

## Feminisms and men in the Brazilian context: provocations from the 13<sup>th</sup> AWID International Forum

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**Abstract** *This paper shows some reflections based on the authors' participation in the AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) Forum, which took place in Brazil, in September 2016. These reflections provide key issues about principles and controversies in the work of research and activism on/with men and feminisms, based on the long path of work on masculinities and gender equality of these authors. From the field studies and political interventions on men and masculinities that take feminism as a theoretical and ethical-political framework, we discuss the production of masculinities in the feminist social transformation in contexts that are increasingly conservative and marked by male chauvinism and patriarchy. We also discussed how gender hierarchy emerges vigorously in the contemporary Brazilian political context, from the impeachment process of former president Dilma Rousseff to the formulation of current education and health policies.*

**Key words** *Gender, Feminism, Men*

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## Introduction

In this text, we share some of the concerns and provocations that occurred during our participation in the 13<sup>th</sup> AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) International Forum, a global feminist gathering, held in the period September 8-11, 2016 in Costa do Sauípe, Bahia, Brazil. This forum is held every 3-4 years, in a different part of the world, including cities like Istanbul/Turkey, Cape Town/South Africa, Bangkok/Thailand, and Guadalajara/Mexico. Some of the relevant objectives of the Forum were: "1) the celebration of the achievements of the last twenty years by several social movements and critically analyze the ensuing learning; 2) the assessment of the current reality to identify opportunities and threats regarding the promotion of the rights of women and other oppressed groups; c) the search for strategies to strengthen solidarity and collective power among the various movements; 4) inspiration, energy and renewal of strength and purpose"<sup>1</sup>. First scheduled for May 2016, the event was postponed due to the ZIKA epidemic.

Initially considered a local problem (in the Brazilian Northeast), the epidemic quickly became a global issue<sup>2</sup>, affecting the lives of countless women and with many discussions, especially on bioethics and sexual and reproductive rights, promoted by feminist and women movements<sup>3,4</sup>. Finally, the Forum was staged in September, gathering about 2,000 participants from a wide variety of movements, sectors and countries. In this meeting, the theme of which was "Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice", we highlight the presence of traditionally sidelined and underrepresented groups in collective spaces of discussion, among which are young feminist activists; black and indigenous women; sex workers; women with disabilities; and trans, intersex and migrant activists. Also, if in previous forums, male presence was shy, this edition evidenced an expressive number of cis and trans men dialoguing with different groups around issues related to social justice and with specific spaces focused on reflections on male participation on topics that are dear to feminism and collective health in the Brazilian context, such as sexual and reproductive rights; the prevention of violence against women and girls in private and public spaces; social participation in addressing health inequalities, which are among the most relevant. Moreover, among these men, we were the three activist-researchers who, for several years, dedicated themselves to the development

of collective actions, research and networking in order to work with men, from a strong attachment to feminist principles and horizons.

These initiatives build on a number of assumptions, among which are: 1) the recognition that the feminist project of social transformation is part of a broad movement for the symbolic and institutional reconfiguration and practices that subordinate women and the feminine; (2) the claim that such a transformation also requires substantial changes in the way men and masculinities are produced in our society, that is, we should review the several ways in which sexism and patriarchy conform to our daily lives and our institutions, values and symbols. Thus, as a strategy for thinking about limits and possibilities for the integration of men in the feminist struggle, we proposed to the Forum a specific session entitled "Feminisms and men: transforming practices, institutions and symbols". This proposal sought to dialogue with the discussion axes of the Forum such as democracy, violence, respect for differences. It is worth mentioning that the opening session was attended by a trans male, also contributing to the debates on masculinities.

We consider that the current challenges of feminisms and women's movements are not only related to women themselves. It is from this understanding that we integrate the actions and reflections with/on men and masculinities, such as the articulation of black women, with which we have dialogued and shared patterns of claims in the field of health, when we brought to the fore the genocide of the young population, especially of men, black people and the poor. Our interventions were guided by narratives about an itinerary of collective works that have already completed almost 20 years, during which we gained learning and experienced political, ethical and conceptual deadlocks.

This course begins in Brazil and other Latin American countries, especially since the 1990s<sup>5</sup>, when some men and women, civil society organizations and research groups decide to work directly with male populations, facing the challenge of working with men, from a feminist or gender perspective. The best way we found to talk about this itinerary was to share concerns, especially considering the current Brazilian political moment (with similar reverberations and dynamics in other countries of the region), which encourages us to talk about "masculinities in times of sexist and patriarchal coup", inasmuch as, on the one hand, during the process that resulted in the removal of President Dilma Rousseff, there were

recurrent references to sexist arguments, with a view to her moral disqualification, a game that began in the 2014 election campaign and extended after her departure from the Presidency. On the other hand, this trend is confirmed by the composition of a male-only ministry and a clear rejection of the feminist agenda by the current government assumed by former Vice President Michel Temer and his team.

Thus, we emphasize that the realization of this event occurred at a sad moment in Brazilian political history, which has certainly produced impacts on the lives of real women and men, but also in the symbolic and cultural forms from which we produce femininities and masculinities, making us face again the challenges that perhaps seemed to have already been overcome. We are living in difficult times, when setbacks threaten the young Brazilian democracy and produce lasting repercussions on the field of feminist studies and interventions in Brazil and other countries. After all, critical situations of this nature have occurred in several other countries, as discussed in the opening session, mediated by Sonia Correa, co-coordinator of the ABIA Sexuality and Policy Observatory (SPW). The impact of this scenario on the field of political studies and interventions on men and masculinities, which take feminism as a theoretical and ethical-political framework, is of great concern to us.

Thus, we seek from the speech of each one to bring elements to the debate about working with men from feminist readings, anchored in our actions as activists and researchers, and close dialogue with public policies. We also seek, through specific selections of our performance, to provide the participants with a broad view on deadlocks, but also possibilities within the contemporary context. In general terms, we emphasize that the transformation of gender relationships to the promotion of social justice, with equality and democracy, is, among other possible alternatives, a result of education in sexuality, as long as it recognizes the need for reflection on naturalization processes about social places of men and women and respect for differences.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed, in different countries, the development of a project to dismantle the course undertaken since the end of the 1990s, regarding sexuality education, assumed in the Brazilian context by collaboration between the health and education sectors, besides the strong presence of civil society organizations. Contrary to human rights, fundamentalist debates that disregard the theoretical-epistemo-

logical consistency of the field of gender studies insist on fallacies such as “gender ideology” and are taking shape in different Latin American countries. The adoption of this terminology by conversational sectors, especially of a Christian religious nature, reveals a space of tensions and disputes in which social respect for gender diversity and sexual orientation and the ideal of equality between men and women is at stake.

Thus, the proposal to censor sexuality education in schools (camouflaged in the expression “school without a party”), criticism of the use of educational materials related to coping with homophobia (pejoratively called “gay kit”), persecution of the “gender” term in public education plans exemplify only few initiatives that have gained the headlines, political disputes, and recent election campaigns across the country<sup>6</sup>. In this fundamentalist thinking, the possible equality between men and women becomes a danger to the maintenance of the current status quo based on gender asymmetry and hierarchy. Recognizing the dismantling of sexuality education in the current Brazilian context means pointing to the urgent need to establish a position of struggle in favor of secularity, equity and equality between men and women, from a feminist and gender perspective.

Similarly, we must alert to resistance to the recognition of women in politically representative spaces, which has been growing in recent years, as well as a complex web that links the field of politics to ancient patriarchal traditions. In Brazil, by assuming the possibility of a woman in the highest position of national political representation, we witness resistance from a variety of sources, from the refusal to use the term “President”, to car stickers that illustrate Presidential rape, “Ill-judged” to Dilma, in the electoral campaign; people shouting “Dilma, fuck you!” in a World Cup opening event, phallic jokes from the President’s public speech slips and the fateful episode “Beautiful, discrete and housewife” (an allusion to supposedly journalistic material about the wife of the current President). Excerpts from the speeches of some federal deputies in favor of the opening of the President’s impeachment process (on 17/04/2016) published in the Congress portal) illustrate old traditions in the shape of formal politics: “For my family! My children, Estevão, Amanda, my wife, my parents [...]”; “For my family, for the good people”; “For my granddaughter who is celebrating her birthday”; “For my sons Bruno and Felipe”; “For my daughter Manoela who is going to be born”; “For Sandra,

for Erica, for Vítor, for Jorge, and for my grandson who is coming”; “For the honor of my father who has held this chair twice”.

Despite our position on the government in question and the legitimacy of the coup disguised as impeachment, whose effects are already felt, the statements that accompanied the vote of the congressmen (mostly men) regarding the implementation of the process of impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (the first woman elected democratically in Brazil) and the establishment of the ministries by the coup government (exclusively composed of men, whites, rich and supposedly heterosexual) made clear that we still have much to learn and much more is yet to change in the field of gender relationships, both from the symbolic viewpoint and in the various forms of socialization and institutionalization of power, which favor the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity<sup>7</sup>.

The speeches of parliamentarians and the set of measures taken to reverse important advances in the field of women and the LGBT population (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transvestite) generally produce figurations<sup>8</sup> that illustrate strong forms from which the sex-gender system operates in the establishment of masculine power relationships, whether in spaces of intimacy, in the public sphere or the illusory boundaries between both. This process produces diverse modes of oppression over/in subjects and over/in institutions, from the production of perverse truths and ways of subjectivation (and exclusion).

The glorification of the “traditional family” in the speeches of our “representatives” is no mere coincidence. With the exaltation of this intelligible, normal, or basic “family model” (insofar as the others, when recognized, are called “alternative models”), these deputies not only confront parliamentary decorum (in its broadest sense) and zeal for good and public order (which could never be guided by personal interests or honors or extended to their families), but also produce, as an effect, the (re) affirmation of a way of living sexuality (exclusively for reproduction) and an economic model of family arrangement focused on material and symbolic reproduction, markedly sexist and patriarchal, with an oppressive and enslaving basis, in which the patriarch is the central figure.

In the infamous game between private policies and public practices (which breaks with the arbitrary and useful separation between public and private), a clear gap is noted between the accumulation of theoretical and political produc-

tions on feminism, gender and sexuality, and the narrow-minded maneuvers in the exercise/maintenance of traditional power practices.

Also, it is worth emphasizing that the thread that stitches this discursive and material plot, which orders power plays, is set by heteropatriarchal postulates that reaffirm the dominant masculine position and function<sup>9</sup>. Although, as Parry Scott<sup>10</sup> points out, the patriarch is a multiple and changeable figure, sometimes “the incarnation of the oppression of women and the working classes” or “the symbol of national unification for its contribution to the formation of the homeland”, those enunciated in the House of Representatives extol the portrait of a patriarchal model of family and gender structure that seemed to us (at least in the realm of desire) very distant in time and space.

It was, at least as we thought, almost 20 years ago, when the book “Men and masculinities: other words”<sup>11</sup> was launched. The setting was different then. As a result of a collective effort that began in 1995, fueled by the stimulating discussions at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing International Women’s Conference, that group had something in common. They all recognized the historical itinerary and importance of the feminist legacy and the sexual rights movement to the way in which male experiences, symbolic social reassignments about masculinity: [...] In seeking to define broadly in public and private spheres their space in politics, economics and issues related to sexuality, women and homosexuals organized themselves to challenge the discrimination they suffered by proposing other mentalities, behaviors and perspectives, “other words” for inter-gender relationships, questioning above all the hegemonic masculinity: white, heterosexual and dominant. At the time, we were thinking about the effects of shifts produced by feminism on men and the symbolic order of masculinity. Such shifts derived mainly from the achievements of the women’s and LGBT movements, who claimed, in a more or less direct way, a symbolic resignification of masculinity.

Challenges are certainly different today, marked by a less optimistic and more worrying scenario. We must work from cartographies of controversies, as the actor-network theory invites us<sup>11</sup>, for if, on the one hand, men and masculinities are diverse – apart from sex and sexuality (often considered as binaries) and men are “affected” by sexist and patriarchal models (since the main causes of death for men are external,

such as violence and road traffic accidents), on the other hand, places of power and violence are led by men (men are the ones killing the most) and economic and political exploitation methods are largely orchestrated by men and based on patriarchal and sexist models of relationship.

In general, our experience at the AWID Forum reinforces our convictions that structural changes stem from the involvement of men (1980s), but we must go further, and that mascu-

linity organizing ways are not only in the bodies of men but are reproduced in institutions and symbols. Finally, in the play of these challenging controversies, we hope that the reflections produced at this meeting can help us produce creative theoretical tools to understand the current political landscape and to continue to project “other words” to continue to feed our utopia for a better world, with social justice and gender equity.

### **Collaborations**

B Medrado, M Nascimento and J Lyra equally collaborated in the design, elaboration, writing and review of this paper.

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