Gender and Social Paradigms

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Introduction

The utopias that we imagine, our ideas about the society that we want and the lives we would like to lead, mould social planning and public policy. They lay out pathways where practice blends with theory, programs and concrete actions interweave with profound philosophical assumptions, and analytical methodologies mingle with epistemological reflection. This paper will attempt to build a bridge between the theoretical concerns regarding the *category of gender* and practical interventions in real life.

Social technology and implementation of governmental actions are informed by theory either explicitly or implicitly, either consciously or as baseline suppositions. Our *central purpose* is to review the prospects for analysis and issues with which the category of gender has interacted, probing more deeply into the paradigms that have sustained the major positions in dispute.

Bearing in mind the overall guidelines and themes will help us take a non-technocratic look at problem-solving. Knowing the difficulties entailed by a rationale for scientific knowledge, we are alerted to possible dogmatic positions. Aware of the philosophical debates, we will be able to reflect more carefully about the unintended consequences of the programs we follow. Contextualizing possible solutions within a specific political setting will make it possible to more cautiously evaluate the effectiveness of partial actions.

This paper will characterize the main theoretical confrontations that often crisscross with the issues of social science in general. Our overview will touch on the core issues where details blur, to more broadly grasp the theoretical panorama of the overall disputes. We will reflect on the concept of gender that has forcefully broken into the social disciplines in the last few years. We will address the debates that have hinged on this concept on different levels and in various paradigms, trying to sketch out, in black and white, an outline that will then be useful in distinguishing the subtler hues. Finally, we will analyze how these theoretical postures are assumed in determining *needs*, a central element in planning public policy. The paper's innovative contribution will be to categorize and systematize elements that are usually scattered[1].

I.   Gender as a tool for analysis

Like all terms and concepts in social science, gender has a life of its own, its own birth and historical development. It would be pointless to attempt to attach a stable meaning to it, since –like any category built as an intellectual tool– it has borne a broad range of approaches and interpretative subtleties. This is not to criticize, but it means that it has acquired a presence, grown and is now used to unveil a previously concealed reality. Like other concepts of science –the unconscious, roles, stereotypes– it has brought to light a reality that was difficult to name before it appeared. Therefore, we may consider its usefulness and fertility as a significant theoretical justification.

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1.   Most theoreticians whom we analyze are North American and European women, who are points of reference for Latin American production of theory. The opportunities available at developed-country universities –though not to us– have enabled academicians involved in gender issues to make substantial contributions to our understanding of these topics. Latin American scholars, committed to seeking out political strategies to transform the social situation of women in each of our countries, have appropriated these concepts and enriched them.

The category of gender has become consolidated in the study of men-women relations, emphasizing these relationships' organization between the sexes. (Scott, 1986). Fundamentally, it has been used to differentiate from a static idea of female nature, from an essentialistic concept of femininity, from a biological or religious outlook, which is translated into an ahistorical vision. This new position, implied in using the gender concept, has emphasized the *context* in which women and men have developed, thereby showing the importance of cultural, geographic, economic and other determining factors, resulting in variability.

The concept has not only described relations established between men and women, but also breaks with the naturalistic fallacy of assuming that what is or has been is the foundation for what should be, with the idea that the past strongly determines future possibilities. On the contrary, the gender approach makes it possible to dream of fairer future societies and interpersonal relations in which subordination is not a constant or a condition.

The gender concept, as an intellectual tool, was not incorporated into academic life before the seventies, when it became independent from the feminisms of that period. Twenty years later, it is amazing to note how it has become consolidated in the document from the Fourth World Conference on Women, organized by the United Nations. The *Action Platform*, a document approved by the world's governments, uses the term, both to analyze women's status worldwide, and for proposed action programs to reverse prevailing situations of inequity[2].

Gender as a relational notion, according to (Scott, 1986), would seem to emerge among American feminists as an alternative that will make it possible to go further than studies centering exclusively on women, suggesting that information about one sex is also relevant to the other. Few serious researchers have challenged –rather, many echo– this dynamic concept of relationships, which is fundamentally and

basically alluded to in gender. As a category of analysis, gender seeks to fill the gaps in existing theories to explain inequalities between women and men. At the same time, this perspective unifies different social experiences, reflected in different case studies[3].

Although many authors make gender a category of analysis, many others make it a paradigm. If we consider *gender* as a category of analysis, its purpose is to encompass a complex set of variable and unstable social relationships, comprising inter-related parties (Flax, 1987). However, in the latter case, there is an extensive patriarchal paradigm that completely permeates philosophy and social sciences; therefore, gender is a powerful theoretical alternative to the mere concept "offering sufficient grounds to elaborate a new social theme, agglutinating a new lifestyle of reason and justice"[4].

Not only is gender considered in regard to women's status, to the analysis of male domination and of the power situations established; the aim is also to step back far enough to be able to critique and re-evaluate modification and alteration of the status quo. In the view of Jane Flax (1987), the fundamental objective of feminist theory is –and rightly so– to analyze gender relations: how they are created and experienced, and how we think or fail to think about them.

In the last few years, *gender* has influenced different social sciences, marginally at first and then as a legitimate foundation of the discipline. Papers have multiplied where

2. However, the popularization of this term has entailed indiscriminate use, without a single, universal meaning. Izquierdo (1994) illustrates the different positions in this regard, pointing out that sometimes neither the term nor the concept is used, and the classification is male and female, meaning masculinity and femininity as part of natural sexual attributes. In other cases, the concept is used but not the term, with the understanding that sexual differences are not the cause but the pretext to justify inequality between men and women; this is exemplified in writings such as those of Beauvoire or Mitchell (1995). In many cases, the term is used without the concept, mechanically replacing the term "sex" by "gender", when actually the issue is sexual inequality and not gender inequality.
3. Joan W. Scott, Gender: A useful category of historical Analysis, in American Historical Review, No. 91, 1986
4. Femenías (1990) pg. 32.

the use of gender is central for descriptive and explanatory analyses and to make critical contributions to contemporary societies. It has been useful as a theoretical tool for analysis, to go more deeply into political practices and to scrutinize different realities from a different vantage point, often a revolutionary one.

II. Various paradigms and dimensions: from abstract to concrete.

The paradigms underpinning gender studies correspond to different levels or dimensions of essential analyses, including ontological, scientific, epistemological, political/economic, ethical and what we have termed practical angles.

There is an *ontological plane* in social reality, somehow independent of the concept that we have about it in our cognitive appropriation. This is the reality of daily life, referred to by such questions as: What are men and women? Do the differences or the similarities essentially characterize them? To what degree do universal or cultural characteristics determine their existence?

Another level of analysis is *scientific*, to systematically and rigorously describe and explain relationships between men and women: to describe, using different techniques and approaches, and explain the existing situation as the result of one or more causes.

A field that is fundamentally interrelated with the preceding one, but at a different level of abstraction, is the *epistemological plane*, which seeks answers to the following questions: is it possible to know "objectively"? Is knowledge, as it is currently recognized, the outgrowth of a patriarchal ideology, in which case it deserves to be discredited, or should we rather recognize its legitimacy and correct for any androcentric slants in theoretical production? Is there a different way of producing knowledge that is "female"? Is it relevant to refer to "women" as a universal category, or are the differences among women –from different countries, classes or ethnic origins– so important that we cannot bring them together under a single term?

This leads us to the *political and economic* domain: Is it possible to accommodate all women's differences and interests under a single political program? How deep are the changes sought? Is it legitimate and desirable to incorporate the gender perspective as a priority, or is it necessary to combine gender claims with other critical movements that emphasize antagonisms such as class, ethnic grouping or religion? In programs, what is more important, transforming women's situation, or their impact on society as mothers and reproducers, or their rights as citizens?

This brings us to the *ethical plane*: the right, as human beings, to enjoy certain essential benefits. This leads us to ask, on the *plane of practical action*: Programs for women as intermediaries, or as the actual recipient of an institution's priorities?

We have attempted to work on the different planes, at an intermediate level of complexity. Our option would have been to reduce the positions to their most salient characteristics, at the risk of caricaturizing the different stances or making the issues so complex that the essential features were lost. It is questionable to what point it is possible to unite the discourse of thinkers called "post-modernists" or "post-structuralists". However, we have characterized them from a safe distance, in order to appreciate the points of agreement and visualize the distances between an objectivistic epistemological position and post-modernism[5].

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5. Judith Butler (1992) critically assesses the broad brush-strokes with which post-modernism has been portrayed, without distinguishing the various positions within this overall grouping. Many will surely be astonished to learn, she adds, that Lacanian psychoanalysis in France has taken an official position against post-structuralism, that Kristeva denounces the flaws of post-modernism, that Foucaultians seldom have anything to do with Derrida, that Cixous and Iragaray are fundamentally opposed to each other and that all or almost all French feminists subscribe to a bland notion of modernism.

However, it is difficult to find pure representatives of each position. Moreover, most contemporary authors attempt to rise above dichotomies by inter-relating or balancing opposite positions. Nevertheless, we trust that this systematization that we are proposing will make it possible to more readily examine the diverse assortment of issues and the profusion of articles and papers on gender.

Each paradigm is associated with plays on words and terminologies that sustain philosophical concepts on which they are based and which they presuppose. In this presentation, we first characterize these perspectives as antagonistic, although we do defend the idea that they can and usually do form a continuum along which male and female thinkers who are working with these issues position themselves.

III. A Range of Dimensions Interwoven with Gender

The Ontological Plane

In this dimension, the question addresses the nature of female beings and their relationship with men. Do men and women share the same characteristics, or do they have distinguishing peculiarities?

Feminists have responded to this question from two opposing positions: some consider that differences are innate, and some maintain that they are not. These responses will give rise to diverging epistemological positions and political strategies. The vast theoretical production features manifold nuances resulting from the interweaving of arguments advocating one or the other position, but the debate hinges on these extreme claims: the essentialization of sexual difference, or the absolute denial of any such difference. These strongly dichotomous positions are questioned by other thinkers who attempt to construct an alternative discourse overcoming these either-or oppositions that appear to be unreconcilable.

In this polemic, conflict and opposition, some defend the so-called feminism of

equality, and others the so-called feminism of difference. The former considers that the sexual difference should not be a crucial distinction in human behavior and social relations. They propose to shorten social distances between men and women, by promoting equal rights, non-discrimination and women's promotion in different public spheres: political, educational, legislative and others.

The second tends to accentuate the differences over the similarities, by opposing male and female sexuality, on a biological, psychological or socialization basis. They include positions that see this opposition as radical and immutable, and also place higher value on female attributes than on male traits. Other positions, by contrast, recognize differences between men and women as relevant to human relationships, but understand these differences in different contexts and see them vary through history.

The most radical thinkers define feminine in an anti-patriarchal sense: a debasement of maleness rather than just male roles or practices, with an uncritical defense of all values based on women's experience as women —motherhood, care of the private family setting— and commitment to maintaining differences rather than narrowing them.

This trend, which sees differences as unchangeable, is also known as cultural feminism[6] because it likens women's liberation with the development and preservation of a female counter-culture. They exalt and consecrate the so-called

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6. A term coined by Alice Echols to label a faction of radical US feminism. (cited by L. Alcoff, 1988). The arguments of Barry (1994), a representative of radical feminism, reject the label as cultural, essentialistic feminists. Barry turns the accusation around, claiming that the male-dominated patriarchal society assigns collective identity to women, by sexualizing them, e.g. " women are..." and this is what, the author argues, radical feminism proposes to de-essentialize. Women's sexuality and reproduction is constructed socially and politically as inferior. Barry's article also suggests that the differences between radical feminists and equality-oriented ones are differences in priorities, emphases and degrees – they fight jointly for equal rights, equal pay, legalization of abortion, etc.– whereas the distinctive feature of equality thinkers is their refusal to understand sexuality as a condition of exploitation.

female values —sweetness, tenderness, dedication to others, sensuality, commitment— in opposition to male values of aggressiveness, oppressive culture, lack of emotional commitment. This revaluing of feminine qualities, in classic dichotomies (private/public, emotional/rational, practical/abstract) gives an innovative value to the one pole of private, emotional and practical matters.

Biological determinism is one of the weightiest arguments offered to sustain this strong opposition between female and male sexuality: "due to his anatomical condition, the male human was a natural predator and the female human his natural prey"[7].

With other arguments, regarding differences in experiences, authors such as C. Gilligan suggest "that moral choices by women may be more humane than men's"[8]. These reasonings —whether grounded in biology or in the social construction of experience— are opposed by other authors who consider them essentialistic, since they revalue the "category of women" while insisting on unchangeable, fixed differences as the explanation for behaviors (Scott, 1986).

Authors such as D. Riley (1983) approach this debate in terms of what she calls the biologism/culturalism dilemma. Riley criticizes the attempt to conceptualize women either as biologically determined or entirely culturally constructed[9].

Along these lines, more recently J. Buttler observed that, when one states that gender is a cultural construct, in some versions this seems to be fixed and determined, as it was according to the formula that Biology is Destiny, in which cases culture becomes Fate. So, Buttler continues, this raises such questions as: could it be constructed differently, or does its construction imply some sort of social determinism that excludes any chance of transformation? How and where is it constructed?[10]

The efforts of contemporary theoreticians to respond to the questions raised by the ontological dimension have found, in criticisms of universalism and rationalism (in different schools of thought and from different disciplines and perspectives), new concepts to enlighten this debate. Criticism of the idea of universal human nature, of human subjects as transparent, rational entities (based on psychoanalytical theories about unconscious acquisition of sexual identity, and of the importance of language in constructing it) has contributed ideas to feminism about the construction of subjectivity, of the processes that create subjects' identity, and fundamentally of the historical and contextual determination of these features.

However, here also the standpoints and interpretations are not linear and do not fully agree, although they are based on common theoretical foundations. If the feminism of difference have proposed a definition of women based on women, at the opposite extreme some post-structuralist theoreticians have claimed that it is impossible to define women as such, arguing that if women are a social construct, then efforts must be bent to deconstructing the fiction of the category of "women". As Alcoff (1988) has pointed out, the risk of this position is to conceal gender again, paradoxically finding a common ground with the liberal vision – based on a generic subject– wherein human particularities are insignificant[11].

Alternatives geared to constructing a theory that will avoid both essentialisms and the absolute elimination of differences find, in theoreticians such as Scott, major contributions in this direction. Scott maintains that the choice between equality and difference is disempowering, since "the very antithesis hides the inter-dependence of the two terms, because equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not exclude equality". She proposes that we reject that opposition, in the name of equality resting

7. Susan Brownmiller, quoted by Raquel Osborne (1994)
8. Carol Gilligan, quoted by Joan W. Scott (1986)
9. Denise Riley, quoted by Linda Alcoff (1988)
10. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Routledge, Great Britain, 1992
11. Linda Alcoff, Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminism Theory. In "Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society", Vol. 13, 1988

on differences. The author points out that these differences will always have meanings related to particular constructions in specific contexts (Scott, 1990).

In line with the reasoning, Alcoff introduces the concept of positionality, which would make it possible to address the debate no longer in terms of defining women as a group of objectively identifiable or predetermined attributes, but rather by the position that women occupy, lacking power and mobility, within a particular context[12].

These positions would have the advantage, for political action, of moving the debate from the arena of opponents excluding each other, to the summit of consensus, with a common argument for women, and a starting-point from which to make a critical analysis of reality and design common strategies to transform it.

The Scientific Plane

All cultures have constructed explanations about women, defining their nature or philosophizing about their particular traits, but all these approaches have been curiously near to stereotypes or distorting myths. The scientific perspective, despite its limitations, is one of the most effective attempts to describe the current status of women or retrieve their lives in history and explain the inequalities or the reason for them.

During these last few years, descriptive studies have multiplied (demographic, statistical, daily life and general diagnostic studies about women's situation in different settings) as have explanatory studies seeking the causes, the psychological or biological mechanisms creating differences, the social determining factors that have given rise to gender inequalities in given historical contexts.

Social sciences and gender

Systematic studies are important to establish the scope and depth of differences between men and women. If,

for example, we take a traditionally feminine characteristic such as passiveness, and attempt to establish whether it is part of the species' nature, a universal characteristic of human beings or socially constructed, it is important to incorporate rigorous empirical research that will provide approximate answers. To decide about this issue, the fundamental contributions to elucidate it will include archaeological studies about the first hominids, anthropological studies comparing lifestyles in different cultures, and sociological studies, among others, regarding ways that men and women relate with each other in different social classes or societies.

The curious thing is that, twenty years ago, questions about gender issues were not significant. An interesting example of this lack of interest, shared by sociology and history, demography and psychology, is the work of Margaret Ehrenberg (Women in Prehistory, 1989). This author pointed out that, although the issue of social hierarchies is central in archaeology, the degree of political and social power wielded by women in prehistory is a topic to which little attention has been paid, although archaeological evidence can provide invaluable indications of the wealth and status of past societies. What would seem to be an accidental omission is actually part of the overall invisibility of gender issues in almost all academic disciplines[13].

It is promising that scientific studies of gender are witnessing a period of intense activity. In some social science research, gender has been established as an integral part of the discipline, such as in sociology (Guiddens, 1993), whereas in others the research including gender issues has been

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12. Mouffé (1992) states that the whole false dilemma of difference crumbles once we no longer have a homogenous entity —"woman"— confronting another homogenous entity — "man"— but rather a multiplicity of social relationships in which the sexual difference is constructed in ways that are always very different, and wherein the struggle against subordination must be approached in specific, differentiated ways.

13. Margaret Ehrenberg, Women in Prehistory, British Museum Press, London, 1989

included only during the last few years, such as in archaeology or economics, where these studies are still peripheral[14]. Nevertheless, it is curious to note that several economists working with a gender perspective profoundly question the very assumptions of the discipline, its basic concepts, its a priori principles, in innovative, challenging studies (Morey, 1996). For example, Strober (1994) considers feminist economics to be a "radical task" questioning the scientific objectivity and challenging the value of efficiency and the omnipresence of selfishness as male values present in economics. Many world problems are not the result of scarcity –a basic notion of economics– but of poor distribution of wealth. It is strange, this author states, that classical theories accentuate solely the importance of competition –a trait valued as male– for survival, without complementing it with the idea of cooperation – a trait considered womanly. This all reinforces the idea that economic theory as a whole contains apparently universal suppositions that may be suspected of being non-objective sexist projections[15].

It is also interesting to examine the major contributions of such disciplines as human geography and, in particular, gender geography, called that because its analyses consider society's gender structure[16]. Along these same lines, the discipline of architecture and urban planning has been caught by surprise at the strong challenges based on the profusion of empirical studies conducted by scholars working with the gender perspective, influenced by developments in other disciplines regarding this issue. These concepts are firmly grounded in regard to construction of the urban habitat, division of public and private space, regional and urban territorial planning. These issues are reviewed and problematized as the findings of these studies begin to impact public policy-making[17].

Information about differentiated gender roles –studies describing the use of urban space by men and women, in regard to

work, recreation, distribution of city equipment, etc.– are indispensable in designing public policies so that the answers for urban planning will take that diversity into account.

Studies explaining gender relationships – how inequalities are constructed, social concepts of female and male, their impact on public and private space– will provide the input required for policies that will transform that reality rather than reproducing it.

Explaining the inequalities

Some conceptual frameworks attempt to explain inequality by emphasizing a single determining mechanism. In general, they center their attention or especially emphasize *a single level of analysis* or a single variable, such as women's physiology, or subordination of women to men's need to dominate in order to transcend their alienation from the species' means of reproduction (Scott, 1986). Despite the greater theoretical complexity we can also visualize this monocausality in Marxist explanations underscoring economic levels as the fundamental explanation for the oppression of women, or Freudian explanations that understand

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14. Guiddens in Sociology says «few areas of sociology have developed so significantly in recent years as gender studies, although they had received little attention for years»

15. Similarly, Julie Nelson (1992) proposes a review of various aspects of the ontological suppositions, criteria for choice and methodology used in present-day economics. This author also reflects on the limited understanding of the nature and human identity used in economic models as sexist.

16. Gender geography is the study that "examines the ways that socioeconomic, political and environmental processes create, reproduce and transform not only the places where we live but also the social relations between men and women living there and, at the same time, studies how gender relations impact those processes and their manifestations in space and the environment." Little et al., 1988, quoted by Ma. Dolores García-Ramón (1991).

17. See Falú, Rainero (1995) in Hábitat Urbano. Una visión desde el Género [Urban Habitat. A Vision from Gender]. This compilation of papers was produced by researchers from the Women and Habitat Network of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and specifically the work entitled «Urban Services and Women Dwelling in Peripheral Neighborhoods». This study shows that women are the main consumers of the family group's services and mediators of its needs. They are often spatially segregated in peripheral neighborhoods, which in turn empower social segregation, increasing the difficulties of making their domestic time demand compatible with their working schedules.

it as the result of psychological mechanisms of Oedipean phases or elements of primary socialization in the formation of the personality[18].

Certain "monocausal" theoreticians essentially stress the maternal nature of women or the dominant aggressiveness of males. Several books emphasize the *macro level* of analysis, placing the accent on individuals, on the importance of individual decisions or the interactions of small groups such as families or motherhood as the causes of oppression. Others emphasize the *macro determinations*, including broader spaces and times: institutions, economic structures, the influence of the mass media or historical determinations such as tradition and culture.

Each of these contributions has been useful because of their empirical richness and analysis of situations, but excessive emphasis on a single level of analysis may be partial and not sufficient to account for the complexity of the relationship established between the genders. There are currently thinkers who attempt, and rightly so, to produce *multicausal* explanations, seeking to delve into in-depth interactions at different levels, considering that each of them has a relative importance that becomes more complex in relation to other determining factors.

Janet Saltzman (1992) has taken this enriching direction, working on an integrated theory of intervening variables. Saltzman says: "Macrostructural changes trigger a change in the sexual division of labor by which women increase their access to working roles that generate resources. In turn, this change leads to the appearance and growth of feminist movements which, along with the unintentional effects of changes in female working roles, set in motion a series of changes in the system of sexes that reduces the level of inequality between them"[19].

The Epistemological Plane

This level of analysis attempts to answer the following questions: is it possible to learn with the scientific and methodological tools with which humans have produced knowledge so far, or are these tools strongly slanted by an androcentric perspective? Is scientific and philosophical knowledge neutral or is their supposed objectivity only a limited partiality coming out of a particular way of male thinking?[20].

A group of researchers, whom we shall call *rationalists*, defend reason as an instrument for probing reality, to describe the situation of women in different parts of the world, to establish interconnections among different variables. They often use both quantitative and qualitative methods for empirical analysis in the different social disciplines and trust logic or systematic reflection to get deeper into the scientific problems related to gender issues.

Other thinkers have adopted a *skeptical* position, pointing to distortions and inaccuracies, showing that knowledge is situation-dependent, contextualized and constitutionally associated with power. The supposed universality of discourses, projected politically and ethically, is understood as associated with enlightening ideas of modernness. Feminism joins a cultural phenomenon of disbelief in the basic western structures regarding the idea of progress and the possibility for reason to contribute to building better societies.

Classic positivism, an optimistic epistemological position toward knowledge, which has defended not only cognitive validity but the possibility of establishing changes in society through scientific recommendations, has been systematically challenged over the last few decades. The soundness of the foundations of knowledge is in doubt and so, therefore, is the possibility of constructing single, all-

18. It is interesting to include Nancy Chodorow's «maternalism». According to Guiddens (1993), Chodorow explains primary socialization, especially the relationship between children and their mothers, as the predominant influence and primary cause of gender psychology. In subsequent articles, Chodorow (1995) softens this social determination, stressing the differences between subjects and the function of personal creation in formation of personalities.
19. Saltzman op. cit. p. 51.
20. See Mujer y Ciencia [Women and Science], Diana Maffía, 1993.

encompassing theories, in either natural or social sciences.

At this point, it is possible to distinguish specifically, in feminist thought, *two fundamental currents* criticizing rationality, associated with contemporary lines of thought that have vied for the philosophical limelight in recent years: a) those working in the current of philosophy dealing with Anglo-Saxon science, and b) those using as their basic paradigm the Latin-American philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, which we shall label broadly and imprecisely as "post-modernism"[21].

Philosophy of the Anglo-Saxon Sciences and Gender.

Theoreticians working along these lines question science using relativistic arguments such as those of Wittgenstein, Kuhn and Feyerabend and doubt scientific neutrality because of the situational and contextual nature of knowledge. They reveal the weaknesses of observational, logical and methodological foundations.

Thus, objectivity is impossible in scientific output because it is perceived from a vantage point, observed from a theory, experienced from within a theoretical framework, theorized from a culture, and evaluated from an ideology: *one thinks from the contingency of gender*. Although some theoreticians extend this challenge to the natural sciences, the emphasis is laid on the possibility of constructing the social sciences.

According to these thinkers, ideas are not independent, but contextualized and determined by the existence of the subject they investigate. Along these lines, Evelyn Fox Keller (1991) asks: To what degree is the nature of science linked to the idea of maleness, and what could it mean for science to be otherwise? It is necessary not only to visualize women, concealed and absent from much research, but also from the very production of knowledge; women must become scientific producers, and they will contribute a different way of perceiving reality, which will compensate for the previous distorting slant[22].

This position is linked with the thinkers who consider that women's nature is essentially different —as developed on the ontological plane— and emphasize their special intuition, their distinctive capacity for connecting to reality and absorbing it with their feelings. All this will empower women to produce a different type of science.

Lorraine Code, a brilliant American theoretician, in her book entitled What can She Know? writes her most cogent arguments about the risk of thus essentializing women's capacity to interrogate Nature[23]. Code and other authors such as Longino (1995) emphasize that the problem lies in *the very ideas of objectivity and universality*, which implicitly contradict other qualities and characteristics such as subjectivity and particularity associated with female stereotypes. Subjectivity, avers this author, constitutes the subject who knows and within subjectivity *gender* is a salient characteristic[24].

Post-Modernism and Gender.

It is not easy to determine the relationship between post-modernism and feminism. Fraser and Nicholson (1994) consider that a *difficult distance* has been kept between them, although their weaknesses and

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21. The noteworthy exception to this current of thought that we are calling «Latin American» is the intellectual production of Richard Rorty who, although a North American, writes in the European clef. In several remarkable articles, he reflects on the relationship between epistemology and feminism.

22. Evelyn Fox Keller, Making Gender Visible in the Pursuit of Natures Secrets, in "Feminist Studies", Indiana University Press, 1986

23. Code says «The idea of reason is defined by excluding the characteristics commonly associated with womanliness. So, feminists need to understand these associations and develop strategies to construct epistemological positions and regulatory ideals that will not be so clearly aligned with androcentric values and their inevitable construction. The problem is to devise alternatives that will neither presuppose «essential» femininity nor appeal to «feminine» values that are as purely unreal and dogmatic as objectivity and ideal masculinity». Op. cit. p. 54.

24. Possibly the most serious statement is in the issue devoted by Synthese to these issues, relating the nature of objectivity to social values and interests (Harding, 1995) and connecting scientific criteria considered neutral in the sexless sense regarding the context from which they emerge (Longino, 1995). Also see Longino (1993).

strengths could *complement each other*[25]. S. Benhabib (1994) feels that they have formed a *«difficult alliance»*. We think that what has been broadly termed post-modernism is at least a paradigm with *profound influence* for feminist theoreticians.

Post-modernism revisits Dilthey's criticisms of positivism, Heidegger's observations on the function of science in society, Gadamer's reflections on understanding human beings as more associated with art than with rigor, and Nietzsche's methodological precision and affirmations regarding the relationship between knowledge and power.

Especially Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault have been strongly influential among feminist theoreticians regarding certain key points in the debate: the dissolution of strong dichotomies, mistrust of western «meta-narratives», the pretentiousness of essentializing women by attempting to define them. Absolute standards, great theories, and universal categories are abandoned, and local research is favored, in a historical context and pragmatic strategies. Removing the subject from center stage, plurality of voices, and incorporation of differences challenge western knowledge, which would like to be the absolute interpreter[26].

In this direction, Judith Butler (1990) questions the uncontested acceptance of the term «woman», challenging the subject as a candidate for universal representation, with a common identity that is independent of class, ethnic and regional modes of discourse. It is impossible to separate «gender» from the political and cultural intersections with which it invariably is produced and maintained.

This author says: "If one `is' a woman, this is not everything one is; the term is not exhaustive, because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different periods and historical contexts".

The danger lies in the fact that the universalizing term of "woman" can attempt to cover up other types of oppression, creating a fictitious universality because of its attempt at

functionalism. In a subsequent article, J. Butler wrote, "If I understand part of the project of post-modernism, the aim is to question the ways that `examples' or `paradigms' are used to subordinate and conceal what they supposedly explain"[27].

An important outcome of questioning the universality of knowledge is an alternative construct based on the subject's personal experience, interior perspective, biography and individual stories. This aspect, neglected in classical social sciences, acquires almost foundation-level stature for some scholars of post-modernist feminism. The subject is constituted on the basis of discourses and the practices of meanings, both interwoven with power[28].

Experience is colored by the interpretations that women themselves make of their situation. This is built and reproduced constantly[29].

Linda Singer (1992) reminds us of a major part of the "family feeling" between post-modernism and feminism: both particularly resist and defy established forms of power by questioning the legitimacy and validity of mechanisms by which power is sustained[30]. The strategy is to demonstrate that things are not as they should be, or expound the ways in which things are not as we believe they are. Both post-modernistic theoreticians and feminists relativize and ironically mock the voice of authority's uniqueness, revealing the contradictions within or alternatives to dominant discourses.

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25. These authors say: "Post-modern thinkers offer sophisticated, persuasive criticism of essentialism and foundationalism, but their concepts regarding social criticism are often anemic. Feminism offers powerful concepts in social criticism, but sometimes fall into foundationalisms and essentialisms.» op. cit. p. 243.
26. Donna Haraway denounces that the thrust of the Enlightenment, despite its emancipatory ideology, actually resulted in oppressing women, because it silenced their voices, or ignored alternative ways of gaining knowledge.
27. Butler (1992).
28. The subject is embodied language, says Jane Flax. Men are trapped forever in the cobweb of the fictitious meaning, in the chains of meaning, in which the subject is simply another position in the language. Quoted in Benhabib (1994).
29. For a critical review of this notion of experience that paradoxically seems to have become a founding level, see Scott (1992), Butler (1992) and also Diana Maffia (1995).
30. Linda Singer, Feminism and Postmodernism, in "Feminists Theorize the Political", Routledge, New York, 1992

Another epistemological constant in contemporary feminist debate is criticism of the binary logic of dichotomies: true-false, objective-subjective, science-rhetoric, science-politics, science-literature, reason-feelings, knowledge-literature, interest-disinterest, knowledge-power and so on, to which the male-female dichotomy is associated. They attempt to do away with the alternative poles, and to undo conceptual options: in practice, knowledge is constructed on the basis of subjectivity, becoming legitimate through rhetorical arguments, not disinterestedly, discovering power factors in ongoing negotiations to settle one solution on top of another. There is no production of knowledge without emotional passion or values that are not grounded in concrete interests. Thus, in this critical view, gender seems to be a constitutional variable of theory-building[31].

The bounds of skepticism

The problem both for thinkers from the Anglo-Saxon tradition and for those in post-modern philosophy is the risk of relativism. Nihilism is the scandalous boundary of skepticism. If pressure is applied toward total criticism, if questioning is far-reaching, only silence remains, or discourse as a pastime, or the likening of all theories, all opinions, all experiences. Therefore, most feminist thinkers, although they weaken the image of objective, universal, ahistorical knowledge, do subsequently moderate their criticism[32].

The Political and Economic Plane

The concept of gender aims to show the social hierarchy that is constructed on the basis of differences attributed to the sexes and, consequently, the inequity in distribution of resources at different levels. This implies a concern with explaining in each society the unequal appropriation of wealth, political power, status and prestige.

In the last few years, gender inequity has been studied and documented specifically at the level of interpersonal relations,

showing unequal patterns of resource use in couples and families that are also expressed in institutions. Power, defined as the ability of individuals or groups to enforce their interests, is manifested not only in the micro dimension of face-to-face relations, but especially inserted in broader structures of the social macro level.

The most important lines of thought explaining sexual stratification, for example, relate these issues with the organization of society at large. Conflicts of interests between the genders at the individual level are inter-related closely with the way of solving the most pressing political and economic problems.

The larger political controversies of this century have asked: Is it possible to change female inequality independently from other factors of power and social inequalities? How is feminist theory linked with classical political theories: liberalism and capitalism versus critical positions?

Liberal politics preaches equal opportunities and feminists in this camp base women's access to public spheres fundamentally on formulating policies of equality, assuming from the outset the possibility of "modernization" and "progress" within the prevailing economic model. However, as Cristina Molina Petit (1994) has put it, the equal opportunities preached by liberalism mean purely formal equality, such as a legal guarantee. In liberal politics, equal opportunities have historically been translated into opening the doors for women to become involved in the public domain through the labor market and the consequent assumed autonomy. However, at the same time, the organization of society —based on the sexual division of labor— which defines women in private terms, interferes with this possibility[32].

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31. See Donna Haraway in Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. (1994) to appreciate this new style of scientific-literary, argumentative and personal work.

32. Lorraine Code, for instance, defends an "attenuated relativism"; after questioning the idea of traditional objectivity, she affirms that scientific values associated to maleness are developed on the basis of social thrusts, but that the legitimated outcomes are the result of constrained subjects

Consequently, public activity, more than liberation, means that women have to cover both worlds, often entailing a double workday. This situation has affected women's quality of life, warning that equal opportunities under the law may not be a sufficient guarantee to solve the problem of inequality.

In this regard, Angeles Perona (1994) has stated that this new reality led liberal feminism to defend a certain form of governmental intervention, in both the economy and in key institutions (education, health, social assistance). This "welfare liberalism" accepts certain measures of positive discrimination, recognizing that women's disadvantages must be taken into account. Liberal feminism does not dispute the public-private dichotomy, but attempts to reconcile the two spheres, making home and workplace compatible.

Critical positions are also skeptical about the chance for real changes in the existing system. Marxist feminists have intensely debated about the economic and social structure between those who hold orthodox positions and those who question them. The former point to the prevailing capitalistic mode of production as the cause for gender oppression and derive the transformation of women's status from a change in such structures. The latter problematize the ideas of socialist classics – Bebel, Marx, Engels[34]– objecting that the ideological commitment to women was only superficial and incidental, and questioning economic single-causality as an explanation of inequality – as already mentioned regarding scientific thought. Scott, regarding the first discussions among Marxist theoreticians, has said that they acknowledged that economic systems do not directly determine gender relations, and that women's subordination actually comes from capitalism and survives in socialism.

Juliet Mitchell (1995), a British feminist, thinking about women's subordination in the socialist tradition, says that in socialist thought this issue has been subsidiary or invisible in theoreticians' concerns.

Transformation of women's subordination can be achieved only insofar as it is accompanied by changes in production, reproduction, sex and socialization, and all attempts to change *just one* of these integrated elements may paradoxically reinforce the remaining ones[35].

Socialist feminism, on the basis of radical feminism's contribution to the analysis of patriarchal relationships, politicized the private realm, granting private relations a public, political category. That is, "through women's experience in the reduct of private life, authentic relationships of power between men and women are unveiled, and these relationships are politically meaningful"[36].

The Dual System theory, to which many socialist feminists adhere, states that capitalism and patriarchal rule are separate domains but act reciprocally to maintain the oppression of women. As Janet Saltzman puts it, patriarchy is advantageous for capitalism, since the dominant ideology helps keep women in their role of mothers and, consequently, in unpaid housework or poorly-paid work outside the home[37]. The income margin

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who negotiated within the bounds of evidence and facts. Something like a re-conceptualization of rationality or objectivity could make it possible, despite its weakening, to affirm and learn. Also see Frazer and Nicholson (1995).

33. Cristina Molina Petit, Feminismo Socialista Contemporáneo en el ámbito Anglosajón (Contemporary Socialist Feminism in the Anglo-Saxon Domain) in "Historia de la Teoría Feminista". Coordinated by Celia Amorós, Madrid, Spain

34. Augusto Bebel's "La mujer en el pasado, presente y futuro" [Women in the past, present and future] was a standard book for the German Social Democrat party at the turn of the century. It states: "Each socialist recognizes that workers depend on the capitalist class, and cannot understand the others, especially the capitalists themselves; but the socialists themselves often fail to recognize women's dependence on men, because the question hits too close to home, to oneself."

35. In the relationship between women's liberation and a critical leftist movement, see McAfee, Wood (1995), theoreticians who visualize the root of the gender problem in relation to the capitalist system (Jones, 1995).

36. See Molina Petit, 1994.

37. Along these lines, Zillah Eisenstein exemplifies the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy through the criticism of liberalism by the new US right wing. The Right claims that the welfare state is responsible for weakening families, by giving importance to female heads of household and unwed mothers, which undermines the role of the provider-father. Theoreticians of the new US right propose restoring fathers' power, strongly questioning whether money is not something earned by men, but a right that the State gives women. Quoted by Molina Petit (1994).

extracted in this situation contributes to concentrating money in monopolistic sectors of economic and political power, which benefit by maintaining and reproducing low-cost labor.

For Marxist feminists, women's oppression in the contemporary world is sustained by capitalists' power to protect and realize their interests. Therefore, oppression cannot be eliminated without a macro-level transformation of dominant structures.

In the academic world, the influence of critical paradigms has been profound in the 70s and 80s. Different reflections on relationships between feminism and Marxism have no longer attempted to "de-construct" dominant discourses but rather to "reconstruct" a feminist theoretical position, including class and gender in their analysis of social reality.

Beyla and Cornell (1987), after analyzing the contributions of scholars specializing in Marx, Habermas and Foucault, agree that at least there is a consensus about a *minimal utopia* of social life characterized by care and concern for expressive rather than repressive relationships among human beings and between humans and Nature[38].

In recent decades, it has not been enough to pose the question of gender within dichotomous capitalist-socialist paradigms, since the present-day situation of globalization, technological revolution, information interconnection and economic concentration requires a greater intellectual effort to re-think that reality. The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, symbolizing a utopia of social organization able to meet society's basic needs with efficiency and justice, challenges many socialist feminists's belief in the power of such models as referents.

However, the model of structural adjustment of the economy, State reform and market liberalization worldwide has produced a new situation that is disadvantageous for women. At the social theory level, there would seem to be a situation of "consciousness-raising" regarding the effects of this new reality on people's standards of living and general

recommendations about how women can help reverse the negative effects of adjustment measures by joining other disadvantaged social groups[39].

Lately, different ways of relating gender issues with other conflict-ridden areas have emerged: for example, eco-feminists have merged the critical, transforming power of ecology with feminism, creating a new platform for action that is critical of the existing social structure; there are also the women belonging to "Third-World" countries, the contribution of black women, of indigenous women, and so on, who join critical theoreticians from the developed countries in order to create alternative development models[40].

In Latin America, where newborn democracies are still behind in delivering on women's rights of citizenship, the theoretical production has been quite prolific and reveals the progress and growth of gender awareness, reinforced by the process of the United Nations Conference on Women (Beijing 95).

The theoretic debate hinges on arguments that make it possible to lay out and rethink common political strategies. At the same time, they respect the plurality of situations in the different countries of this continent. The document bringing together the position of Latin America's women criticizes the standardized imposition of severe economic policies on these countries, because these policies have widened social gaps and worsened the

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38. We feel that a key contribution is Linda Nicholson's analysis of Marx as a contradictory figure for feminist theory: "Feminist theory has challenged the assumption of the necessary analytical distinction between family and State prevailing in the liberal outlook, but must also challenge the assumption of the analytical distinction of the economy, present both in the liberal and Marxist views. Feminists can use much of Marxist work to understand the separation of family, State and economy as a historical rather than cultural phenomenon, but must criticize their philosophical anthropology, which continues and reinforces the modern suppositions that economic matters are autonomous" (Nicholson, 1987).

39. See Las Repercusiones sobre las Mujeres de la Globalización Económica [Repercussions for Women of Economic Globalization], Marcia Rivera, 1996.

40. In regard to eco-feminism, see Braidotti et al. (1994) and, to more amply view gender and the Third World see the theories produced by DAWN (Development with Women for a New Era).

situation of vulnerable sectors, ethnic groups and especially women. These actions have also undermined the processes of social, economic and political democratization, which processes have helped Latin America's women make some progress. (NGO Forum for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1994).

In defending and reinforcing democratic institutions, the role of the State and its linkages with civil-society organizations are the context for discussion about the women's movement in this region. The fundamental issues or points for reflection hinge on the concepts of women's citizenship, autonomy, political negotiation, search for common strategies contemplating diversity and heterogeneity of women's situations and coordination with other projects for collective action. These issues are strongly linked to ethics.

A significant contribution by contemporary feminism's theoretical debate to general policy is the possibility of rethinking the political level and social relationships as a whole. This also maintains the necessary tension between contextualization of each issue without losing sight of situations' heterogeneity and the need for alliances that will legitimize and enhance the meaning of the feminist struggle.

The Ethical Plane

Every human being is entitled to inalienably enjoy certain basic benefits. What were called *the Rights of Man* were reformulated by Eleanor Roosevelt as *Human Rights*, thus emphasizing the incorporation of gender into their formulation and resting fundamental ethical concepts on the solidarity of human beings toward each other. Recognition and acquisition of these rights is not independent from a lengthy process of building and defending them.

Legal rights were the object of the first women's demands. The suffragists fought, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for the right to vote, thinking about the force of this right for transformation and political pressure. Doubtlessly, voting has

helped women obtain a hearing but this has by no means resulted in any automatic redistribution of power. The distance between a listing of rights and their actual enjoyment is abysmal in some cases. The problem lies in how to translate the enunciation of rights, formally guaranteed in many Constitutions, into rights that will be *enjoyed* in practice. We are currently living within a contradiction between legal equality and de facto inequality.

As Elizabeth Jelin has put it,"clearly there is a great distance between the formality of law and the reality of its enforcement". The concern is for genuine compliance with national laws and international conventions, and here the gender perspective helps visualize women as receiving unequal benefits, and encountering difficulties in their integration as active, independent members of society.

In Latin America, the fight for women's rights has been translated into reaffirming the concept of *citizenship*, in a generously broad interpretation of this term that includes not only formal recognition of political participation and civil rights but also actual *participation* through active political practice and *enjoyment* of a certain minimum standard of living, well-being and economic security (Lo Vuolo, 1995).

Paradoxically, women have arrived late to recognition of their rights as citizens, but are now an international political movement that is unifying with the intention of broadening the actual observance of their rights[41].

Notwithstanding the diversity of situations, ethnic groupings, cultures, nationalities and classes —relativism versus universalism— the idea is to lay a foundation of rights that are shared by every woman in the world. Beyond recognizing the diversity of options in life, equality of opportunities and rights must be recognized. The universalization of

41. For more on the topic of women's rights and broadening citizenship, especially see Pautassi (1995) who demonstrates the fairness of claiming the right to a basic level of material well-being.

these rights is a minimum foundation on the basis of which to accept the heterogeneity of cultures, plurality of voices, providing they are not grounded in subordination or gender asymmetry. The right to education is universal, regardless of any culture or religion that excludes women from the public sphere (e.g. the Moslem culture).

In such a case, universal rights should override ethnic or religious particularities. If there are substantial contradictions between universal rights and cultural diversity, the former should outrank the latter because they are geared to developing the possibilities for human self-realization, despite any fundamentalist position.

However, there are numerous situations in which there is a gap between inalienable rights, which cannot be bargained away by any human being because all humans are entitled to them, and the *awareness* that rightholders have of their rights. The more subordinated, alienated or marginalized a person or social group is, the less they will know about possibilities to claim their rights, and they will see hierarchical relations as "normal", in a process known as *naturalization* of social hierarchies. Women, in many countries, are aware of their legal rights but seldom question how democratically their private home life is run.

The important thing about this statement is how to get policies to visualize women *in their own right* and not as intermediaries in relation to other pressing social problems such as poverty, reproduction, illiteracy, nutritional level of other family members, etc. Some programs, for example, recognize the importance of investing in women as a way of reducing the birth rate, since there is a proven relationship between women's educational level and the number of pregnancies.

An example of this is the rationale for the importance of considering gender for development, as outlined by the *World Bank* in Toward Gender Equality: "disparities between men and women create inefficiencies, set development back and reduce society's possibilities for well-being. Studies have shown the benefits of investing in women".

The World Bank recommends investing in women and girl children as an effective strategy to reduce poverty. Governments, they assure us, cannot keep from investing in women anymore, since this is not only a question of justice, but will also reduce population growth, increase labor productivity, boost human capital formation rates and promote economic growth. The emphasis on women is as an intermediary for other purposes (economic, demographic, family-related) rather than to fairly promote women in their own right.

Beyond pragmatic purposes, it is fundamental to remember that *ethical motivations must be an integral part of policy-making*. It is important to differentiate between those policies that visualize women in terms of the benefits that this will bring some other group, and those that do so because of certain principles of justice and basic elemental rights.

The need for active women's citizenship, understood as political recognition of rightholders and their endeavors, also dovetails with the concept of autonomy, which Vargas (1993) defines as people's rights to defend their interests, control their own lives and circumstances. "The more progress is made in women's autonomy, the more their interests will be clarified and prioritized, the surer they will be about what they want, and about what they are willing to negotiate for."

For a significant, majority sector of the feminist movement, the autonomy now being debated about has already gone beyond the defensive stage, and is now reformulated in self-reliant proposals, working for women's goals and varied interests in the long term, and working to see these proposals assumed in the short term by society and the State, as a way of "massifying" them and generating a common foundation for all women[42].

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42. For more details on the concept of autonomy, see the work of Virginia Vargas (1991) (1993) (1995).

IV. The Plane of Practice

Gender and public policy

Latin America has produced a vast amount of theory regarding the actions and interventions of the State or non-governmental agencies that work with women, and this theory is important food for reflection. The region's context in which these actions take place is characterized by profound State transformations. Since the crisis of the 70s, the State has largely reformulated its functions. The end of economic growth, curtailing of resources for public spending, loss of full employment and the beginning of massive unemployment have all been translated into strong social exclusion characterizing the new conditions of State action.

Further, a fundamental feature of the new Latin American reality, which is particularly forceful in Argentina, is the appearance of the so-called new poor, a middle class with increasing material wants, but who maintain their aspirations (consumption, education, health, and general quality of life). This situation has considerably increased the number of women in the job market, whether to complement male income or because they are the main providers for their households. As described by Feijoó (1993), this has affected the relationship between the productive and reproductive spheres of the sectors in question, redefining the dimensions of public and private, individual and collective, societal and governmental. The author says that these new poor of Argentina, now that they cannot afford private educational and health-care services, for example, are forced to resort to the State market; however, finding the impoverishment of State service delivery, they feel that their citizenship and self-esteem are eroded. Nevertheless, they continue to share the belief, among this social class, that they are entitled to access certain rights as citizens. It remains to be seen whether women will convey their demands to the government on the basis of their rights as citizens.

In recent years, decentralization processes, generally without the necessary resources, have become, in most countries of this region, «deconcentration of problems». This has raised new questions regarding the role of the State and, particularly, the possibilities of local governments to assume the new responsibilities that they are being assigned. However, paradoxically, decentralization entails potential advantages: on the one hand, greater municipal leadership in areas that had been the stronghold of national agencies changes their role from mere policy implementers to policy designers, in the areas of health, education, labor and housing. On the other hand, decentralization fosters a closer dialogue between the government and civil society, opening up opportunities for participation to influence social policies. State decentralization brings new actors on stage, including women, in local government spheres that offer new possibilities to participate in revising social policy contents.

Although this potential opening for participation is generated by decentralization, it does not yet institutionalize practices wherein gender issues in local governance –at least in Argentina– enjoy a comparable status to other municipal issues.

There has been progress in social policy favoring women, but the trend in most countries of the region is to reduce interventions to assistance for vulnerable groups of women. Programs and projects for women by local governments are geared fundamentally to meeting women's "practical needs", i.e. the most immediate requirements for survival of the poorest groups. Evidently, needs involving larger-scope cultural transformations, such as economic autonomy, changes in the sexual division of labor, promotion of participation in decision-making, etc. are still difficult to legitimize socially and impose over the interests of community groups with more power.

In Latin America in the 1950s and 60s, development organizations implemented

projects and programs targeting women in terms of their reproductive role: family planning, population control, home economics and child and mother care. In the 70s, the objective was to integrate women into development (Women in Development, WID), understanding that their marginalization was an obstacle to development. The common denominator of these programs and projects was consideration of women's intermediation to reverse certain parameters such as poverty, malnutrition, high birth rates, or marginalization. In summary, greater effectiveness was achieved in women's traditional role, without substantially changing the problem of women's subordination. That is, this approach never questioned gender hierarchies.

Around the mid-80s and to go beyond WID, *Gender in Development* (GID) came around. This approach emphasizes gender more than just women, recognizing the different roles attributed to men and women in society, subordination of gender and unequal access to resources, proposing that planning and management actions provide for the different effects upon men and women.

At least on a theoretical level, this approach proposes actions that will respond to women's short-term demands, considering at the same time the future impact on gender subordination relationships. This makes it possible to incorporate the time variable, differentiating between women's so-called "practical needs" (specific, daily needs resulting from their current status) and their "strategic needs" based on a critical reflection regarding longer-term transformations that the different interventions call for[43].

If, now, we relate this level of analysis with the political and economic plane, this approach has the same limitations as the neoliberal policies that it fails to question. Gender in Development does not necessarily relate the situation of women's subordination with that of other social groups that have been excluded by the working of the capitalistic system itself.

However, experience has shown that women participating in the different programs, even those initially addressing their reproductive role or attempting to solve their immediate needs, acquire a level of consciousness that often ties in with the more general struggle regarding poverty and social exclusion. They incorporate larger-scope political demands that often go beyond women's specific interests, addressing the organization of society, State obligations, and the concept of democracy, justice and equity.

Final reflections about how the different paradigms fit into practical decision-making.

The most pressing question in our countries is how to satisfy essential needs including work, food, housing, education for the people and how to make the response equitable for different social groups and in gender terms. Regarding gender, public policy-making takes us to an essential debate, involving the definition of needs: what they are, how they are perceived and expressed by women, who defines them and who satisfies them.

Reflection on what the people's genuine top-priority needs are and how to satisfy them involves gender dimensions or paradigms that we have analyzed in this paper. We shall attempt to show, in closing, the close connection between practical decisions –implementing plans and programs– and the theoretical issues outlined.

What are women's real needs?

This top-priority reflection entails the philosophical idea of women as beings – the ontological plane. Is it possible to speak of comparable needs for men and women or do women have particular needs that are theirs alone?

In the former case, programs are implemented in which women are

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43. See Caroline Moser (1991) and Anderson (1992).

swallowed by the more general concept of families or other social target groups. Official discourse legitimizes the non-existence of specific programs for women by arguing for equal treatment: "differentiating for women would be discriminating against them". This denies the de facto inequality of male and female conditions: generally temporary labor insertion, for lower wages and without social security, insufficient training to compete on the market, etc.

This position is illustrated by the many examples of housing policies targeting "families" that fail to take into account the heterogenous composition of households (e.g. the high percentage of female heads of household). Such policies are discriminatory in practice, pretending to be neutral by assuming a single type of "nuclear" family.

Along these lines of argumentation, owner-building housing programs can also be discriminatory because of their foreseeable consequences for women not supported by another adult. Thus, conditions or requirements to receive housing or credit benefits are generally another element of exclusion: minimum income, proof of salary as proof of income. This is caused by imagining situations that are unlike the reality of many women in the socioeconomic sectors where the State intervenes, since they do not belong to the formal employment sector.

The choice of urban areas and therefore the location of houses and access to services and equipment (transport, child care, health centers, etc.) also entails exclusions that affect the daily quality of life for women, who are the main users of these support services.

In the second case, programs address women's differences, but this depends on how these differences are defined: essential and immutable or constructed (ontological plane). Their contents will substantially differ, either reinforcing women's current position or questioning the social patterns and therefore promoting true cultural transformations of relations among the genders.

Training programs for women from low-income sectors are one of the areas in which such positions have been analyzed. If women are seen as having their own skills, i.e. those traditionally attributed to their gender, program content will reproduce those stereotypes, excluding the other possibilities. On the contrary, if women's autonomy is addressed, the program will attempt to develop alternative knowledge that will guarantee their enhanced insertion into the market *a gender equity program*.

There are experiences in which women have taken part in owner-building programs, receiving training in trades that are not traditionally for women. In some few cases, this has resulted in subsequent insertion in the labor market. Still required are actions targeting society at large, to transform discriminatory gender patterns impacting the potential labor market. Explicit organizational support for women must be provided in those activities that are considered innovative.

In the search for answers to women's real needs, it is important to distinguish between *universal needs*, which are common to the entire human race, and those resulting from the dynamically changing social context. The former seem to be directly related to meeting the most essential needs for survival, linked to biological, psychological and social characteristics that persist over time (biological needs such as food, psychological needs such as affective stimuli, sociological needs such as belonging...). The impossibility of meeting needs would seem to detract from full human development[44].

However, the different way of meeting basic needs is characteristic of human beings' inherent variability: how, when and what is eaten depends on culture, the historical period, regional customs, and the

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44. The lack of satisfying factors results in inferior lifestyles, constraining possibilities for life: a child's physical growth can be affected by under-nutrition (a physiological need) and there is the phenomenon of «maternal deprivation» in institutional children leading to crib death (a psychological need); social isolation can lead to suicide (a social need).

symbols and interpretations involved in meeting this need. Virginia Vargas (1993) reminds us of the different identities, particular situations, and even the changing, conflicting nature of interests reflected in specific historical situations and different inter-relationships.

It may be dangerous to defend solely the universal needs or, conversely, the cultural ones, and failing to seek the complex inter-relationships among them in practice. Technocratic and scientific models often offer «universal» patterns that approach an essentialistic definition of human beings: all humans possess such and such characteristics, and therefore their satisfactions and solutions are also universal and unique (*rationalism on the epistemological plane*).

Knowledge resulting from a scientific methodology can be «sold» as an unquestioned prescription by those imposing their product (which can be analyzed on the *political plane*). Further, the diversity of possible alternatives is sometimes emphasized, the multiple discourses, regional differences, sometimes so that it is impossible to separate the contextual from the basic (*relativism on the epistemological plane*).

Pregnancy is a biological process with certain universal characteristics, and all women in this state undergo a series of physical transformations that position them differently at the social level. However, the way that the social group defines pregnancy, the psychological perception of it by women, the particular value assigned to it by each society, the hierarchical enhancement or degradation of pregnant women, the possibility of continuing to participate or not in different social activities depends largely on the particular situation of each society.

What needs are felt, expressed and demanded by women?

Perception and expression of needs, mostly closely aligned with what we could call a «discourse», does not necessarily agree with so-called basic needs. A lack of education and social marginalization usually result in a lack of awareness of essential needs or rights (*the ethical plane*). In Santa Cruz de la Sierra, low-income women would deliver their children at the hospital, and were accommodated two to a bed. However, they demanded nothing more; rather, they were grateful because they were fed «free of charge» for two days. Their demands were slight, although their needs were very great.

Women from a poor urban neighborhood in the outskirts of the city of Córdoba, Argentina, whose personal quality of life was seriously affected by countless deficiencies, were asked, in the specific case of public transport service, what activities they could not perform because the service was too expensive or there was some other problem with it. They answered with demands involving their role as mothers, or as intermediaries for the family group, and were unable to articulate any demands of their own.

In policy-making, it is fundamental to take into account how citizens express their needs. However, at the same time it must be considered that these demands may be ideological statements, and therefore a distortion of reality. Beliefs may be the result of a lack of information (*scientific plane*) or of messages imposed by power groups (*political power*).

An example that everyone remembers is the way that, for several decades, women were convinced that powdered milk formulas were better for babies than breast-feeding. This practice was maintained until campaigns were waged to deconstruct that manipulative message and show the importance of mothers' milk. This all shows that a government nutrition policy will depend on citizens' perception of their needs and the concrete practices that they engage in every day to meet those needs. However, it must complement them with suitable information about available scientific knowledge.

In other cases, women's voice has been silenced. Needs are not felt or expressed as

such. Therefore, they must be created in the process of learning about rights and the needs of all human beings for their full development. We have witnessed in our research that women with small children have little or no free time for themselves[45]. If we assume that all human beings are entitled to leisure time, free of responsibilities (*ethical plane*) then policies should attempt to include women in recreational activities, and to help them see the need to do so, leading them to demand such time or negotiate in the home to obtain it. Public policy can not only respond to existing demands but also create them, using specific techniques and methods (*scientific plane*).

Who defines needs?

It is possible to impose one's own definition on that of others[46]. In a stratified society, with social and gender inequalities, based on domination and subordination, need definitions are not negotiated on a plane of equality[47]. Having power means the ability to legitimize one's own needs: How much free time do women require? How is housekeeping work distributed by gender? How much food do male children need compared to female children? The different stakeholders will attempt to impose their own interpretation of needs and therefore the distribution of the resources to meet them (*political plane*). In many cases, conflicts between definitions are resolved by the discourse of the strongest, and once this interpretation is legitimized it appears «natural», which helps consolidate domination.

In a family, who decides how to spend money to meet family members' needs and demands? In a municipality, who decides if the priority is to build a child-care center or to widen an avenue? Who in the government are empowered to define needs for the public and distribute resources?

Are planners, officials, and legislators only men or do they equitably include both sexes? It is possible for a policy distortion that especially favors men to be an unconscious result of the lack of women making use of their right to govern.

This leads us to the need for women's active participation in local government decision-making and definition and priority-ranking of problems, leading to allocation of available resources[48]. However, women's presence does not automatically guarantee that public policy will be permeated with the gender perspective. Actions usually concentrate mostly in the social area (poverty being the legitimation for specifically women's programs) rather than visualizing that, in all decisions, from the priority-ranking of how to allocate municipal resources, to the modality and design of how to implement the different actions and undertakings, they can and need to be assessed from the gender standpoint. The *presence of women's interests* in local governance is still an outstanding debt.

Who should satisfy demands?

For example, in regard to the need, in every society, to care for its *children*: who should be in charge of them? "Women, especially", would be the traditional politician's answer, "men and women" would be the feminist answer, emphasizing the importance of joint care. From a political plane, we can find where to cut: a conservative position would insist on women's responsibility for child care, whereas a socialist perspective would

45. Uso del Tiempo y el Espacio: Asimetrías sociales y de género. Investigación CISCSA [Use of Time and Space: Social and Gender Asymmetries. CISCSA Research]. Mimeo, 1995-96.
46. The famous Theorem of Thomas "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences", stated in 1928, inaugurated a major school of thought in sociology that studies the importance of defining situations as a process of inter-group construction centering on meaning and strongly conditioning conduct.
47. See Nancy Frazer (1991) for a profound analysis reflecting the complexity of definition needs. The author analyzes the different discourses about needs, the power struggle to interpret and define them, and thus to be able to determine what to satisfy them with. She shows the difficulty of establishing what the real needs are in a context of conflict where hegemonic discourse prevails.
48. The law of quotas in Argentina, which obliges political parties to guarantee 30% of the slots on their slates for women, has resulted in greater female presence in local government decision-making.

emphasize the State's essential responsibility in shared care for the new generations. Here, as in other public policies, a gender perspective would insist on responsibility shared by men and women along with the government's duty and responsibility to ensure care for future citizens.

V. Conclusions

The kaleidoscopic situation reflecting the different positions will warn us about simply accepting the opinion of some «expert» who attempts to give standard, blanket solutions for planning (*epistemological plane, rationalistic position*) and also those who take a *relativistic position*, exaggerating the contextualization of needs, emphasizing the multiplicity of discourses, the particular details of situations or cultures, to the detriment of scientific studies regarding the basic needs of human beings.

The effort of theoretical reflection will begin by understanding that political actions must be the result of the «best decisions» that will incorporate the manifold intervening elements and consider not only efficiency but the justice of action programs. Abstract theory without social sensitivity can become a mere game, but action without theory runs the risk of being simplistic or being co-opted by technocratic prescriptions. The complexity of theoretical discussions calls for really understanding them and also staying free of their spell, if a true social transformation is to be achieved. In the problem of deciding about *which needs to prioritize*, these considerations all come into play.

Our purpose has been to visualize how the different levels and paradigms of gender are involved in programs and projects. It is possible to analyze a concrete public policy by interrogating it on different planes. For example, in a housing policy:

- What is the idea of families, of household unit, that is assumed? What is the idea of women who are targeted? Does it include essential roles and differences? (*ontological plane*)

- Has it incorporated recent research on the formation of family groups, or does it project stereotypes? Does it consider, in designing spaces –neighborhood and shelter unit– the different uses made by men and women? Does it take into account the possibilities and obstacles that the space –its functional organization and formal resolution– implies for men and women? Does it favor private spaces in the housing unit or promote public spaces that will favor women's social contacts? Does it provide for incorporation of collective facilities and public services, considering that most users will be women? (*scientific plane*)

- Does it promote an abstract concept of women or take into account the different cultural and social-class manifestations? (*epistemological plane*)

- Does it evaluate the impact of the intervention, considering women themselves, or does it visualize women only in terms of the family? (*ethical plane*)

- What is the modality of materializing the shelter units, conditions for their allocation, payment terms, loans, subsidies? (*political plane*).

Planning our lives and solving the community's problems seems to be more like steering a ship in a storm than like figuring out a mathematical algorithm. The constant lack of resources, especially in Latin American countries, makes it even more indispensable to systematically reflect on what the priorities are, and for them not to entail inequities for half the population. Planning with the gender perspective means making decisions that will imply, consciously or not, incorporation and ongoing evaluation of ontological, epistemological, ethical and political planes.

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