

4 | Back to women? Translations, re-significations, and myths of gender in policy and practice in Brazil

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Travelling theories have always experienced bumpy rides on their journeys, be they across territorial borders, disciplinary traditions or institutions (Clifford 1989; Thayer 2001). Although they have the power to transform the contexts into which they are imported, they are also prey to semantic slippages – if not thorough resignification – as they are translated into different institutional, disciplinary and cultural contexts (Barrett 1992; Hillis Miller 1996; Costa 2000). As Claudia de Lima Costa notes: ‘in their migration, these theories face epistemological, institutional, and political coercion, such that they end up passing through imperfect terrains, taking sudden detours, and running into occasional snares’ (Costa 2000: 45, my translation).

In the case of the detours taken by gender and development frameworks as ‘travelling theories’, the problem arises from the fact that neither the meanings of gender nor of development are fixed, but rather ‘defined differently by development institutions, gender and development experts, and multiply positioned women and men around the world’ (Radcliffe et al. 2004: 388). As a consequence, gender has become a ‘contentious’ concept and, in some cases, it ‘has been used to side-step a focus on “women” and the radical policy implications of overcoming their disprivilege’ (Razavi and Miller 1995: 41). As Lilian Celiberti observes:

The inclusion of the concept of gender in the international conferences and in the mandates of bilateral cooperation agencies is, first of all, the result of a multiple and rich experience of women’s movements and has signified an advance in the visibilization of power relations and subordination between men and women. However, the popularization of the term ‘gender’ is contributing to its vulgarization and simplification. (Celiberti 1996: 96, my translation)

In this chapter, I identify and reflect upon some of these redefinitions and the consequent detours and distortions that have marked the translation of gender theory to policy and planning in Brazil. I argue that the adoption of a gender approach in Brazil has faced considerable resistance

on the part of planners and practitioners. As such, the concept of gender has been subjected to much bending and stretching in order to fit the needs and interests of contending institutions and actors. This has often led to the smoothing out of its more radical undertones, turning women’s interests invisible once again. More importantly, the consequent re-signification of the concept of gender has resulted in interpretations in which ‘doing gender’ is no longer a part of what ‘doing feminism’ is all about (Sardenberg et al. 1999: 20; Costa and Sardenberg 1994; Alvarez 1998). No wonder feminist scholars and activists alike have called for a return to the category ‘women’ in feminist practice, albeit not without reconceptualizing it first (Nicholson 2000; Costa 2002; 1998; Piscitelli 2002).

It pays, I argue here, to reflect upon what they are proposing, and consider instances and domains in which redefining and reclaiming the category ‘women’ may be not only desirable and feasible, but also fundamental to granting greater visibility both to women as well as to the relevance of a gender perspective in development. In considering these issues in what follows, I will draw from my own experience as an academic feminist and activist in women’s movements, and as a practitioner involved in translating theory into policy and policy into practice. Here, then, I will be speaking not only as someone situated in distinct and, sometimes, even conflicting locations in the field of gender and development, but also facing all the epistemological and ethical problems that arise when we attempt to analyse a praxis in which we ourselves are involved (Durham 1986).

From ‘women’ to ‘gender’ in feminist theory

Despite their common origins and goals, feminist scholarship and political activism are distinct practices. They stand on different bases, advance in different rhythms and, as such, are not necessarily harmonious – far from it. There is a tense, ambivalent, relationship between them. This tension also exists in relation to the practice of feminisms in the intermediary space of so-called NGOs, as well as in relation to feminists in state agencies (or as consultants to them), where theories are usually translated into action (Alvarez 1998). These tensions have intensified with the construction of the concept of gender and its adoption as the theoretical object of feminist scholarship.

Rare is the book, paper, or even workshop manual on gender and development that does not include a chapter or section discussing the passage from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD), often taking a comparative approach that favours the GAD perspective. Such accounts tend to over-simplify the differences between the two approaches, as well as smooth out the process whereby one has come to substitute the

other.¹ They also tend to pass over debates among feminist theorists that have led to the adoption of ‘gender’ as its central analytical category. In opposing ‘women’ to ‘gender’, these accounts lead to the misconception that they are categories of the same order, that is to say, that one can substitute the other or that they are mutually exclusive. As I hope it will become clear throughout this chapter, they are not. But, for the moment, let us just observe that ‘gender’ refers to a more encompassing phenomenon – that of the social construction of the sexes – whereas ‘women’ is but a category of gender, a social construction in itself. It follows that there can be no ‘opposition, exclusion or substitution’ of one for the other because one (‘women’) is a class or category *within* the other (‘gender’) (Kofes 1993: 29). The question remains: When is it proper to use one instead of the other?

Like gender, ‘women’ is a slippery concept, marked by tensions and ambiguity in its meanings. On the one hand, the term refers to a construction – to women as representation – whereas, on the other, it refers to ‘real’ people and to a social category – to women as historical beings, subjects of social relations. There is a gap between the two meanings and slippages occur between one and the other; these slippages occur not only in uses of the concept, but also in our lives. As Teresa de Lauretis (1994: 217–18) points out, as ‘real’ beings, we, as women, are both inside and outside of ‘gender’, both within and outside of ‘women’ as representation. This entails an irreconcilable contradiction. It is precisely in this gap ‘between the constructions and our actual lives as sexed creatures’ (Cornell 1995: 86) that feminism is rooted; it is this complex, even contradictory, interplay between ‘fantasies of Woman and the material oppression of women’ (Cornell 1995: 76), in this ‘constant rifting’ between them, that feminist politics is grounded. Donna Haraway (1991) captures this in her observation that a feminist is someone who fights for women as a class and for the eradication of this class.

Not surprisingly, feminist politics has emerged and thrived as identity politics, founded on claims for and by women; there could be no feminism without ‘women’ (Alcoff 1994). Likewise, as a political practice rooted in the feminist movement, feminist scholarship was established by and for women, having as its major goal to transform women’s lives through the production and dissemination of knowledge. Though this exercise focused initially on finding the sources of women’s subordination in society, it was also a means of denouncing the exclusion of women both as subjects as well as objects of science, revealing that women have been not only underrepresented but also misrepresented in the construction of knowledge, over a wide range of disciplines. Here, then, rested the basis for the

development of a field of ‘women’s studies’ – with the anthropology of women, sociology of women, history of women, and so forth – an exercise which has revealed the diversity of women’s experiences throughout history (Sardenberg 2002b).

These initiatives, then, not only provided the much needed greater visibility to women, filling the existing gaps in knowledge, but, more importantly, they also revealed the perverse and pervasive workings of the androcentric bias in Western thought, paving the way for the emergence of feminist epistemologies (Sardenberg 2002b). Furthermore, the accumulated knowledge on the diversity of women’s experiences, coupled with the increasing sophistication in feminist theorizing, revealed shortcomings in feminist thinking as well, leading, in time, to a shift of focus and terrain in feminist scholarship (Piscitelli 2002).

Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips (1992) have argued that this shift denotes a considerable difference between feminist theorizing in the 1970s and that of the 1990s. They point out that despite the plurality of approaches that characterized feminism up until the late 1970s – i.e. liberal, socialist and radical – there were some important points held in common among them, even if they embraced significantly distinctive, if not actually irreconcilable, traditions of thought in social theory. There were acute differences in the political projects of these different feminisms; liberal feminists focused on removing discrimination through education and legislative reforms, while socialist and radical feminists focused on the need for deep structural changes. But they too disagreed profoundly: which structure was the determining one – production or reproduction; and who benefited the most from the exploitation of women – capitalists or men?

By the 1980s, the earlier consensus was broken. A significant contributory factor was the critique of non-white feminists of the racist and ethnocentric assumptions of mainstream (Western and white) feminisms. The distinct gender experiences, desires and needs that differences of class, race, age, sexual orientation as well as ethnic and national identities produced demanded new theorizing as well as a redefinition of feminism as a political project. This coincided with the formulation of a new problematic with gender as the object of feminist analysis (Scott 1988; Flax 1990). Barrett and Phillips highlight increasing ‘uneasiness’ about the distinctions between ‘sex’ (as a biological given) and ‘gender’ (as a cultural and psychological construct) and the theoretical problems involved in drawing sharp divides between biology and social constructions. For some, although sexual difference was to be seen as more intransigent, it was also regarded in a more positive manner – as witnessed in eco-feminist-inspired eulogies of difference, a countermove to the notion of gender. For others these

profound ‘destabilizations’ within feminist thinking itself (Benhabib et al. 1995) arose from the ‘appropriation and development by feminists of post-structuralist and post-modernist ideas’ (Barrett and Phillips 1992: 5) – a process which, we may add, depended fundamentally on feminist notions of gender.

The paradigmatic change in this shift of terrain from ‘women’ to ‘gender’ ‘emerged at a moment of great epistemological turmoil’ (Scott 1988: 41) when all these elements combined to bring gender to the centre of feminist theorizing. With gender, feminisms (as thought as well as practice) finally had an instrument for denaturalizing social inequalities based on sex differentiation. A gender perspective not only ‘stressed the relational character of normative definitions of femininity’ (Scott 1988: 29), but also provided the means for the deconstruction of women and men as essentialist categories, and for re-presenting them as gender categories as well as historical beings, immersed in historically determined social relations. Gender is but one component of these social relations; yet, it transverse all the different social planes and other social determinants – such as class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, for instance – which together contribute to the construction of social identity. A gender perspective makes it possible to reconcile singularity and commonality; gender makes sense of the substantiality of women and men cross-culturally and throughout history.

‘Gender’ is also a fundamental tool with which to analyse the impact of ideologies in the structuring of the social and intellectual world, far beyond the events and bodies of women and men. Gender is also a central constituting element of the self, of a person’s sense of being, as well as a classificatory principle for ordering the universe. It is a category of thought and thus of the construction of knowledge, which means that ‘traditional concepts of epistemology must be re-validated and redefined’, so as to make possible analyses of the ‘effects of gender on and about knowledge’ (Flax 1990). Here, then, rests the stepping stone for the construction of feminist epistemologies and for a feminist critique of modern science (Sardenberg 2002b). No wonder the formulation of a new problematic with gender as object of feminist analysis would in time displace the terms of the debates that carried feminisms through the 1970s.

All of this explains why ‘gender’ was embraced with great enthusiasm among feminist scholars; they saw (and most still see) in it a significant theoretical advancement, offering greater analytical and political possibilities. However, the wide appropriation of the term has not necessarily implied common understandings and uses of the concept behind it. On the contrary, in some instances, in fact, ‘gender’ has merely replaced ‘women’, discarded as something *passé*, or worse, as too closely identified with

feminism – that is, too much politically charged, and thus not ‘scientific’ enough. ‘Gender studies’ sounds much more aseptic, less contaminated (more ‘objective’?) than women’s studies or feminist studies, the change in terms making it easier for some to conquer space within the academic canon instead of challenging it. Indeed, the use of gender instead of women gave more status to the researcher, insofar as it was (and remains) identified with greater theoretical sophistication, and permitted an escape from the women’s studies ghetto (Costa and Sardenberg 1994; Heilborn 1992). More recently, however, particularly since its adoption by the international conferences and development cooperation agencies, gender has fallen into common use. The very fact that the term is now used by feminists of all different walks and talks – and by non-feminists and even anti-feminists alike – should caution us as to its slippery nature.

Translations and (mis)uses of gender in Brazil

It is worth recalling that, originally, the term *gender* was appropriated by English-speaking feminists in opposition to *sex* (and not necessarily to ‘women’), as a means of combating biological determinism. But this distinction was not necessarily a feminist creation. According to Nellie Oudshoorn (1994), in fact, the term *gender* had been around in psychology since the 1930s, when it was used to distinguish psychological from physiological characteristics. It was Robert Stoller (also a psychologist), in his book *Sex and Gender*, first published in 1968, who came out with the sex/gender distinction as a biological/social distinction. This same distinction was made by Anne Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), perhaps the first feminist publication to apply the concept against biological determinism, as per her definition: “‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (Oakley 1972: 16).

As Donna Haraway (1991) points out, whereas in English-speaking countries the term *gender* had for long been included in dictionaries, carrying a sexual difference connotation, this was not true of most other languages. Indeed, *gender* does not translate easily. In romance languages, for instance, the term has many different meanings, none with the same connotation as in English, thus opening the way to much confusion in its usage. As Marta Lamas (1996: 328, my translation) well observes: ‘To say in English “let’s study *gender*” has the implicit meaning that one will deal with a question related to the sexes; to say the same in Spanish remains unclear to the non initiated: what *gender* will one be studying, a literary

style, a musical genre, or a painting?’ (Lamas 1996: 328, my translation). No wonder French feminists did not incorporate the term *gender* (‘*genre*’) until recently, nor, for that matter, *gender relations* – preferring instead the expression *rapport social des sexes* (social relations of sex). True enough, this preference has relied, to a great extent, on the notion that *sex* itself should not remain in the biological realm since it is also an object of social elaboration (Ferrand 1988; Saffioti 1992). But the multiple meanings of *genre* have certainly contributed significantly to a reluctance on the part of French feminists to adopt it fully.

Though equally characterized by the ambiguities of multiple and diverse meanings in Portuguese, the term *gênero* (gender) has found greater and more immediate acceptance in Brazil. By the mid-1980s, it was already figuring in the parlance and works of Brazilian feminist scholars.² A good indication of this is to be found in the names of the women’s studies centres being created in the country at that time. Whereas up to 1985, they were usually named *núcleos de estudos da mulher* (nucleus of women’s studies), afterwards, the terms *gênero* or *relações de gênero* (gender relations) began to appear in the names of nearly all newly created centres (Costa and Sardenberg 1994).³ The presence of the term *gender* does not, of course, guarantee that the ‘original’ concept comes behind the label (Bahovec and Hemmings 2004).

As elsewhere, so too in Brazil the emergence of the field of ‘women’s studies’ was intrinsically linked to the emergence of local feminist and women’s movements. Indeed, many of the women who were activists, involved in the movement and integrated in feminist groups, were precisely the same women who formed women’s studies groups and dedicated themselves to carrying out research and theoretical reflections on women’s issues.⁴ These first academic efforts centred on women had a militant, activist tone. So-called ‘second wave’ feminism did not emerge in Brazil until the mid-1970s, delayed by the repressive military regime that came into power in 1964 (Sardenberg 2004; Sardenberg and Costa 1994).⁵ Despite the publication of pioneering works in the 1960s, ‘women’s studies’ in Brazil only came into being at around the same time that ‘gender studies’ were gaining momentum in the ‘North’.

One of the immediate consequences was the tendency to incorporate the term ‘gender’ (a novelty) in substitution for ‘women’, without the necessary theoretical/epistemological shift of one problematic to the other. Thus, analysing the works produced in the *Antropologia da Mulher no Brasil* (Anthropology of Women in Brazil) during the 1980s, Maria Luisa Heilborn noted that from studying ‘women in all places and from the most different angles’, everybody turned to ‘gender’:

From sex they have gone to gender, but the category is being used without the perception of being imbricated in a relational system that it should have, and without the perception that, if it maintains any link with any anatomical basis, its main utility is to point to and explore the social dimension which, in last instance, is what is important when we do anthropology. (Heilborn 1992: 94, my translation)

Suely Kofes (1993) argues that where ‘gender’ is an *analytical category*, ‘women’ is an *empirical* one. She further stresses, as noted earlier, that ‘women’ is a category of gender, thus the theoretical relevance of using both of these categories.

This seems to be a point of convergence in current feminist thinking in Brazil (Prá and Carvalho 2004). However, among Brazilian feminist scholars, whether gender should be regarded as an analytical or historical category is still debated; or as both, as professed by Heleieth Saffioti (1992). Indeed, to date, beyond a loose consensus that gender refers to the phenomenon of the social construction of sexual differences, there is little agreement among Brazilian scholars as to the proper uses of the concept.

According to Claudia de Lima Costa, it is possible to identify at least five different approaches to gender at use, as follows:

- gender as a *binary variable*, in which sexual difference is regarded as being determinant in the construction of Woman and Man, and, as such, they become static, a-historical categories;
- gender as *dichotomised roles*, an approach which emphasises sexual divisions and the imposition of feminine and masculine roles, but does not deal much with how these roles come into being, nor regard the issue of power relations among the sexes;
- gender as a *psychological variable*, which focuses on gender identity in terms of degrees of masculinity and femininity, but not as relational categories;
- gender as a *translation of cultural systems*, in which men and women are seen to live in separate worlds, emphasising differences which are created with the socialisation process; and
- gender as a *relational category*, breaking with the dualism of conceptualising gender in terms of a system of social relations, opting instead for dynamic and historically situated notions of masculinity and femininity and an emphasis on power relations. (Costa 1994)

In Brazil, it is the last approach which has gained greater purchase amongst feminist academics and activists: the gender approach that feminist practitioners had in mind when advocating for the shift from WID to GAD (Razavi and Miller 1995).

Gender in development policy and planning in Brazil

Although gender and development discourse has yet to find great receptivity or a wide audience in Brazil, a gender and development framework has been adopted in public policy and planning. New spaces ‘more sensitive to practices of citizenship’ (Valente 2003: 1) have opened up in recent years, including the creation of specific arenas for participation and control of women’s and gender equity programmes in the state apparatus (Prá and Carvalho 2004).

The dissemination of the uses of gender beyond the academy has not been primarily the work of academics.⁶ Rather, this task has been taken up by feminists active in the numerous NGOs which have proliferated in the region within the last decade (Alvarez 2004). In Brazil, the 1992 translation of Joan Scott’s (1988) article, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, by SOS Corpo – a feminist NGO based in Recife – played a pivotal role (Thayer 2001). Though this translation was intended mainly to make it possible for more members of the group to participate in the collective reading and discussion of the text, copies of the translation were soon circulating among different feminist circles around the country, including women’s studies centres.

Based on this translation, SOS Corpo prepared a booklet (*cartilha*) that was to be used in gender-sensitive training courses and among poor women in Pernambuco (Camurça and Gouveia 1995). Thus it was that a twice-translated version of Joan Scott’s article began to be read and discussed by poor rural women in the hinterlands of the Brazilian Northeast (Thayer 2001). Soon after, other feminist NGOs around the country also began to make use of the concept and prepare similar booklets, such that, by 1995, even before the Beijing conference took place and the gender perspective was endorsed by most participating countries, gender was already in the process of being incorporated widely into feminist discourse in Brazil. Of course, this does not mean that practice has followed discourse. That is to say, although the concept of gender has gained greater acceptance, it is always necessary to verify the meaning at play behind it (Simião 2002), and what approach to the concept does in fact get implemented. In practice, a range of simplifications arise, for pragmatic reasons as much as through the inevitable resignifications required to translate the language of the academic into the worlds of policy and practice.

Gender as ‘man and woman’: the ‘happy family’ I must confess that although I defend the so-called *relational approach*, in thinking of gender relations as power relations, and have consistently criticized the *sex has to do with biology, gender is about culture*, as well as the *gender as dichot-*

omized roles approaches in my Feminist Theories classes at the Federal University of Bahia and in writing (Sardenberg 2002a), I have at times relied on them during gender-sensitive training seminars geared to participants who are not familiar with the sophistications of theoretical abstractions, and particularly so in the countryside.

I am not alone in following this course of action; these approaches seem to be the ones most commonly adopted by NGOs in Brazil, as they are more easily understood by non-academic audiences (Simião 2002). However, they can just as easily lead to passing on the notion of male and female roles as being complementary and, as such, precisely to the ‘family model’ that gender-sensitizing should aim to deconstruct. Not surprisingly, the *complementary gender roles* approach is often the one found in operation in rural development projects. In point of fact, this is the approach employed by MST (the Landless People’s Movement), the major social movement in contemporary Brazil, even though much lip service is paid to the relational approach in their booklets.

The simplification of the concept of gender generally depicted in many gender-sensitizing training kits and manuals – i.e. the ‘sex is not equal to gender’, ‘gender is not equal to women’, ‘gender has to do with men and women’ drills – and often used in gender-sensitizing workshops, can lead to an equally conservative notion of gender. Such was the notion held by the chief agronomist in a rural development programme in Bahia, Brazil, where I worked as part of a gender advisory group. After attending a gender awareness workshop held by project co-sponsors IFAD, where such drills were in order, he began to oppose the creation of the women’s production groups we proposed, arguing that since gender had to do with ‘men and women’, we could not work with women alone. Unfortunately, he had no regard to the unequal power relations at play between the sexes, remaining oblivious to the *relational* character of gender throughout my participation in the said project (Sardenberg et al. 1999).

Gender as ‘women’ Interestingly enough, the head coordinator of that same project fell on the other extreme. For her, ‘doing gender’ meant working with women: more specifically, creating income-generating programmes for women. She also maintained this notion throughout the period I worked in the project – she could never find enough time to participate in the gender-sensitizing workshops we held – and was overheard while engaged in the following conversation with the Director of the agency implementing the project:

DIRECTOR: What is this stuff about gender? Are they talking about *gêneros alimentícios* [foodstuff]?

COORDINATOR: No, this gender thing is about women.

DIRECTOR: What?

COORDINATOR: Gender is like women.

DIRECTOR: Then it is the same thing as *gêneros alimentícios*, it is a food item.⁷

In another rural development project in Bahia, the director told us 'not to bother to talk about gender'; why complicate matters if it was all about women, anyway? No wonder he found it 'amazing' when we proposed to have workshops for the men of the participating communities as well.

It should be emphasized that the notion that 'gender has to do with women' (and women only) is not necessarily one held by rural project directors alone. Even within the academic world it is common to find researchers and scholars who propound such a view, or even worse: that gender is but a feminist catchword to make women's studies look more respectable, as one of my male colleagues once told me.

Of course, it cannot be forgotten that the construction of the gender problematic as an object of feminist scholarship is, in fact, a feminist creation. Nor can it be denied that gender was originally employed by some feminists precisely as an attempt at legitimizing women's studies by dissociating it from the political stance of feminism (Scott 1988). In the world of Latin American development planners and practitioners, this dissociation seems to be well established by now; indeed, 'doing gender' is now commonly opposed to what 'doing feminism' is all about (Sardenberg et al. 1999; Alvarez 2004).

Doing gender vs doing feminism The change from the WID to the GAD framework in development policy resulted from the recognition that development needed to deal with the structures of women's subordination in society and, as such, with the existing power relations between women and men. This represented a challenge not only to the dominant models of development and forms of intervention, but also to local cultural values regarding those relations. Not surprisingly, there is usually much resistance against the GAD approach, leading to attempts to redefine it, freeing it of its more political overtones.

In the different projects I have had the opportunity to work with in rural Bahia, I have observed that it is acceptable to work with 'gender', so long as one deals primarily with the *practical gender needs* of women and with raising their self-esteem; for example, with helping them realize the significance of their contribution to the family or talking about women's constitutional rights. This is all right, this is 'doing gender'. However, when one attempts to work on issues of *power* relations, such as those regarding

domestic violence, then it is seen as 'doing feminism', that is, as taking a 'radical' approach and 'threatening to destroy families', as we were accused of doing in one project. Indeed, we were dropped out of that project for being 'feminists' (Sardenberg et al. 1999; Sardenberg 2000).

Unfortunately, this is not specific to Brazil. Sonia Alvarez (2004) reports a similar attitude on the part of government officials in Colombia. As one of them told her: 'Now things have changed, it is no longer that radical feminism of the 1970's, now it's policies with a gender perspective' (2004: 132). Perhaps the greatest problem lies in the fact that such an attitude seems to be taking hold among practitioners who deem themselves to be 'gender experts' or 'technicians', as the woman director of an NGO in Chile explained to Alvarez (2004: 132): 'our work is as technical as possible ... and there is a great deal of work to be done in the operational side of gender'.

Gender hiding women In Brazil, whether in pursuit of this 'non-political technicality', or perhaps trying to be 'politically correct', more and more practitioners, NGOs, government agents and the like have been adopting the term 'gender', using it even when the correct term would be 'sex' (such as in population statistics) or, more commonly, in substitution for 'women', when, in fact, it is often precisely 'women' that they should be talking about.

Indeed, we find that affirmative action programmes that should be clearly addressed to women, the excluded or whichever marginalized segment the action aims to redress, are often referred to as 'affirmative action programme for gender', or 'public policy for gender', whatever that may mean, turning women invisible once again (Costa 1998; Costa and Sardenberg 1994). This is particularly so in the case of labour unions who have come to speak of the 'Gender Department', in lieu of their former Departamento Feminino ('Feminine Department'), or of social movements, such as MST (Landless People's Movement), which now has a 'Gender Sector'. We must then agree with Grau, Olea and Pérez, when they argue that 'when the State, unions, etc., absorb and resignify feminist discourses, we need to be more and more careful so as not to speak only within the hegemonic discourse about "gender"' (in Alvarez 1998: 279).

Back to women?

Let us remember that the feminist critique of WID challenged both the notion of 'development' and an essentialist and universal category of 'women' (Jackson and Pearson 1998). However, it is clear that in many instances, particularly in terms of advocating legislation, policies, and of

representational politics in general, we must ‘make claims in the name of women’ (Butler 1995: 49) – even if ‘the category “women” that is constructed via those claims is necessarily subject to continual deconstruction’ (Fraser 1995: 69). At the same time, we must be aware that no matter our various attempts at ‘refining’ the concept of gender, and independent of our constant struggle to politicize it, translations and retranslations of the term may always ‘water it down’ or incur some other form of ‘corruption’ of the meaning we strive to assert (Scott 2001).

It seems clear that, whatever we do, there will always be ‘tensions ... between a feminist critique of social structures and more utilitarian uses of a “gender” focus in development’ (Radcliffe et al. 2004: 02). As Lewis Carroll observed long ago in *Through the Looking Glass*:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s what the question is.’

Notes

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1 For an exception to this, see the excellent work of Razavi and Miller (1995) and Kabeer (1994).

2 See, for example, the works of Elizabeth Souza-Lobo (1991), many dating from the mid-1980s.

3 For example, created in 1983, our group, the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies (NEIM) of the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), did not have *gênero* in its name, whereas the Nucleus of Women and Gender Studies (NEMGE) of the University of São Paulo (USP), created in 1986, did.

4 For instance, many of the women in the steering group that created NEIM at UFBA (including myself) came from Brasil Mulher, an autonomous feminist reflection and action group in Bahia.

5 It should be noted as well that it was not until the 1970s that the participation of women in the Brazilian labour force began rapidly rising.

6 In fact, within the last decade, the gap between academic production and that of other feminists seems to have widened (Sardenberg 2002a).

7 This was actually a sexist comment on the part of the director: in Brazilian Portuguese, to refer to women as ‘food’ means that they are to be ‘eaten’, that is, used as sex objects.

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