GROWTH AND STRUGGLE: THIRTY YEARS OF GENDER STUDIES WORLDWIDE

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To celebrate this anniversary, we might start by recalling what was happening in the world thirty years ago. 1994 was the year of the great election victory of the African National Congress in South Africa, ending the racist regime that had governed there for eighty years. The Soviet Union had fallen a few years before, and the Russian economy was collapsing after it, in a great humanitarian catastrophe –from which the current Putin dictatorship later emerged. Latin America was emerging, unevenly, from the 'lost decade' of debt crisis and stalled development. China was returning to capitalism and becoming a manufacturing super-power, exploiting the labour of vast numbers of women in expanding factories.

In the early 1990s the HIV/AIDS pandemic was still spreading globally, especially in poor and marginalized communities. Also spreading was the power of transnational corporations and

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international finance, energetically pursuing the globalisation of their operations– 'globalization', the pursuit of worldwide markets and sourcing, had become a business buzzword in the 1980s. The ideology of privatization and free markets, called 'neoliberalism' by its opponents, in the 1990s dominated economic thinking and practical policy-making in much of the world. The result was growing wealth among the rich, but not among the poor. The neoliberal Washington Consensus dominated development strategies; one of its products was the North American Free Trade Agreement, which came into operation in 1994.

In the universities of United States, which remained the world centre of gender studies, the early 1990s saw two notable changes. One was the growing authority of Black feminist thought, which had recently produced the concept of 'intersectionality' in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw. The other was the rise of queer theory, with its roots in US gay and lesbian activism and European post-structuralist and deconstructionist thought. Its advent was signalled by the worldwide fame of the feminist philosopher Judith Butler and her book *Gender Trouble*, published in English in 1990 and very soon translated into other languages.

Less centered in the USA were two other shifts in feminist thought and research. The first was the growth of interest in questions about men and masculinities, which rapidly became an international research field through the 1990s. The second was the revival and growing urgency of environmental feminism, as awareness of the problem of human-produced climate change spread

internationally. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] issued its first Assessment Report in 1990, its second in 1995.

In 1994 feminist groups in almost every country were preparing for the 4th World Conference on Women sponsored by the United Nations, held the following year in Beijing. This event was remarkable for producing the wide-ranging Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, adopted unanimously by the participating countries. These documents represented an unprecedented, worldwide political commitment -at least, an apparent commitment- to the goal of gender equality.

At the same time, notable intellectual work on gender questions was appearing from the global South. In contrast to the turn towards poststructuralism, culture and 'identity' questions in the USA, this work tended to emphasise institutions, divisions of labour and structures of power. Two ambitious projects illustrate this. In 1993 Teresita de Barbieri, after decades of empirical and advocacy work on the situation of women across Latin America, published her classic conceptual paper "Sobre la categoría de género: una introducción teórico-metodológica". This traced across the continent the institutionalized patterns of gender relations, bringing together in a generous synthesis the nature of patriarchal power, class divisions among women, the politics of childbirth, issues about men and masculinity, and more. In 1994 Bina Agarwal, development economist and socialist feminist, published her magnificent book *A Field of One's Own*. This traced across rural south Asia the patterns

of women's access to and ownership of land, and explored how this involved the politics of the family, the state and legal regimes, relations with local environments, and more. With work like that going on, it was an auspicious time to be launching a centre for gender studies in Guadalajara.

How has the worldwide field of gender studies changed, since that auspicious moment? Signs of trouble were not long in coming. The 1995 meeting turned out to be the last of the series of World Conferences on Women. Feminists in United Nations agencies feared that with a growing number of anti-feminist right-wing governments coming to power, calling another such conference might undo commitments made at Beijing. Indeed, when the United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals in the year 2000, the provisions for gender equality and the advancement of women were surprisingly narrow.

Yet in other ways, feminist influence and agendas have persisted, and trends from the early 1990s have continued. The number of women who are members of parliaments or heads of government has crept up farther. The numbers of young women completing secondary school and the numbers going into higher education have continued to grow; the 2003 UNESCO report *Gender and Education for All: the Leap to Equality* is a notable example of international feminist policy work. Gender equality and gender diversity have become major themes of international 'human rights' advocacy and aid programmes. A number of countries which formerly banned

abortion and information about contraception have adopted policies that treat reproductive autonomy as women's right.

In the academic world, University courses and programmes on gender studies have multiplied in regions such as Africa and east Asia where they had formerly been rare. The volume of gender-related research has grown, and the number of journals specialising in gender studies, or particular areas of gender research, has increased. For instance, in studies of men and masculinities there are now about ten journals internationally, whereas in the 1990s there were two. New feminist and gender-studies journals with a strong local focus have emerged in regions of the majority world that have been under-represented in global scholarship. A vigorous example is *Feminist Africa*, launched in 2002, available open access at https://feministafrica.net/. The current issue documents 21st-century activism across the African continent.

Beyond the academic world, international activist networks working on gender issues have become more extensive and visible. To give two examples: MenEngage is a worldwide network claiming five or six hundred pro-feminist organizations working with men and boys; RedLACTrans is, as it says, regional but also links groups and movements across multiple countries. Both of these networks have a Web presence, and this points to an important change in the cultural environment for gender studies.

The Internet has grown with remarkable speed in the last generation to be the main channel of communication among academics, researchers beyond the university, movement activists,

and policymakers. Printed journals are not yet obsolete, but are likely to be; many journals and magazines now are online-only. With this, and databanks, and Cloud storage, and other online resources, the Internet has become the main repository of knowledge about gender, and also a major forum for debate.

More: through social media, entertainment channels, news channels, disinformation campaigns, data mining, surveillance, and 'the Internet of Things', the Internet has also become a significant part of the gendered world itself. It is a site where gender is constructed, performed, re-constructed, distorted, and struggled over. The so-called 'manosphere' is a notable example, a complex of websites disseminating misogynist and anti-feminist ideas, which serves for numbers of boys and young men as a source of reactionary definitions of manhood. So as well as gender-related research (e.g. surveys) conducted via online tools, there is now a great deal of research about the phenomena of online gender – a research field that did not exist at all thirty years ago.

In other ways too, gender studies has changed focus or emphasis. There is now more emphasis on worldwide differences in gender orders (or gender regimes) and therefore on specific social and economic situations and the possibilities for action they contain. Few feminist thinkers now assume that there is a universal patriarchy, a grand all-encompassing theory, or a master key to gender inequality which, if we could only find it, would unlock a feminist future. The task of change seems grittier, more piecemeal, and more prone to reversals than it did before.

One reason for this greater sense of complexity – and greater realism, to tell the truth – is that some groups who were formerly marginal in feminist scholarship have increasingly gained voice. Indigenous women are among them, insisting on the historic significance of colonialism as an issue for feminism. Indigenous movements and scholars have brought out the different social structures, epistemes and customs that existed before colonial conquest, and their survival and re-creation in the present. Such voices have denounced the continuing racism in postcolonial countries, and the complicity of feminist scholarship coming from settler populations. The Australian indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2nd edition 2021) is an influential example.

Another marginalized group to become more visible is transsexual women, who now have a political presence that is surprising from the viewpoint of the early 1990s. Trans women's visibility increased with the rise of queer theory, the invention of the acronym 'LGBT', and a sudden burst of mass media attention to 'transgender people'. This all happened in the USA, but produced language that was rapidly internationalized in human rights advocacy and aid programmes, e.g. those concerned with HIV/AIDS. Impoverished trans groups around the global South have benefited from aid money, often by becoming NGOs (non-profits) and professionalizing. That in itself can be a problem, as Latin American feminism knows from the long conflict between autonomous and institutional strategies. Nevertheless organizing and lobbying by trans women and men has

influenced legislation; legal change of gender status is now increasingly provided for, and its conditions made less onerous. Argentina's 2012 *Ley de identidad de género* is a notable example.

But this kind of change has not happened everywhere, and even where it has, the change has met opposition. We are in a time when the scattered gender backlashes of earlier decades have consolidated into a coherent campaign against reform of the patriarchal gender order. An early step was taken at the Beijing conference, when the Vatican and ultra-Catholic governments objected to use of the term 'gender' in UN documents. Around 2011-12 this matured into a deliberate campaign against 'gender theory' or 'gender ideology', the caricature of feminist thought recently devised by conservative Catholic intellectuals (well described by Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017).

Anti-feminist, anti-gay and now also anti-trans, this agenda has gained support from the latest two Popes, and has been carefully disseminated through the church's international organizations. The ideas have surfaced in political campaigns from France to Colombia, Brasil, Australia and Hungary. Just a little later, militant Protestant groups and right-wing Republican Party politicians in the United States took up anti-trans measures, as well as renewing their attacks on gay marriage equality, and women's rights in relation to contraception and abortion. Dramatic consequences of neoconservative mobilizations include the overturning of the 'Roe v. Wade' precedent after the US Supreme Court was stacked with right-wing judges, the recent drastic anti-homosexual legislation

in Uganda, and the banning of gender studies from universities in Hungary. The anti-gender campaigns have been given extra momentum by the rise of extreme-right electoral politics, and the increased number of authoritarian governments around the world, almost all of them controlled by men with reactionary views about gender.

Of course gender is not the only thing at stake here. Racism is equally important to mobilizing right-wing movements and consolidating their popular support – witness the importance of 'border protection' and persecution of refugees and migrants in the global North. Defence of an orthodox religion and hostility to religious minorities is important for authoritarian movements in the Islamic world and in India under the anti-Muslim BJP leader Modi. Background to the new-right movements is the mass precarity and heightened inequality resulting from two generations of neoliberal policy, as the new-right leaders' endless denunciation of 'elites' suggests.

Yet through the shouting, we can hear in all these movements the accents of dying privilege, the emotion of entitlement that was once secure (or thought to be secure) and is now slipping into the gulf of the future. That, I think, is a sign that though anti-gender movements have had important successes recently, in the long run they are losing. No-one can build lasting hegemony from resentment and fear.

Gender studies, the field of research and teaching concerned with this whole arena of contestation, has a part to play in preparing

a different world. Accurate knowledge and careful thinking about what is, after all, a major part of human experience, matters for decision-making – whether the decisions are personal, national, or global. This branch of the human sciences is still young, and I believe it has a rich and varied future. My congratulations to all who have been involved with the Centro de Estudios de Género, and my best wishes for the coming years.

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