

Rethinking What It Is to Be a Feminist

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Abstract

Nowadays, analyzing the world and all the media exposure on gender issues relating politics, religion, family, education and professional aspects, we observe that the presentation of the subject is always the gender inequality. Does the power domination direct stake in gender issues? Bourdieu already said in his work “Male domination”, that inequality is affirmed only in the domination of one over the other and in the creation of hierarchies. In our study, we apply a reflection according to critical theorists on a theme much sought, but not practiced in society.

Keywords

Inequality, Gender, Social Domination

1. Introduction

The “*Global Gender Gap Index*” (2017) reported at the 2018 World Economic Forum brought alarming data that should be raised into reflection by all. Despite all the attempts and advances made we continue to have a wide gender disparity in various areas and around the world.

In the “*Global Gender Gap Index*” report, Latin America will need at least eighty years to completely eliminate the existing gender disparity, estimated at around 30%, followed by Eastern Europe, Central Asia and North America (the latter represented by the United States and Canada). In Latin America, women currently represent 50% of the population, but only 41% of the workforce while salary is on average 16% lower compared to men. The fact that women accumu-

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¹The Global Gender Gap Report is an insight tool published annually by the World Economic Forum. The 2017 edition of the Report features a range of unique contextual data through a research collaboration with LinkedIn.

late an occupational segregation with a higher education did not change their remuneration.

When we focus in our analysis on the political representation in society, the disparity is even greater. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the proportion of legislative seats held by women in Latin America is only 20% of the total, and the 2017 elections did not bring any women to the post of head of state. Undoubtedly, gender equality in political life promotes great stability in economic development of the society and observing the statistics, we ask this question: Is it possible to ever reach gender equality? Is such a democracy, which encompasses universality, real?

2. The Social Domination of Gender

French philosopher Michel Foucault published, in 1988, three volumes of a work called “History of Sexuality”. The first volume, entitled “The Will to Knowledge”, was a precursor to further studies and led to new thoughts and trends. Foucault raised a crucial question about sexuality, considering that the repression of sex has been fueled by social domination through the policy that protects and governs the norms of society.

The philosopher in this statement above subtly associates that behind the capitalist power is accepted norms and attributions for the community, and that it is through “a set of military and school disciplines” (Foucault, 1976) that generate knowledge about the body. Around the nineteenth century, Europe and all its colonies around the world were already preoccupied with sexuality in schools, and it was from there that they began a set of rules about the bodies of young people and children. However, due to the great need for power in the capitalist world, social domination became a pseudo balance and has been trying the disruption at all costs, although the war seems far from over.

Foucault (1988) states that “the modern repression of sex is sustained because it is easy to be dominated; the historical and political aspect of society protects it”. According to the author, this process of domination began in the so-called “Age of Repression” in the seventeenth century and also coincides with the development of capitalism. In Beauvoir (1970), the author emphasizes the occurrence of gender inequality when she says that individuals become women or men. However, in the case of the female gender, the education that is presented by society for girls is just to prepare them to become women. Reinforcing here what Foucault has told us above.

From a Marxist perspective, women are exaggeratedly associated with nature, thus becoming the object of men’s work, being transformed to serve their interests through a symbolic inscription of those interests in their bodies. Due to a scholastic debt of the superiority of reason and its exclusivity to humans, the woman is understood as property because it is also nature, and her domination is nothing more than the result of a constant work of men imprinted on women.

Scientifically, the women’s stories have been uniquely recognized as a feminist affair, being literally excluded from history as a public domain of existence, and

not presenting any participation of content on war, economics, politics and many other themes that magnifies the historical narrative of society. That's why Scott wondered "How does gender work in social relations?" (Scott, 1989). The author considers the gender as "a more objective and neutral connotation than women".

The question raised by Scott brings us a reflection on the social relations of the feminine and the many "symbolic violence" existing in every aspect of society between the feminine and the masculine, that is, there is a de-historicization of women from the moment that the cultural events of the feminine reproduce and spread a pre-established *habitus* idea about them and their history in society. Foucault states that "We deny the woman as a historical subject and the possibility of discussion about any cultural arbitrary. The symbolic violence is necessary between the masculine and the feminine, since the disqualification of a body is a form of punishment, starting with an ethical reflection and moving on to the introduction of a moral and its codes".

However, it is possible to restore the historical denaturalization that protects this symbolic domination of men over women through the rupture of the Marxist tradition within education and scientific studies, which confirms through its theory of patriarchy as the main cause of gender inequality. According to Joan Scott, gender "is the first way to give meaning to power relations. It would be better to say: gender is a first field within which, or through which, power is articulated".

For Bourdieu (1998) the roles of man and woman were already historically traced and there was no reason to understand any change about "gender", it is affirmed that "the strength of the male order is evident in the fact that it dispenses justification..." According to Bourdieu, western society presents power as a "structured structure" that contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, thereby acting subtly and internally to control the ideology of the mass through its manipulated speech to make sense of the existence of life and the social structures, that is, "the symbolic power is, in effect, this invisible power which can only be known with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subjected to it or even that exercise it." (Bourdieu, 1998).

According to Bourdieu, the occidental society presents the power as a "structured structure", which contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, and thus, acting subtly and internally to control the ideology of the mass through its manipulated discourse to make sense of the existence of life and social structures, that is, "symbolic power is, in effect, that invisible power which can only be known with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they exercise it" (Bourdieu, 1998).

3. Understanding the Struggle for Equality

One does not have to be a feminist these days to understand that women at all times within the history of the world seek their place and tirelessly seek accep-

tance as an important and essential part in the building of a society. **Judith Butler** (1990), a philosopher and gender issues scholar, published in 1990 a book she originally titled “*Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*”, and according to her, the contemporary legal structures immobilize categories of identity in terms of the compatibility required by the heterosexual matrix. In other words, for the author, the rupture of gender inequality starts from a political action committed to the deconstruction of relations of identities hierarchy, and focus mainly on the processes of production of these identities and maintenance of relations between them.

The Feminism has become a social movement and has become visible from some actions presented as “waves”. The “first wave” of feminism would have occurred in the late nineteenth century and specifically centered on the claim of political rights (voting and being elected); social and economic rights (having paid work, studying, having a property and inheritance). The “second wave” presented itself after World War II and directed the struggles mainly against patriarchy, body domination and pleasure; and it was at this very moment of the struggle for more respect for women that the category “gender” was created, and it was when in 1949 that the work of French thinker Simone de Beauvoir entitled “*The Second Sex*”.

Beauvoir presented a new idea to the concept of “woman” and its representativeness in society, stating that this “woman” is always defined by the “other”, that is, objectify someone is the same as devalue her subjectivity, thus spreading the myth of the rational, moral and political precariousness of women. There is a phrase that became an icon of the questions raised by Simone Beauvoir that says: “*No one is born a woman: she becomes a woman*”, that is, the characterization that profane culture stereotypes the role of a woman in society and seals her identity in a bubble that does not match her own true “self”, or rather does not let her discover her true “self”. There is in the speech of the Brazilian children’s chronicler Figueiredo Pimentel that portrays exactly this idea that a woman becomes woman from the moment she clashes with the dominant patriarchal culture, when he says in the book “*Teatrinho Infantil*” the following sentence: I do not wish, with Otilia, to be wise, because wise women become overly pedantic. The kingdom of women is the home, not the academies, libraries, laboratories (...). “I want to be good, simple, modest and esteemed by all” (Pimentel, 1958: p. 154).

Almost sixty years later, we have a sentence, published by magazine “*Revista Veja*” in 2016, that raised many discussions and reflections on the visibly macho patterns that we have as representativeness in the Brazilian political world concerning women, when portraying the vice-first lady at the time Marcela Temer, on the cover, with adjectives somewhat convenient to the existing patriarchal traditionalism, which reads: “*Marcela Temer: beautiful, modest, and stay-at-home-mom.*” This classification is nothing more than the incapacity of women in public life, is to disqualify the identity of these women making them always subjected to the male sex and oppressed in their freedom to express and to desire another choice.

Women have been relentlessly fighting for a right that was denied even before existing because from the moment society decides the role of human beings in politics, economics, work, sports, family and education it hurts the universalization of the rights and life choices of all, and as Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1989) said, there must be a “fight for recognition”, which, according to her, the search for “recognition of difference” feeds the struggle of groups mobilized under the mottos of nationality, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

In addressing the issues of feminism, we have an important relevance to draw here. When we think about gender inequalities we need, however, to present the ethnicity and race of Brazilian women and present that the fight of these women who have suffered sexual violence, slavery and humiliation become in critical aspects a distinct oppression of white women. That is, in the “second wave” of the feminist movement, bourgeois women sought and still seek to break down the stereotype of the fragile, submissive domestic woman, while the fight of black women during and after slavery was against their characterization as an object for all kinds of desires white men wanted.

Angela Davis affirmed that the rights prevailed for white women, requiring mainly the vote with the proposal of suffrage, being defeated in the first Convention (Seneca Falls, in 1848). There the absence of black women was evident [...] (Davis, 2016) Black feminism, in this aspect becomes a multiplicity of experiences and according to Djalma Ribeiro (Ribeiro, 2016) black women were silenced in the feminist movements, conceptualized as “Second wave”, for not considering that their struggles were also feminist, even when they historically produced and created forms of resistance.

We understand that even in feminist movements, there was a white racial domination. Such movements generally focus on issues that exclusively interested white women and forming an abyss in understanding the different realities among women. We also emphasize that in slave labor, black women also participated in the exploitation alongside men, mainly in production, strength, beatings, many of which followed by death, and adding multiple violence to women through sex, rape, reproduction and lactation.

In this extremely tiring struggle, we still have a crucial and uncomfortable question to reflect upon, the body, the woman’s body as an object of desire and domination. Foucault in (History of Sexuality, 1985) says that “Sex relations have given way, throughout society, to a device of covenant: system of marriage, fixation and development of kinship, transmission of names and property. This device of alliance, with the constriction mechanisms that guarantee it, with the often complex knowledge it requires, has lost importance as economic processes and political structures no longer find in it an adequate instrument or sufficient support”.

That is, women being seen as the domain of men and as mere reproducers and in playing a supporting role in the sphere of the political system of society. Power relations in this universe become intentional and intelligible from the moment it calculates its goals for the ruling mass.

In Brazil, since colonization, the female sexual repression has been grounded by religious principles that transformed many perverse practices revealed through indigenous women, enslaved black women and submissive European white women. Women, particularly the indigenous in this colonial era, were identified “as the spirit of temptation, deceit and sin” (Lodono, 1990). Therefore, the supreme importance in the history of feminism is to review the past so that through the facts we find other meanings for a future and essentially for the present, delegitimizing power and domination.

Margareth Rago, a Brazilian historian in her book titled “Cabaret at home”, states that: “[...], the woman has been nothing more than spectators on the stage of life, and the man continues to want to hinder the movements and therefore support progress”.

In this historical conception of Rago, it only reinforces that the very real and constant struggle is still shy and rooted in patriarchal education, a link nurtured for thousands of years, and that has shown a fierce need for change, for this new modern and interconnected world that we are living. Still, in slow and misaligned steps, the feminist movement and all its reflective baggage has been making itself heard but has not been making itself understood. Understand that we no longer have to pursue gender equality, when in fact we are entitled to the choices of our own lives, whether women or men.

4. The Beginning for Change, Conclusion

At the end of the eighteenth century, the European revolutionaries to justify the inequality between women and men stated that all men are equal, however, women were considered mentally fragile, childish and consequently incapable of men’s intellectual and political tasks.

However, even though, for many theorists, a realistic gender equality is a utopia, the initial change for this to occur is to break the rules and change the historical subjectivity through the counter-conduct. Michel Foucault opines that “They are a movement which has as its object another conduct, that is, to want to be led in another way by other conductors and other pastors, to other purposes and to other forms of salvation, by means of other procedures and other methods. They are movements that also seek to escape the conduct of others, that seek to define for each one how to conduct themselves” (Foucault, 2008).

Foucault believed that talking about feminism, about sex, was talking about freedom. And, we can only have this freedom from the delegitimation of the present through the story told, we need to think, redo and transform the stereotype created by patriarchalism and correct the gender blindness of political theories of race and class. Gender oppressions are constituted by techniques of power, but it is essential to understand that as unique individuals we are constituted in our essence. We must generate productivity from new behaviors, new attitudes, and new ideas in order to finally break up with the spread of the patriarchal chauvinistic imbecility that has been passed on to us from generation to

generation.

We need to initiate the change with our children by raising them differently. We must stop smothering the humanity of boys from the moment. We teach them to fear being afraid, fear the weakness and vulnerability. Boys are always pressured to prove their manhood, and in contrast, we teach girls to “be less” and “want less”. The wheel needs to be broken, torn and we can only do it together with men, women, feminists in favor of gender equality and respect in society. And I end this reflection with a phrase that marked my conception of myself and the world I desire, by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who in a lecture conceptualized what it is to be a Feminist: “is a man or a woman who says, yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.”

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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