigrant workers without documents.

Complications for those who want to return home or follow their migratory trajectory

The complexities of this situation do not stop for those who have decided to leave Chile due to the lack of opportunities and the failure to achieve their dreams in Chile. This concerns mainly Haitians who have arrived in recent years and Dominicans, whose diaspora is relatively recent in Chile. Most Dominicans in Chile entered irregularly, causing them problems due to the informality of their employment. Mr. Villanueva highlights the collective weight of the acute economic instability, the lack of academic and work opportunities, and the discrimination.

Many Dominicans have attempted to return to the DR, but have failed on the few flights available due to the lack of necessary resources and other problems. Meanwhile, the Chilean State (El Desconcierto 2020) was trying to reverse a Supreme Court ruling that prohibits the signing of a 9-year guarantee of non-return to Chile for people leaving the country under the humanitarian return regime. This is being done in conjunction with the renewal of pending deportation proceedings. As for the Haitian diaspora, while some are looking to leave Chile by returning to Haiti, others are trying to reach the US by crossing on foot, by motorcycle and by truck the countries that separate them from their final destination: the other "El Dorado."

From California and New York

Guerline Jozef, director of the Haitian Bridge Alliance, based in California, began the discussion of Diasporas in the US speaking of the countless challenges of the aforementioned trip between Chile and the US. In addition to the violence and considerable difficulties that Haitians may face during the trip, since January 2019, when they finally arrive at the US border, they must return to Mexico to await their asylum application hearing (thus termed Migrant Protection Protocols). These protocols are part of a broad spectrum of US laws designed to block migrants and asylum seekers from entering the US. However, even when migrants manage to enter the US, they can be deported, despite being in the midst of the pandemic. In fact, more than 400 flights of deportees from the US to countries such as Haiti and the DR are currently registered, notwithstanding that with the closure of borders around the world the trend has been to suspend or decrease deportations.

Reasons for deportations

These deportations are not only for convicts who have served prison terms in the US. Immigrants who violated immigration laws or even the curfew during the US quarantine can be detained and deported. Alba Lucero Villa, director of the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights (NMCIR), gives the example of the risk faced by Dominicans who were exercising their right to participate in protests against the murder of George Floyd by the police. She highlighted this because the structural racism endured by Afro-descendants in the US is no different from the structural racism that they endure in the context of the US immigration system. Mrs. Jozef remembers one of the most terrible instances in this history of migratory racism that occurred between 1991 and 1993 with another virus: the HIV-AIDS virus. Hundreds of Haitian refugees with HIV-AIDS were detained in a Cuban Detention Center (Guantanamo Bay) due to the false hypothesis that the virus originated in Haiti and that Haitians were more exposed than others.

The situation today in detention centers, which are not complying with coronavirus prevention measures and are not freeing those who are most vulnerable to the virus, is another striking example of the violations of international standards and the rights of immigrants. No wonder Mrs. Villa describes it as "a pandemic within a pandemic".

Yet, immigrants in detention centers are not the only ones facing the weaknesses of an immigration system undermined by structural racism. The Dominican and Haitian Diasporas in the US also face it in their daily lives. Ms. Villa highlights that: "the pandemic has exposed the systemic failures that exist in our community and the inequality that exists in communities of color, which due to decades [...] of neglect coming from different levels of the federal government has created the conditions for our communities to feel the rudest effects of crisis situations like these. "

It is not a coincidence that communities of color, which include Latinos, have the highest death rates from coronavirus in the US. This is due to the lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and a disrespect for their basic rights. Those immigrants who do not have a green card or US nationality have been unable to access aid programs in response to the states' pandemic (except in California thanks to the fund created by their governor). Even in the case of mixed immigration status families, access to social assistance programs is at stake in the US in the context of increasingly restrictive immigration policies under the Trump Administration.

Note: The webinar is available at the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acxJMjawSRY&feature=emb_logo