

The “politics of gender”: a genealogical commentary

Sonia Corrêa¹

I was motivated to write this comment after reading a series of analyses that re-visit the conditions in which a transnational agenda of repudiation of “gender” took shape, in the 1990s (Butler, 2004; Case, 2017; Garbagnoli, 2017; Mikolsci and Campana, 2017: 723-745; Kuhar and Patternote, 2017; Viveros, 2017: 220-241). I should say I have examined this trajectory on previous occasions (Corrêa, Petchesky and Parker, 2008; Corrêa, 2009). What follows is fundamentally based on these earlier writings, on the analysis developed by Girard (2007) but also on my personal memories. I had the privilege, so to speak, to closely follow several of the 1990s debates in which anti-gender politics – which now sweeps over the Americas, Europe but also Africa -- gradually took form. These occasions were the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development (1992), the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (ICPD, 1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (IV WSSD, 1995) and the ICPD and Fourth WCW +5 and + 10 Reviews (1999, 2000, 2004 and the UN Summit on Development Goals of 2005).

In the literature above mentioned, there are discrepancies in respect to when exactly anti-gender politics have erupted. What tends to predominate is the version that gender was attacked at the IV WCW during the Beijing negotiations. Some observers, however, locate this eruption in Cairo, but there are also those who identify UNCED (Rio 92) as the initial moment of this saga. This blurring of dates and facts is understandable because these conferences were held sequentially, and in each of them novel policy definitions in respect to reproduction, gender and sexuality were adopted that would be transported to the next negotiation in a cumulative manner. At each new stage of this process of normative legitimation, conservative reactions would blow up. It is not easy to retrace these meanders without having been there.

In realizing that, I thought that it could be useful to revisit this trajectory from the standpoint of my positionality as a contributor and observer to this winding road. In fact, I felt I had to write this commentary before my memories of what had then happened entirely wanes.

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March 1995: the first signs of the bonfire

In March 1995, I arrived at the United Nations headquarters in New York to participate in the final stage of the Third (and last) Preparatory Committee for the IV WCC, which would be held in Beijing in September of that year. In the previous week, the UN Copenhagen Summit on Social Development had taken place and six months before we had fiercely engaged with harsh negotiation of the ICPD in Cairo. At the Copenhagen Summit, we, the feminists involved in the UN conferences of the period – of which a large number was from the global South – had organized a hunger strike to ensure the inclusion in the final document of references to the deleterious impacts of structural adjustment programs on health and education in our countries. The final text of the Summit Program of Action included language adopted at the Vienna International Conference on Human Rights (1993) affirming women's rights as human rights as well as ICPD definitions of reproductive health and rights, even if, during the proceedings, these definitions had been systematically attacked by the Holy See and its allies in the process. The text was also peppered with gender language, especially with regard to the sexual division of labor between men and women in the realm of social reproduction. This gender vocabulary, it should be noted, was never the subject of any controversy.

When I arrived in New York, however, I was told by my feminist colleagues attending the last Beijing PrepCom that that gender was into brackets. This means that the term gender was not considered anymore a consensual definition as it had been the case in Cairo and Copenhagen. Activists were also very concerned to see debates entirely paralyzed because the female diplomats coordinating the negotiations were not prepared for the fierce attacks on gender and other related controversial issues which have suddenly erupted.

Indeed, after being briefed in the corridors I entered one of the working rooms and saw a very tall Sudanese delegate vigorously demanding gender to be “bracketed”. He had the support of other Islamic and non-Islamic countries, mostly from Latin America.² As I had been told, the

² Over the two weeks at the Social Development Summit, we feminists had observed with concern many side conversations between representatives of the Vatican and Islamic states, and suspected that an unprecedented strategic rapprochement between these actors might be underway. To understand this concern it is necessary to remember that, throughout the ICPD process, there was no articulate action between the Holy See and the Islamic states. In this process, the Vatican did everything possible to put pressure on the Latin American countries, its historical allies, and when this strategy failed to work, as will be detailed, the Central American countries - El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras - became their spokespersons,

female chair of the session was in complete disarray, unable to contain his endless and very aggressive speech. The not-so-invisible hands of the Vatican were also detectable in the dynamics at play. While the Holy See was very silent, the delegations of Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, their faithful Latin American surrogates, supported the Sudanese diatribe.

According to Girard (2007), what then happened was that in the third and last week of the Preparatory Committee as soon as the terminology of sexual rights and orientation was incorporated into the text under negotiation, the Holy See, supported by Sudan, Malta and Honduras, requested that gender be put in square brackets and demanded from the Secretariat a precise definition of its content. In parallel, gender was virulently attacked in the spaces in which civil society organizations involved in the process leading to Beijing gathered.

As soon as I left the negotiating room, Joan Ross Frankson, a Caribbean feminist then on the team of WEDO³ told me about the pamphlet "against gender" that had been distributed a few days earlier to delegates (especially from the global South). The pamphlet had been produced by a US Catholic right-wing organization, the Women's Coalition for the Family, led by journalist Dale O'Leary. The text distorted an article by Anna Fausto-Sterling on intersexuality (Fausto-Sterling, 1993:20-25) and argued that when using the term "gender" feminists (described as "generally homosexual" in the pamphlet) claimed the existence of five distinct genders. Joan was indignant and said to me:

"These nefarious people have not only troubled the negotiations, they have offended us... How can they say that feminists believe in the existence of five genders? We know quite well that gender is what explains the inequality between men and women in all spheres of life".

Some years after, reflecting on this episode, Rosalind Petchesky recalled how the 1995 attack on gender had perplexed many feminists attending the Preparatory Committee -- who had never read Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler or Fausto-Sterling: "We were provoked to explain gender to ourselves and to others" (Girard, 2007, p. 338).

and began to establish connections with African countries. In the case of the Islamic world, in turn, great flexibility was observed in relation to the ICPD's controversial themes.

Egypt, as the host country of the conference, did its utmost to make it a success and, as surprising as it may seem, the Iranian delegation played a key role in the approval of the relative language.

³ Women, Environment and Development Organization, an international network created and coordinated by Bella Abzug that played a very important role in the feminist advocacy work for the many conferences of the so-called UN Social Cycle.

In the course towards and after Beijing

It is, however, necessary to get back to Rio 1992, to better understand how and why this Vatican “gender trouble” erupted in the final stage of the route to Beijing. At UNCED, in Rio, no language on gender, sexuality, or the right to abortion was inserted in the text negotiated by states. The UNCED Document adopted the classic definition of equality between the sexes, inherited from the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and language on family planning and reproductive health, this latter term being quite new, entered the conversation amongst UN member states through the hands of WHO, shortly before UNCED.

As prosaic as this language may seem today it provoked fierce attacks and political maneuvers on the part of Holy See delegates. In Rio, the Vatican deliberately reactivated the longstanding North-South controversy around population control policies to feed a political opposition between poverty and the right to development, on the one hand, and “fertility control” (in their view family planning and reproductive health) on the other. These insidious games, it should be noted, were also enabled by the position expressed by some of the big global environmental networks that, in preparation for Rio, had openly called for strict demographic control as a necessary measure to “protect nature”.

Consequently, in the course of the Rio negotiations, the feminist agenda on reproductive autonomy found itself squeezed in between these powerful forces and once again faced the old resistance of a number of Southern countries in relation to considering contraception as an individual right. In watching these complicated dynamics, several of the feminist networks attending the UNCED civil society forum decided that it was vital to invest time and energy in the forthcoming International Conference on Population and Development, scheduled for 1994 in Cairo. Our feeling was that if we did not do so a major political disaster could occur.⁴

⁴ A finer and more detailed account of what happened in Rio must also include the intensity and visibility of the issues of population, reproduction and human rights at the Global Forum parallel to the official conference that was taking place at *Aterro do Flamengo*. Not only was the issue of Population and Women's Rights a major theme of *Planeta Fêmea*, the feminist tent, but a feminist treaty on population policies was produced there. A year later, at the 1st ICPD Preparatory Committee, the Women's Declaration on Population Policies would be launched, which would be revised and improved at the Conference on Reproductive Health held in Rio de Janeiro in January 1994.

This decision, taken in the heat of the Aterro do Flamengo, which was the site of the NGO UNCED Global Forum, is at the origin of the rich and highly conflictive process leading to Cairo⁵. ICPD conceptual and policy outcomes, in turn, are what triggered the sudden attack on gender witnessed in March 1995 in New York. This is so because it was on the path towards ICPD that, for the first time ever, the term gender entered the UN intergovernmental vocabulary. Until then, the term was used in UN-sponsored research and analyses, but not yet as a parameter to guide state policies. Furthermore and more critically, ICPD was politically legitimated much more than gender: the concepts of reproductive health and reproductive rights; abortion was recognized as a serious public health problem, universal sexuality education policies were recommended, and, not less importantly, the various forms of families were fully affirmed.

However, it should be said that as in Copenhagen six months later, at no point in the arduous clashes surrounding these various topics, gender was seen as controversial. This has been so, apparently, because -- as Dale O'Leary (1997) herself admits in her book -- in ICPD, the Holy See and its allies invested all energy possible to block the recognition of abortion as a major public health problem as well as of multiple forms of family. These were rather unsuccessful efforts, as both definitions were preserved in the final document.

But I want to also raise the hypothesis that the smooth acceptance of gender in ICPD can also be explained by the stream of gender theory that entered the Cairo document. As my friend Joan said, "gender" in the ICPD Program of Action was about the inequality between men and women, it was not supposed to be enmeshed in the confusion of sexuality. Case (2017) suggests that gender reached Cairo through the hands of American feminist legal scholars and practitioners and this is partially correct.⁶ But from where I look at it, gender entered ICPD after gaining traction in the field of gender and development whose frontiers transcended the United States. In this domain, feminists from both North and South of the Equator applied the lenses of gender to critically look at the socio-cultural layers superimposed on biological sex that determined the roles and spheres of the masculine and the feminine and justified inequalities in access to powers and resources (Razavi and Miller, 1995; Moser, 1993).

⁵ In the early stages of the process, the terminology used in the draft document was "women's status", a category widely used in demographic debates to explain cultural variations in fertility levels. The struggles we had to abandon this terminology were by no means trivial, since our focus was not on fertility, but rather on the power relations and gender inequality at the micro and macro levels that determine it.

⁶ The author cites, for example, decisions by Justice Ruth Ginzburg.

What happened, however, is that gender came out of Cairo, immersed in sexuality, even though not all feminists participating in the process recognized that right away. Already in the first Preparatory Committee for ICPD, in April 1993, lesbian activists had included in their demands for the conference a claim of non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and this, it should be said, was supported by a few countries.⁷ Subsequently, adolescent sexuality and, above all, language on sexual rights were included in the draft document. Although the term sexual rights did not survive the negotiations, it was debated in the plenaries.

On the last day of the Cairo conference, as I walked towards the plenary I eavesdropped a French-speaking African delegate commenting to his colleague: “*Il y a trop de sexe dans cet document!*” (there is too much sex in this document)⁸. This blossoming of sex should not be a surprise because at least since Foucault (1999) we do know that sex is critically situated at the intersection between population management and body disciplines. According to Gloria Careaga, the Mexican researcher and activist, after Cairo, the international networks of lesbian women made a robust investment to ensure sexuality not to be buried in the Beijing inter-state process. In her own words:

“Before Cairo, there was no deep discussion among us about sexual rights... There was a lot of confusion about the concept. Heterosexual women thought this was a lesbian issue and lesbians thought it was a heterosexual problem. We, lesbians, felt that we had a responsibility to defend sexual rights (in the IV CMM case) (Girard, 2007, p. 323).

This conceptual and political agitation would trigger the Vatican “gender problem” six months later at the Third Preparatory Committee for the IV CMM. Butler (2004) accurately captures this critical injunction when analyzing the attack on gender that materialized in New York in the following terms:

“It is no surprise to me that the Vatican has referred to the possibility of including the rights of lesbians (in the text) as anti-human. That may be true. Admitting lesbians into the realm of the

⁷ USA and Sweden, at first.

⁸ Phrase heard in the conversation between two African delegates and which I have quoted on other occasions.

universal can undo the human, at least in its current forms, but it also implies imagining the human beyond its conventional limits” (p. 190).

This means that the March 1995 assault did not target gender as it has been originally inscribed in the ICPD document, so to speak. It aimed at containing the proliferation of sexualities and genders that flourished around the term, which means that the war on gender since ever implied raiding sexual and reproductive rights, sex education and abortion as a health problem.

Curiously enough despite this initial furor, during IV WCW itself, once again, the term was not subject to major controversies. Although there were no big fights, when the final document was adopted, the Holy See made a reservation clarifying that, according to its view, “gender is grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female” and that any “dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes” was to be excluded. A similar explanatory declaration was requested by Paraguay.

In contrast, in the negotiations, the Vatican and its allies openly assaulted Vienna's definition of women's rights as human rights, which was contested in the name of John Paul II's thesis on the dignity of women. They also fiercely squandered paragraph 106k which recommends the revision of punitive abortion laws, paragraph 96 which defines women's sexual rights and above all the language on sexual orientation inserted in the chapter on human rights. The last two topics were exhaustively debated until the very end of the conference. The only feminist loss was that the inclusion of sexual orientation as a non-justifiable basis of discrimination was defeated by a small margin of vote, at 3 am, in the very last plenary.

A quarter of a century later, in revisiting the Beijing scenario, I wondered what would have happened between March and September 1995 to explain this tactical retreat of the Holy See in relation to “gender”. I have no definitive answers. Eventually, the tautological note of the Secretariat of the IV WCW establishing that gender should be read in the Platform for Action according to its ordinary use in UN documents temporarily appeased the Vatican's fury. Or, perhaps, as in Cairo, the Holy See had too many hard frontlines to cope with and gender was again relegated to a second-level priority. But we may also ponder that, despite the anger manifested in New York, six months later Vatican intellectuals had not yet fully matured their position on gender as to raise a big blast against the concept.

This cautious approach would be, however, temporary. In 1999 and 2000, during the Cairo and Beijing Plus Five Reviews, gender was attacked head-on from the beginning to the end of the negotiations. Whenever the term arose in the debates, its meaning was interrogated and various delegations – Islamic and non-Islamic – requested its elimination. The argument used was that gender was not about women’s rights but a code word for homosexuality, pedophilia and other "sexual perversions". Quite significantly, these are exactly the phantasms that proliferate today around gender, suggesting that these UN debates were used as test grounds for what would materialize as political mobilizations in Europe and Latin America a decade later.

It should be also said that the 1999-2000 negotiations were much harder than Cairo and Beijing because open anti-feminist positions and a homophobic climate had matured in the UN environment. Not less importantly, the mode of operation of Southern countries clustered under the Group of 77 and China (G77) had changed. In 1993, in the preparations for ICPD, G77 took the decision to just act as a consensual bloc in relation to economic issues, leaving members states of the group free to take individual positions in relation to other issues. This *modus operandi* greatly facilitated the consensus reached in the ICPD +5 and IV WCW negotiations because it left the space open for global South countries to express varied views in relation to gender, sexuality and reproduction.

When the Plus Five process began, however, G77 was working as a closed block in relation to all matters under debate. This alteration was justified as an effect of the 1999 Asian financial crisis that pushed Southern countries to assume tougher negotiation positions in global policy arenas. But for those of us who had followed previous UN battles, it was quite evident that the rule of cohesion in all matters was mobilized by Holy See allies within G77, a group that included Islamic countries with significant political weight in the bloc, such as Egypt, Pakistan and Iran⁹. The rule aimed, in fact, at silencing the plurality of positions in relation to gender and sexuality matters that existed within the group and that had enabled Cairo and Beijing consensus five years before. Watching this new scenario we, the feminists, have named this new formation linking G77 states and the Holy as the “Unholy Alliance”. The group was

⁹ Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran, countries that have highly skilled diplomacy, but also Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan. At the Beijing + 5 review, on several occasions, we saw delegates from these countries in continuous conversation with NGOs of the US religious right. And we subsequently learned that the costs of the Iranian delegate were covered by one of these organizations.

extremely well organized and counted on the flagrant political and financial support of the US religious right NGO that flooded the civil society space. But, despite all this strength, once again, the Holy See and its allies were defeated, including with regard to the term gender that was extensively used in the final documents of both Plus Five Reviews.

My own view is that, perhaps, this second blatant defeat may have leveraged the theological investments against gender that subsequently took shape within the Vatican itself. Before that, few founding texts of the crusade against gender had already been published: in 1997, *The Gender Agenda*, written by Dale O'Leary (1997) and the *L'Évangile face au désordre mondial* (the Gospel in Face of the World Disorder) authored by the Belgium Michel Schooyans, a year later a letter by the Peruvian Bishops signed by Don Alzamora Revoredo was also made public. In 2001, the *Problem of Gender*, written by the German female theologian Jutta Burgraff, associated with the University of Navarra in Spain, was made available in various languages, including Spanish. This text was in fact the draft of Burgraff a contribution to the entry on gender of the Lexicon of Ambiguous and Discussed Terms on Family Life and Ethics, published in 2003, constituting the first anti-gender official Vatican doctrinaire guideline. One year later the Holy See released the Catholic Church Bishops' Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World which offers the following on its first page:

“In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed sex, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed gender, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from bio-logical determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality” (Vatican, 2004, page 1).

Latin America as a target

As the Catholic church itself, the crusade against gender has always been transnational. Having been gestated in the high spheres of intergovernmental arenas and theological lucubration,

since 2013 it has propagated in Europe and Latin America (Corrêa, 2017; Mikolsci and Campana, 2017; Patternotte and Kuhar, 2017) and more recently in the US as bottom-up political mobilizations.

In Europe, the meaning and scale of anti-gender mobilizing that erupted in the *Manif pour Tous* in France (2013) were not immediately grasped because most observers were reluctant to admit that European gender and sexual democracy could be at risk. In Latin America, I dare to say, we experience a radically different syndrome of denial¹⁰. Given the deep and wide colonial legacy of Catholicism and the more recent impacts of the evangelical expansion (re-colonization) of the last thirty years, most of us interpreted the fierce attacks on gender, which materialized after 2013, as “more of the same”. The syndrome was so powerful that even I, who had witnessed all the processes described in this commentary, did not realize what was happening until I began grasping the meaning and directions of the dynamics play simultaneously underway in Europe.

This denialism would be, however, quickly shaken under the impact of the anti-gender "perfect storm" to use the interpretation done by Serrano (2017) that swept the region after 2016: the assault on “gender ideology” in the Referendum for the Peace Agreement in Colombia, the grotesque attack on Judith Butler, in São Paulo in 2017, the presidential elections in Costa Rica (Murillo, 2018) and, most principally, the Brazilian elections of that same year that has taken Bolsonaro to power. Although these sweeping crusades have only taken shape in the last 8 years or so it should be said that the region had been on the radar of the Vatican and its allies for much longer.

O’Leary when analyzing what she depicts as the "global feminist conspiracy" in her 1997 book already gave much attention to Latin American feminism. In her analysis, the references to American gender feminism are blatantly prevalent and a few mentions are made of European feminism. However, several pages are dedicated to Latin American feminism. O’Leary examines the outcomes of the 1990 *Encuentro Feminista* of San Bernardo in Argentina, cites a number of CLADEM documents and dedicates a whole section to the exegesis of the

¹⁰ I further suspect that the transnational significance, scale, and potential effects of these attacks have been somewhat overshadowed by the legal and judicial gains of the last decade, especially the laws and legal decisions on equal marriage. So much so that, to a large extent, it has gone unnoticed by us the 2013 speech by Rafael Corrêa that, one might say, sparked the anti-gender crusade in the region.

elaborations on gender by Marta Lamas, the Mexican feminist intellectual¹¹. Her emphatical concern with Latino feminism is not unfounded. Firstly, because in Latin America, the political, cultural and intellectual transformations of gender and sexuality that took place in the last quarter of the 20th century were unequivocal. And perhaps more significantly, in the landscape of global south feminisms that engaged with the 1990s UN conferences, the Latinas were, indeed, the most familiarized with critical theories of gender and sexuality.

As importantly, Latin American state positions on gender and related matters have indeed altered the geopolitical game at play on the road towards Cairo and later on Beijing. Very early in the process, under the leadership of Brazil and Mexico, the “herd” of Latin American states that used to smoothly follow the Vatican's positions in relation to these matters started drifting away. This shift has greatly contributed to enabling North-South consensus around these matters. In particular, during the very difficult negotiations of the +5 Review processes described above, Latin America openly rebelled against the new consensual voting rules established within the G77. This move was followed by the Caribbean and a few Sub-Saharan African countries. A new negotiating bloc was created that was named Some Latin American, African and Caribbean Countries (SLAACC) which would ensure positive final outcomes of the negotiation in relation to sexual and reproductive rights, sex education, various forms of families and gender that, as noted, was subject to vicious and fierce attacks. At the end of the Beijing +5 Review, I and the Indian feminist Gita Sen interpreted the emergence of SLAACC as a breakthrough. We saw in it the projection of a future in which strong consensus could be built in the global south around an intersectional agenda of social justice, gender justice and erotic justice.

We were wrong. The successes in shaping transnational gender politics in the 1990s can be measured by the fury with which gender is now attacked North and South of the Equator. Consequently: *la lucha continua*.

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¹¹ Marta Lamas and Gertrude Mongela, coordinator of the IV CMM, are the only feminists from the global South mentioned in the text.

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