

# “Third World” Girls: Gender, Childhood and Colonialism

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## Abstract

This paper discusses to what extent a view of “third world women” as traditional and oppressed still holds with regard to girls from “developing countries”. For that, we recall the criticisms put forward inside feminist studies and make use of the debates about how childhood has been perceived in gender studies, and then approach the issue of girls from the global South. Next, we try to apprehend how girls from the global South have been represented in the recent academic production in this field and, finally, we present some of the results from our fieldworks in Brazil to exemplify how this standardized outlook hinders the understanding of the complexity of the lives of girls situated within their contexts.

## Keywords

Gender, Girls, Global South

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## 1. Introduction

In 1984, Chandra Mohanty published an article that became a classic [1] criticizing the discursive construction by “Western” feminist studies of a “Third World woman”, perceived as homogeneously traditional and oppressed. This paper has its objective to discuss to what extent this colonialist view still held with regard to girls from “developing countries”. For that, we recall the criticisms put forward by Mohanty [1] and make use of the debates about how childhood has been perceived in feminist studies, and then approach the issue of girls from the global South. In this movement, we articulate the criticisms made of the thinking conditioned by colonialism, gender studies, and the sociology of childhood to defend the need for studies that consider the specific contexts in which power relations take place. Next, we try to apprehend how girls from the global South have been represented in the recent academic production in this

field and, finally, we present some of the results from our fieldworks in Brazil to exemplify how this standardized outlook hinders the understanding of the complexity of the lives of girls.

## 2. The “Woman from the Global South”

In order to discuss how the girls that live in the so-called “developing countries” have been represented in gender studies, we need to understand how the figure of the woman in these countries has been constructed in the feminist intellectual production of the metropolis. According to Chandra Mohanty [1], the colonization process implies a structural relationship of domination and a political or discursive suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) affected by it, in this case the women from the so-called “Third World”<sup>1</sup>. In the feminism developed in the metropolis, the “Third World woman” is often constructed as a monolithic and singular subject. This woman is constructed as an “other”, mutually exclusive with the “I”, in a process of demarcation of a position of power [2]. This “other” is opposed, and gives meaning to, the “Western” woman, taken as the reference, and thereby a series of opposite pairs is established in which the “Third World” woman represents the past, the tradition and the oppression. She is sexually inhibited, poor, unschooled, religious, oriented towards the family, and victimized. This contrasts implicitly or explicitly with the self-representation of the “Western woman” as educated, modern, in control of her body and sexuality, and free to make her decisions.

This approach is possible only because it is based on a universal notion of gender that would be identical in all contexts and cultures throughout history. In this view, women appear as a pre-constituted and coherent category that exists before the empirical research and outside any context whatsoever. It is worth noting that this same political and discursive movement occurs when intellectual women from the global South or global North discuss the working women, rural workers or ethnic minorities in their own countries, taking their own middle-class cultures as a reference.

Apart from that, this notion presupposes a concept of power as something that one possesses: “Third World” women have no power; it is in the hands of men. A polarity is established between women and men, regardless of inequalities of class, race, ethnicity or sexuality. If the questions posed by black and lesbian feminism managed to disrupt the homogeneity within gender studies in the metropolis by developing the debates about intersectionality, they failed to make the same progress when dealing with women from the global South [3]. Consequently, at the international level the hegemonic feminist thought still often takes middle-class women from the metropolis as its central reference.

Finally, within the present approach, women from the global South need to be

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<sup>1</sup>We believe that it is more adequate to employ the phrases “countries from the global North” and “countries from the global South”, understanding this division as political and not geographical; or, alternatively, “metropolis” and “periphery”. However, taking into account their presence in many studies, we also kept the expressions “developing countries” (as opposed to “developed countries”) and “Third World countries” (in contrast to “First World countries” or “Western countries”).

empowered through the contact with the feminism produced in the metropolis. Because they are perceived as passive, what is left to them is the supposed redemption that the Western feminisms would bring to their lives. Without noticing, this bias in the way of understanding the experiences of women from the global South ends up reinforcing the same absence of voice that one tries to fight and, in so doing, keeps relegating the studies about gender relations in the periphery regions of the world to a condition of sub-theorization [4].

It is a fact that within gender studies there is today a growing number of studies concerned with the context, and the specific forms of articulation of women from the global South. In popular culture and in the policies and campaigns from international agencies, however, the homogeneous view of the woman from the global South as oppressed and traditionalist is still very powerful, despite decades of maturation of feminist thought around the world. And this distorted view is even more deep-rooted when the attention falls on girls, as we shall see next.

### 3. The Girls

Built upon the lives of adult women, feminism has had difficulty to deal with childhood. This results in a weak articulation between gender studies and the sociology of childhood [5], despite the several parallels between these two areas, among which we point out the need to listen to voices hitherto ignored, and to break away from essentialist views. As a result of such feeble dialogue, one has on the one hand an adult-centric outlook upon children and, on the other hand, the understanding of gender as a list of differences between boys and girls without due reflection about how such differences are constructed and how they are perceived and signified by the children.

Transposing interpretive categories of the lives of adult women onto the analysis of gender relations in childhood may obscure the specificities of the lives of girls. For example, this approach is unable to go beyond binarisms such as the adult world of “labor” versus the childhood world of “playing” [6], a question that we emphasize in view of its relevance to understand the lives of children in the “global South”.

Within this binarism, the participation of children in the sphere of work by means other than the traditional image of exploitative child labor remains invisible. Without ignoring that domestic work can acquire exploitative and degrading features, it is important to put into context the different expressions of domestic work, and to understand how girls appropriate these activities to benefit other experiences they have in their daily lives, such as the schooling process and the fruition of time and space.

It is also worth mentioning that the abstraction of the heterogeneity of children in the name of a single category of childhood has parallels in the primacy of a single concept of “woman” [7], which has been historically reviewed and criticized by feminism, as we pointed out above. Going a step further, one has to reconsider the very concept of “child” adopted by childhood studies. To under-

stand age as the most important category in the lives of children in every context, is to overlook the experiences of children embedded in factors such as gender, race or class, which can be even more decisive. Also, one has to take into account that the categories of “age” or “generation” overlap with others, so as to produce particular experiences.

Traditionally, sociological literature, particularly which related to education, has dedicated itself to children almost exclusively through the point of view of their socialization [8]. The adoption of a linear concept of socialization in which children appear as mere receptacles of actions imposed by adults—and not as agents in a process [9]—also hinders the apprehension of the construction of gender identities in childhood as a continuous and contradictory process in which girls and boys take part actively. In the different socialization spaces, socializing under a gender since childhood means more than to just internalize norms. Even the impositions are always added to the pleasures, to the resistances, to the difficulties etc. [10] apart from being mixed with restrictions of various orders that eventually shape to a greater or lesser degree the possibility of expressing certain practices.

Hence the need to investigate how children engage with, construct or challenge dominant gender practices and discourses, as well as the crucial requirement of examining how gender matters, to a greater or lesser degree, to the lives of children in each context. This exercise implies going beyond binarisms, and exploring the complexity of gender relations, extending also to the children the reflections that feminism developed about adult women. This does not mean to say that gender cannot be expressed in the lives of children in a binary way. However, what is seen here as indispensable is to challenge the social and cultural mechanisms that intervene to keep such binarisms, and to throw light on the ways in which children experience such constructions.

#### **4. The Girls from “Developing Countries”**

The discursive movements with respect to women discussed by Mohanty in the 1980s can still be observed in many feminist texts about girls from the Global South, as well as in the agendas of international organisms and in campaign materials of NGOs [4] [11]: alterity of the girl from the metropolis with respect to the girl from the global periphery; the girl from the metropolis taken as reference and center of the thinking; homogenization of girls from the global South with a single figure of an oppressed girl with no rights to school or playing, exploited by child labor, controlled by traditionalist values; the need for political action of a markedly colonizing and paternalistic character that would free them from their oppression. Fennell and Arnot [4] show how, despite a sophisticated awareness of the intersectionality of social class, ethnic and gender identities in metropolitan social science, an essentialized conception of girl prevails when dealing with countries from the South. “As a result, the diversity of experiences of young women within such societies, the range of possible femininities, and indeed their contribution to the survival of their families and their own negotia-

tions and resistances are likely to go unrecognized” [4] (p. 529).

In summary, when dealing with girls, the distortions related to their being from the global South are added to those related to childhood, resulting in children being defined as passive, lacking autonomy, mere objects of socialization. Consequently, a cumulative model of the understanding of inequalities is reinforced, a model in which the “degree of oppression” of a subject derives directly from the number of oppressed categories in which he or she is found. Using a metaphor by [12] Nicholson these categories are added one by one like beads in a necklace, without consideration of the possible articulations and contradictions between them that may go beyond a mere sum of iniquities. By considering beforehand that a girl is necessarily more oppressed than a boy, one ignores that, apart from this child being affected by other power relations in the context in which she lives (social class, race, origin, religion *et cetera*), her distinctive properties do not produce effects capable of being theorized in an *a priori* reductive manner.

There is confusion here between obstacles experienced by the whole of children in an adult-centric world and difficulties that are experienced exclusively by girls. Similarly, questions of social class, origin and race/ethnicity are ignored in the characterization of the social loci occupied by children. If the lives of all children—in the metropolis and in the global periphery alike—can only be adequately understood by taking the whole of the social relations surrounding them, in unequal societies such as those located south of the equator the colonial occupation, the slavery regimes and the political interventions of North Atlantic countries cannot be neglected in their potential of creating internal mechanisms of stratification and social segregation [13].

In the various campaigns promoted by international agencies—which have gained new impetus in the last decades with the United Nation’s conferences—there is still a predominance of denial of the capacity of children from the global South to decide and act towards overcoming life conditions they see as bad, be it poverty or gender oppression [14]. In a study about three campaigns developed for the “Western” public to gather support and funding for the education of girls in periphery countries, MacDonald [11] suggests “that what Mohanty (1984) terms the ‘Third World Woman’—a homogeneous, static image of women in the third world—is the specter used to motivate Western support” (p. 1). Centered on the girls’ right to school access, these campaigns, on the one side, disregard that in many countries from the global South, as in the metropolis, girls have been doing better than boys in their school trajectories. On the other hand, these campaigns failed to deal with the complex gender relations inside and beyond the school, relations that can only be properly understood based on “locally situated gender analyses”, as pointed out by North [14] (p. 438).

The discursive movements of homogenization and construction of alterity with respect to girls from the global South are also widely disseminated in the popular cultures of countries from the North, as shown by some studies. Pomerantz, Raby and Stefanik [15], for example, in a study with Canadian girls, indi-

cate that girls considered sexism as overcome in their country, persisting only in distant, poor, Islamic countries, in the global South for short (p. 194 and 199). The authors showed how this discourse is part of a wider trend in the so-called post-feminism, “which implies that girls now live in a world beyond sexism and, as a result, are beyond the need for collective political action” [15] (p. 186). It becomes evident that the discursive construction of the oppressed girl from the global South—the counterpoint of the free youngster from the global North—has also implications for the girls in the metropolis as part of a discourse that depoliticizes, masks gender inequalities, and reduces both successes and difficulties to individual issues.

Have gender studies overcome those impasses through criticism? Without aiming at a comprehensive assessment, we have surveyed recent academic publications to offer some examples of how this theme has been dealt with, and of the space it has occupied in international feminist debate. Most of the studies dealing with the life and schooling of girls from the global South remain confined to a specific area, significantly labeled Gender and Development, an area strongly marked by the description of practices, the report of experiences and the proposition of recommendations for public policies, often to the detriment of theorization and construction of critical knowledge.

We find few articles that break away from the stereotyped view of girls from the global South produced by “Western” feminism. They are based on results from empirical research and present reflections based on specific social and cultural contexts. They put forward original questions and show processes of resistance, rupture and change in which girls themselves are the protagonists [16] [17] [18].

Next, we explore some of our results with qualitative research with low-income girls in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, utilizing them as examples of how a standardized view makes it difficult to understand how they face and transform their life situations.

## 5. The Girls We Studied

In the past, women’s access to formal education in Brazil was limited, if not inexistent. Although women have conquered the right to education in 1827, such access happened in a segregated manner, in which few women had the opportunity to study, the majority attended vocational modalities of schooling focused on the education of “good mothers” and “good wives”, and not properly on an education oriented towards the exercise of citizenship and to the labor market [19]. In parallel to that, life conditions of the population, the gender division of labor and the few opportunities of jobs in a still rural Brazil were factors that hindered the increase of schooling.

This picture began to change when, around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the massive construction of schools began to increase substantially the access of the popular classes to education. Whilst buildings were put up to face the growing educational demand, legal barriers were demolished that restricted the educational

trajectory of certain social groups [20]. In other words, by removing obstacles and leading the population to a more egalitarian situation in the field of education, an unexpected effect took place: the struggle for equality through a universalist policy eventually produced an unevenness.

That is to say that women were the main beneficiary of the democratization of access to education, to such extent that last century witnessed the so-called “reversion of the gender gap” in education. As an illustration, data from the 2010 Demographic Census showed that in the 15 to 29 years old population 3.6% of men were illiterate, against 1.9% of women. Because of more haphazard school trajectories for the boys, 42.4% of men between the ages of 15 and 17 attended regular secondary education, compared to 52.2% of women of the same age group [21]. As one would expect, these inequalities accumulated throughout the school trajectory of students, so that women accounted for roughly 59% of those concluding higher education in Brazil, according to data from the 2014 Higher Education Census [22].

Furthermore, this pattern of inequalities finds international parallels. If we take as a measure the years of schooling, OECD countries witnessed the reversion of the gender gap around the 1960s and 1970s [23]. As a whole, these inequalities have created a prevalence of women in the final years of basic schooling and higher education [24]. Brazil, as we saw, is no different. Thus, to discuss educational inequalities in the Brazilian context means to bring to the surface the disparities that affect negatively children and youngsters from the popular classes, a large part of them black and also with a tendency to concentrate on boys.

It is relatively simple to observe these inequalities; what is more challenging is to understand their causes. It is fundamental to look at the life experiences of girls within and without the school, seeking to understand how their contexts influence the relation they construct with the schooling process. Based on these considerations, the objective of the research that gave origin to these considerations was that of understanding how children from the popular classes perceive and resignify the attitude of their families towards gender differences and similarities with respect to rules and controls, uses of time and space, work and leisure activities, and also family incentives to study and perspectives for the children’s future at school and at work. The purpose was investigating the relations between those practices and expectations and the schooling of boys and girls from the perspective of the children.

Based on this analytical angle, we observed and interviewed girls and boys from low-income urban sectors in São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city [25] [26]. During the first phase of this study, for a period of 18 months between 2011 and 2012, we recorded semi-structured interviews with eight mothers, one grandmother, two fathers and 10 children, in six different households. In five of the visits, sons and daughters participated in the conversation at different moments. We went to the schools for information about the children’s performance, either in documents or in conversation with educators and, while we were there, we

also made observations and informal conversation with the pupils. Thus, 14 boys and 12 girls between the ages of six and 18 were involved in this first stage of the research.

In the second phase of the study, we followed for five months one class of the third year of fundamental education in a public school in São Paulo, which had 25 children—14 girls and 11 boys—, the majority of them between the ages of eight and nine. After three weeks of informal interaction, children were requested to make free drawings of their homes. Based on this product they were invited individually or in couples, according to their affinity, to a separate room in the school where we conducted recorded interviews. Out of this particular class, 20 children were interviewed (12 girls and eight boys)<sup>2</sup>.

In the daily lives of children studied in this research, the balance between work and leisure was key to understand how their routines were organized in terms of responsibilities, recreation and access to the streets. All of these children were involved in some degree with domestic chores, especially with activities such as making their own beds or tidying up their bedrooms, but differences between the sexes became more accentuated concerning practices related to the maintenance of the domestic unit as a whole, in which the end was the collective benefit. In this respect, we observed a sexual division of domestic work, in which the participation of girls was far more expressive than that of boys.

When girls had sisters of a similar age or older, it was common for them to share the housework among them, but the same cannot be said about brothers of similar age or older. In addition, when boys were the youngest children, the participation of girls in the family organization increased as they became partially responsible for looking after them. Among the boys, there were rare cases in which they demonstrated having no involvement in housework; however, during the interviews it became clear that there was no symmetry between their participation and that of their sisters and female colleagues. Exceptions, nevertheless, existed. One of them was Lourenço<sup>3</sup>, the youngest child of a family composed by mother, sister and two older brothers. Because of his feeling of boredom, motivated by the limited choices of entertainment and sociability at his disposal, Lourenço was unequivocal: “But there’s nothing to do, so I clean the house when it’s all dirty”. This case notwithstanding, the smaller participation of boys was clear among the children studied here.

In the case of mixed-gender siblings, some testimonies indicated that girls did notice how much they were overloaded when compared to their brothers, and some of them even denounced such disparities. As an example, Débora pointed out: “When she [her mother] was doing a course I had to clean the whole house by myself, and my brother was just playing videogames”.

The range of activities performed by children in their moments of leisure at home presented, once again, a strong differentiation by sex. Only girls declared

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<sup>2</sup>In all these stages, parents and teachers signed consenting forms. The objectives of the research were explained to children and their will to participate or not was respected.

<sup>3</sup>All names of research subjects used here are fictitious.

that they played with dolls, played house or make-believe about family themes. Other activities, recognizably masculine, comprised the boys' leisure routine and, therefore, were not so easily appropriated by girls, such as playing with videogames. In the testimony above, for example, Débora recognized her overload of domestic work when compared to the amount of time her brother played his games. Similarly, Vítor, Juliano and Karlos, to mention some examples, were not routinely in charge of any domestic work, and played their videogames freely and had unlimited access to the streets.

In a similar fashion, Bianca told us about part of her day in the company of Larissa in the following way: "We play with the computer, or we watch TV and sleep". To Gisele, the situation seemed similar: "Ahm...like...during the day...[thinking]...I just...like, sometimes I play with dolls, sometimes I sleep". Little opportunity of leisure, few excursions to the street, low level of sociability exercise and, for good measure, an overload of domestic chores comprised a list of characteristics found more often in the routine of girls. In contrast, leisure seemed to encompass a wider and more varied range of activities for the boys, alternating between activities conducted within the household and those practiced outdoors.

In the weekends, the situation was the same. For the boys, Saturdays and Sundays seemed to be extensions of their free afternoons, with leisure and circulation around the streets. Among girls, two distinct scenarios could be observed: on the one hand, the possibility of dedicating to leisure, with occasional and controlled visits to the street, and involvement in less recurrent activities, such as shopping or helping their mothers to prepare special meals. On the other hand, the weekends can also be an extension of their tedious routines, as exemplified in the two testimonies below:

I don't like weekends.[...]It's bad...it's too boring to stay at home. (Pâmella)

Yeah [agreeing with Pamela], being at home...doing nothing. (Thaís)

Within this scenario, the school—during break time, in the park, courtyard, in the sociability within and without the classroom—was the space that gave them their only regular opportunities of doing something that they enjoyed and that escaped from daily obligations. Although they lived in the same region, and in residences not far from one another, Thaís and Débora rarely saw each other outside school. Because they did not develop any extracurricular activity outside classes<sup>4</sup>, they spent the afternoons restricted to the domestic environment with rare and brief excursions to neighboring houses. This pattern, characterized by spending most of the day at home, can also be found in the routine of Débora, Gisele, Bruna and, among boys, only in Lourenço's.

Just like with the discrepancies in responsibilities for domestic chores, girls were also capable of perceiving the inequalities in access to the street between them and their brothers. They expressed their dissatisfaction, as in the example of Yara who says that her 15 years old brother was authorized to stay late in the

<sup>4</sup>In Brazil, children stay at school for about four hours a day, in either a morning shift or an afternoon shift.

street: “Because he is a boy and he is a nuisance inside the house”. What Yara described as being a “nuisance” at home was due to the fact that her brother was not willing to perform any domestic tasks, not even making his own bed. His noninvolvement in domestic chores implied a rather peculiar form of “punishment”: staying outdoors.

It can be clearly seen that the girls studied by us experienced various kinds of gender oppression. Within their families, the existence of a division of domestic labor that fell upon the shoulders of women and girls was made evident. The street environment and the surroundings of their homes and of school were understood as “dangerous”. However, such risks were mentioned almost exclusively by girls, who felt more strongly the effect of the restrictions and controls put in place by their fathers, mothers and other relatives. By virtue of this gendered perception of the dangers of the street, the opportunities of sociability and leisure for girls were reduced even further, a situation found in several Brazilian studies [27] [28] [29]. Not by accident, some girls, as shown above, stated that weekends were boring, because they were a time when they did not go to school and spent most of their time at home, with few alternatives of leisure.

Besides the pleasure of being at school, we observed that these restrictions led girls to value their school lives more than their brothers, because they saw in them an opportunity to overcome both poverty and sexism. They turned out to have more dreams for their futures and acted deliberately to take the opportunities that the school offered also for learning, future autonomy and social ascension. They were more dedicated to their studies than their brothers, enjoyed school more and reached more rapidly higher levels of certification. Although not homogeneous across the board, these attitudes are a trend for the majority of girls within this social context.

First, we can observe that the expectation for girls to take part in the daily chores and, moreover, that they be proactive in these tasks seemed to serve as an incentive to the development of attitudes such as organization, discipline and responsibility. These attributes converged towards many of the qualities that the school requires or expects from their students: keeping themselves tidy; being aware of their obligations and discharging them autonomously; adopting a mature and responsible attitude; attending school regularly and forgoing part of their leisure time to correspond to the expectations of adults about them. It is not just a matter of obedience and submission to rules, since various researches have shown how much educators expect also certain degree of autonomy and initiative on the part of pupils [30] [31].

It is a fact that, in the common sense of our country, the image, not infrequently stereotyped, of the “good female student” as a passive, quiet and obedient girl still persists. Understood as a synonym of a dedicated and hard-working student, this picturesque portray of female submission encapsulates girls into a femininity destitute of power, agency and protagonism [32]; an approach also present in French literature on the school success of girls [33] [34]. Under this approach, even gender inequalities that favor girls tended to be seen

under a victimizing lens, one that imposes upon these same girls negative attributes. Hence, success at school would be understood as a privilege earned not through their effort or dedication, but through their faults. Now, this explanation does not seem sufficient to encompass a historical, complex and still little known phenomenon such as the reversion of gender inequalities in education.

Far from denying that such aspects of femininities can be present in many female students in Brazil, it is necessary to pay attention to how much the loopholes in a situation of daily oppression and domination allow subjects endowed with certain autonomy to mobilize positively their efforts, competencies and dreams to achieve such satisfactory results at school, despite all forces to the opposite [35]. At least within the educational sphere, the sexism widely present in society finds some weakness. Challenged by a dull routine, the majority of girls we studied found in the dream of prolonged schooling a way out towards new future perspectives. Following this line, we observe that children and youngsters, by virtue of their sex, could face the labor market in very different ways. For almost all the boys, an immediate possibility of having an occupation and, additionally, of guiding their school trajectory by an expectation of low levels of schooling. For the majority of girls, the threat that a short schooling trajectory could feed back into their own subordination of class and gender, that is, that their lives as adults would be just an extension of their controlled, boring and unequal routines.

It does not seem exaggerated to conclude that the daily experience of girls under an unbalance between work and leisure is the main ingredient in the constitution of longer, more qualified and even more ambitious schooling perspectives. Or, recalling Charlot [35] (p. 169), that girls could mobilize themselves around a “life project, which is also a project for independence, freedom and emancipation”, despite the discrimination they may suffer at home or at school or, paradoxically, precisely because of it. The term “project”, however, does not seem to be the most adequate in this context, since the school and occupational aspirations for the majority of children are not organized in a consolidated and mature manner. They were no more than glimpses of an imagined future, shining more brightly for girls: their femininity is seemed to be projected in a representation of themselves in consonance with a prolonged schooling, possibly feeding back into the machinery of their own school success.

## 6. Conclusions

Along these lines, there is no unique model of femininity fully “incorporated” by the girls we studied, in such way that the girls from the popular sectors experienced spaces and institutions such as the school, the street and the family in different, not to say contrasting, ways. Despite living in a sociocultural context embedded in a rather sharp sexual dichotomy, with a tendency to polarize men and women in unequal spheres of power and privilege, part of the girls showed they are capable of appropriating these realities to potentialize their capacities and perspectives, even when these promises failed to come true at that point in

their lives.

Not by accident, many of them turned out to be critical of the situations experienced, and their dreams for the future—not only more elaborate but also more daring than those of boys—were proof that the degree of distancing from reality experienced in their daily lives was essential in allowing them to peer into new life horizons. Therefore, instead of trying to understand who are these “good girls” that become “good students” at school—or, even worse, to frame such notion under the anachronistic image of the quiet, passive and submissive girl—it is important to recognize the protagonism of girls in bringing together attributes such as responsibility, organization, discipline, initiative and autonomy in the search to construct their own alternatives of life, femininity and of schooling, even if, in so doing, they had to carry on their shoulders the contradictions of a society that stages both social reproduction and social transformation.

Therefore, the idea of a “Third World girl” oppressed and submissive does not help us to understand these flesh-and-bone girls we investigated, girls for whom subordination and autonomy were constructed and experienced at the same time that they tried to be protagonists of their own lives. Certainly, this proviso does not only go exclusively for this study of girls of the global South, but also for those that inhabit Metropolitan countries. It is equally crucial to attend to the contexts and specificities of metropolis, considering that the experiences of girls and women—just like those of boys and men—are permeated by categories that render complex their position in the social space.

In the present text, we tried to consolidate this argument based on the investigation of differences in the schooling of girls and boys of popular classes in a large urban center in Brazil. We hope through this exercise to have placed some tension on the additional representations around “Third World girls”, thereby contributing to have their experiences theorized in academic research in a manner that takes into account the contradictions of their reality, so as to overcome the homogenization imposed by a colonialist view.

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