

Feminism in Brasil Today¹

Translation by CHRISTOPHER PETERSON

REF: After 20 years of feminist struggle, what have been the real gains for women?

Hildete Pereira: One of the issues that was raised in the 1970s - when the movement regained the impetus that dated back forty years to the women's suffrage struggle - was that of changes in the Brazilian Constitution. There was a real gain in the 1988 Constitution, even though women's daily lives have changed very little.

Angeia Borba: I think this really was an important triumph for this period, even given such limitations, since the majority of the articles in the Constitution have still not been backed by enabling legislation, a situation which is leading to tremendous problems. For example, the entire Social Security issue is still pending. The proposed legislation to regulate working conditions for female domestic servants and rural workers has still not been discussed by Congress. However, there have been positive developments in the State Constitutions and enabling legislation that have allowed for gains that were not included in the Federal Constitution.

REF: Can the Councils (on Women's Rights) also be considered a victory?

AB: Of course, the Councils gave visibility to

the kind of discrimination that women still suffer in Brazil. The government's recognition of the Councils was the first step towards drafting public policies to meet the needs of the female population, in addition to a concept that is almost taken for granted now, namely gender planning.

REF: Strictly speaking, the Integrated Program for Women's Health Care (PAISM), the first major public policy in Brazil devoted specifically to women, preceded the founding of the Councils...

AB: Although the PAISM had already been drafted before - by feminists - it was only disseminated around the country after the National Council (on Women's Rights) went into action and there had been developments in the State Councils and Coordinating Boards. But there is another aspect that should be mentioned. I would not say that our real gains were limited merely to legal, formal, or constitutional achievements.

HP: Indeed, there was a cultural change in Brazil regarding the women's issue. In the 1970s, to say you were a feminist you had to be almost apologetic. It's not like that anymore. There has been a real change in this sense.

Jacqueline Pitanguy: Now, just what kind of notion of reality is implicit in this question? I would rather begin with something that predated the Integrated Program for Women's Health Care, the National Council, and the State Councils, namely, a change in attitude by a significant share of Brazilian women in relation to the image of feminism in Brazilian society. It is obvious to me that none of this would have happened and been sustained if there had not emerged a new social identity among Brazilian women. It is also increasingly difficult for me to deal with the category of "women" in a homogeneous way, but the fact is that women of all different social

¹ Interviewers from *Revista Estudos Feministas* in this debate included Lena Lavinás, Maria Luíza Heilborn, and Bila Sorj. The idea of its realization was taken from the last dossier theme, 'Feminism Today' (vol. 2, n° 3/94), which was an international discussion. To think about feminism in Brazil today, we held a round-table in Rio de Janeiro, with colleagues of this town, only. Unfortunately, Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira couldn't attend.

shades have perceived this new identity, this new position.

This new reality reflects a change in both self-perception and social perception of women's position in society. As contradictory as it may seem, this reality is modern in many senses. As for our gains in the legislative sphere, they are both achievements and frustrations at the same time, but they are still relevant. For example, the Council has played a role in social change, albeit in a country where what is built today can be torn down tomorrow.

In order to illustrate this kind of instability, which is characteristic of Brazilian society as a whole, we might cite the point in time in which the National Council on Women's Rights managed to reach 250 schools in the public school system with a program called "A Debate in School on Women's Role in Society". This program appeared to work and to be in place for good, since it was linked to the local school systems, had its own infrastructure, and did not depend on Federal resources. All of a sudden, it simply evaporated. So I think that the notion of reality cannot just hinge on that of continuity.

HP: I disagree with Jacqueline. As I see it, a real gain has to be something tangible, permanent. The issue of legislation is tangible, it's a feminist struggle dating back 20 years. But many things changed without direct interference from feminism. We were 11% of the labor force back in 1970, and now we're 39%. This is a real figure. Women have taken to the streets, to public life, to becoming breadwinners.

JP: But this wasn't because of the Councils or Coordinating Boards, or even because of the feminist movement itself.

HP: That is true, but things go hand in hand. The feminist struggle provided legitimacy for women's desire to work outside the home. To take the example of the labor market, some articles in labor treaties and some demands by working women predated the appearance of a self-ascribed feminist movement in Brazil. Such demands are linked to the struggle for women's social enhancement. I see the

issue as more of a convergence, along the lines you mentioned, where the struggle specifically provides for an understanding of (and legitimacy for) processes that are much broader than the feminist struggle itself.

REF: The struggle for rights based on an ideal of equality between men and women has been criticized because it does not recognize the right to difference. This theoretical debate of course has strategic implications for the Brazilian feminist movement. Just what might such implications be?

HP: This issue of difference raises some doubts in my mind. We are different biologically. So what is feminine nature? I do not know. My biological self was already defined when I was born... In relation to maternity, we are different. What are the other differences? Are we less aggressive? Sweeter? More submissive? Is that the difference?

JP: I would like to distinguish between equality and equity. When one talks about equality, one abolishes differences. To speak of equity means the possibility of justice, if we might use another concept, even while one acknowledges differences. The feminist movement's struggle, as I see it today, seeks precisely the political construction of difference and is therefore able to preach equity.

REF: The debate on difference, at least in the French context, appeared in a discussion where the massive entry of women into the labor market supposedly meant that they shared a male world. Furthermore, that the right to difference meant imagining that there was an entire female culture linked to private life, feelings, subjectivity, motherhood, etc. This supposedly meant that the feminist struggle would no longer focus exclusively on formal rights - access to jobs, lack of career discrimination, the right to vote and run for office, etc. - but that it would also contemplate this dimension of feminine culture.

JP: I'm not very familiar with the French debate, but rather with the American debate, which they refer to as Radical Feminism. There you get into the notion of essence, you deal with this idea of

difference transcending History, and you end up in a kind of metaphysical essence. I have an ideological problem with this view of difference. So I do not go along with Radical Feminism, the kind of feminism that reestablished an idea of the absolute, an idea of transcendence of History based on a feminine essence and which thus leads to complicated political consequences. I feel closer to another kind of feminism. My experience in the United States was in the New York-New Jersey area. I belonged to a group of human-rights and women's-rights activists. It was quite a peculiar group. There was an attempt to make the women's issue a general issue. The big agenda, the big challenge, was no longer to particularize the women's issue, but to make the gender perspective present on any agenda, whether national or international. If you were discussing violence, you had to carry into this debate on violence the issue of the gender perspective and not build a debate on gender and violence. The same was true for labor, the environment, etc.

REF: How do you see this in Brazil?

JP: Here, on the contrary, I see the reconstruction of little ghettos: women and the environment, women and violence, women and health. I mean, rather than raising the gender perspective in different issues, you particularize the issue. In my opinion, when you construct a particular field, you admit an essence. This kind of feminism is so essential and untranslatable in terms of a more general logic that it has become a particular arena of knowledge, of struggle, of strategy, of an agenda. It is obvious that here in Brazil the pathways for building feminism have always been completely different. Feminism was built in the midst of a struggle against the dictatorship, for social rights, for social justice. In Brazil, such characteristics were not so acute or so marked as I was able to perceive them in the United States.

HP: I disagree. From 1975 to 1980, the strategy of particularizing the field was important, because it called attention to the specificity of the feminine issue. In the midst of the struggle for democracy, we

pointed to our specificity, and this even protected us from political repression. Today, the issue is being raised in other terms. The perspective of specificity has lost its strategic value and has become an issue of feminine essence. There is a new agenda that is being built on the basis of this view. But it has still not won out.

REF: But there is a feminist discourse today that ascribes to women a priority commitment to ethics, anti-bellicism, defense of the environment, solidarity, compassion. How can these be developed into a political agenda?

AB: What are the perverse effects of this essentialist ideal in a poor, underdeveloped country with thousands of contradictions? The movement's major contribution has been this ability to exercise a precise historical vision, an idea of circumstance, negotiation, alliance, something that Brazilian feminists have learned and improved. And this is something that essentialism condemns, indirectly. Feminism in Brazil has succeeded in dealing well with the idea of good and evil, just and unjust. We admit ambiguity in the relationship among people. The notion of essence, on the contrary, conjures up the absolute. This horrible thing of extremes - of good versus evil - that this idea of essence inaugurates was not predominant before. Nowadays, such absolutist judgments are expressed all the time in the movement. Any kind of action receives some kind of judgment in the name of good or evil. And there is no political basis to this.

HP: I would like to make an observation. ECO-92 gave a lot of emphasis to this kind of discourse. A current has thus developed that has begun to work with the construction of difference. The equality we seek is vis-à-vis the law: "different yet not unequal" was our motto in the (1988) Constitution. However, we had not elaborated clearly on what our real differences were.

AB: In fact, there was an alternative to Article 5 in the Constitution that read, "We are equal in the eyes of the law." The alternative reading was, "Men and women are in fact equal in the eyes of the law, but

historical differences must be acknowledged, and it is the state's responsibility to act upon these historical inequalities." This debate has sprung up in some political contexts where women are forced by the contingencies of activism itself to debate with men. For example, in trade union and political party spheres. At the time, we were unable to assess the scope of this wording. If we had affirmed not only the principle of equality, but also the need to make repairs for historical forms of discrimination, we would have left the door open for a body of legislation based on affirmative action, or positive discrimination.

HP: I believe that our difference is in relation to maternity. And this would require a specific agenda. Why? Because to have children is to raise them by ourselves as we have always done. This is an issue where we haven't succeeded in moving an inch. We have not succeeded in getting the Brazilian government to increase the supply of daycare centers or to implement collective kitchens. Women have entered the labor market *en masse* and have yet to solve this problem. Maternity is an issue that has been raised, but which remains to be solved. We may need to have some privileges because of this difference.

AB: I think that other forms of differentiation are also justified. For example, a distinction vis-à-vis night shifts and retirement schedules according to years of service and age makes sense in a concrete framework where certain activities fall more heavily on women. Some such protective measures are justified on the basis of the country's overall situation, where women benefit rarely and poorly from opportunities in the labor market.

REF: Feminist practice in Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s has presented a new dynamic as compared to previous decades. Some changes include the rapid growth of feminist NGOs, a heavy degree of specialization and formation of networks - health, rights, the environment - strong participation in national forums and significant presence of women in governmental and other agencies. There are two issues here: A) The

debate over representation in the movement has always been a delicate issue, in the sense of denying hierarchical forms of participation and thus characterizing it as radical democracy. But while this was the inspiration for the feminist movement in the beginning, the currently proposed institutionalized practice of feminism demands a rethinking. How does the issue of representation work in this case? B) A consequence of this process of institutionalization and professionalization of feminist practice may be the isolation of these feminists from the movement and its problems. How do you view this issue?

HP: Concerning the problem of representation in the feminist movement, we would have to think back to the 1970s, when leadership in reflection groups was denied. In fact, we only **said** that there was no leadership. We had a great deal of difficulty in recognizing this and living out this experience. We fought with the women from the political movement *per se* because of all that business about needing to have a coordinator and plenary meetings for everything, while we came back at them with radical democracy. Today the problem is who represents whom. I believe that the NGOs do not represent the feminist movement. But every political movement needs institutionalization; it's inevitable. Just as there are professionals in politics - inside the parties - the NGOs are also a place for the professionalization of feminists. But they can't speak on behalf of the movement, for no other reason, for example, that when you hold a political meeting like March 8th, they never show up. To the extent that you professionalize, you don't take to the streets to struggle or go to the demonstrations.

AB: I don't think it's just a matter of the NGOs. On the one hand, it is an achievement to have institutionalized spaces and the possibility of concentrating more on certain issues. But we have occupied various other spaces, like the universities, and this has even backed a more highly-qualified kind of discourse on women's conditions in our country. We have created a broad range of spaces for activity that did not exist 15

years ago. This has been an important gain. On the other hand, there has been dispersion. We have not succeeded in occupying this space and at the same time maintaining a mobilizing force to act in circumstances where you have to bring political pressure to bear. If there were a Constitutional review now we would be running many serious risks. This is in sharp contrast with 1987, when we were petitioning on every street corner in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil as a whole. We submitted popular amendments to the Constitution on a broad variety of issues. We produced debates and seminars in trade unions. The "lipstick lobby" was not just in Brasília, it was all over the country. What I miss in this process now is this mobilizing force, and the responsibility is not just that of the professionalization phenomenon for feminists in the NGOs.

JP: What is happening in Brazil is not so peculiar. Demobilization of the grassroots is widespread in many countries. Despite the vigor of the feminist movement, certain victories slow down mobilization. This becomes even worse in Brazil, where disbelief is widespread, in a very negative overall context in relation to major grassroots mobilization of men and/or women.

I am even surprised by the vigor that still exists in the movement. An example of this was the national meeting on Women and Population, which to the surprise of the entire organizing committee brought over 500 women to the Brazilian National Congress (1993), with active participation in the discussion process and a truly impressive energy.

Wania Sant'anna: I would like to point out that institutionalization is not a phenomenon that is peculiar to the women's movement. Various other segments of the social movement have been undergoing the same process. In fact, nobody even knows whether demobilization has been responsible for institutionalization, or vice versa.

Important causes have been attracting few people. The Campaign Against Hunger has been successful because you participate in small groups, doing various concrete actions. It is not a neighborhood, farmers',

or consumers' association. The reason for this is the real impoverishment of the people, meaning that their time is taken up in guaranteeing their survival rather than in political/organizational activities. This economic crisis situation has led to the loss of primary gains, which in turn leads to demobilization.

Concerning women's organization since 1988, the Constitutional Congress, and review, there was the disappearance of the National Council on Women's Rights as an agglutinating force vis-à-vis the National Congress.

JP: Getting back to the question of representation, authority, hierarchy, or discipline, I should mention my experience in the Council. During a critical moment in the National Council for Women's Rights, I had to wait a month for the grassroots groups to be consulted in order to authorize me to resign as chairwoman. The National Council was a good example of collective work combining professional efficiency with a representative mandate. Professionalism should not be confused with lack of democracy.

The women's NGOs that are out there trying to get organized are also seeking efficiency and productivity. Their legitimacy is based on the kind and quality of their work and their capital. They try to listen to demands. You can belong to an NGO with greater or lesser legitimacy and even be there as part of some movement. I repeat, I do not believe that the NGOs represent the (feminist) movement.

HP: It is important to stress that the NGOs have emerged and developed in the absence of the state, which has pulled out because of its bankruptcy, its lack of funds. We are witnessing the destruction of the state in Brazil and the rest of Latin America, within a neoliberal context of new relations between the North and the South. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there is no longer the threat of communism. So now the South threatens the North with over-population, drug traffic, nuclear weapons, and violence. Funding for NGOs comes through

First World organizations that are concerned with problems like these, that the South can transfer to the North. Since the North is worried about this, it finances the NGOs, which organize inside the social movements in order to meet the kinds of needs that the Brazilian state, and Latin American states in general, are unable to cope with.

REF: When we speak of professionalization, we are not just dealing with efficiency, but with the fact that some women are making feminism a profession and are therefore accumulating information and political contacts and circulating internationally. What is the impact of this new category on the women's movement?

AB: I think that there are situations where the NGOs speak for the movement when they shouldn't. They accumulate a huge amount of information in their daily work, and sharing this is difficult. This means that two spheres are created within the movement. There emerges a body of individuals who are able to speak about given issues and elaborate on them and so on, and there is another body of people who are unable to do this. I'm not excluding NGO people from the movement. The problem is how to turn them into a mobilizing force. I am concerned with the fact that the NGOs have emerged in a void of the state. And I ask myself: how does the movement feel when it goes out on the streets to make demands of the state, like changes in public policies, if we now have NGOs occupying this space? I can go to a government agency and make demands, but I can't demand anything of an NGO. At the most, I can say, "I like your work," or "I don't like your work." But I do make demands of the government. Although I think it is great to have professional feminists, I take a cautious stance towards the NGOs, particularly because of the nature of the link between the movement and them. The feminist movement in Brazil has always considered the state its interlocutor. We want rights. We want the Constitution, we want a fair, active state. The NGO dynamic short-circuits the possibility for continuing to have the state as an interlocutor. However, it is

also true that NGOs facilitate things sometimes. Having CEPIA on the organizing committee for an experience (the process of the Brasilia Charter and preparation of Brazilian women regarding population policies) played an important role, and for many of us who went there, it revived moments from the National Council on Women's Rights. Another example is an NGO that does research. To raise data, study correlations, and distribute this kind of material helps the movement. This should be the fundamental role of the NGOs.

WS: We might say that NGOs have gone overboard on given roles, where they should have limited themselves to advising the social movement. For example, I believe that *Rede Mulher* (the Women's Network) and *SOS* provide advice to women on the periphery, and this is in fact - in terms of what you say relating to the agencies - their advisory role in various fields: health, sexuality, violence, and so on. NGOs are service organizations, and the research they do is entirely tied to the demands they receive.

REF: But when an NGO distributes contraceptives or sets up a gynecological clinic, is that an advisory role or the role of the state?

JP: The very concept of state has changed, and historical changes have occurred that have led to a questioning of its role. Who wants it? I don't want that capitalist, gigantic, bureaucratic, Brazilian state built by the military. At a given moment in time it was progressive to support the idea of an interventionist state. It was also at that time, during the dictatorship, that the major cadres joined the state. But nowadays, perhaps nobody wants certain kinds of developments that turned the idea of the state into a monster.

WS: No one can replace the state in terms of the reach of certain public policy activities. The world's largest NGO would be incapable of operating the kind of program that a well-oriented government can do at the national level. Based on a certain intuitive feeling, in given forums the representatives from NGOs do not speak individually, or at least their interlocutors do not presuppose this.

REF: But they are not speaking from the same vantage point, because they are speaking as individuals, while someone representing an NGO ends up having a differentiated kind of voice, because one supposes that she bears some kind of greater legitimacy: she is speaking on behalf of both the people who work in her NGO and also the groups they assist. Do you all agree with this interpretation?

WS: I agree, I think this is a sticky issue, the fact that the NGOs have occupied a space which in fact in the past pertained exclusively to the women's movement. An example of this is the conference coming up in Beijing. As it stands now, the women's movement is not going to participate, while the NGOs that are accredited by the United Nations system are.

JP: It is not just the NGOs that have the authority to speak. The position that many feminists have in the academe also gives them an immense amount of authority, and this has also produced tension vis-à-vis representation within the women's movement.

REF: Some feminists have called attention to the fact that the Brazilian feminist movement in recent years has trailed along behind the agendas and discussions proposed by the conferences. Do you agree?

JP: In 1985, at the time of the 3rd World Conference in Nairobi, one of the goals was to create institutional mechanisms that would promote women's development around the world. And it was "trailing along behind" - to use the expression - that we had legitimacy in Brazil for setting up the National Council (on Women's Rights): The United Nations suggested the implementation of "institutional machinery". The Council was precisely this institutional machinery. We put some teeth into this idea and provided the legitimacy for creating a National Council, whose statutes were already being drafted. In similar fashion, with the Conference in Mexico in 1975, we began to meet in Brazil and organized a week of debates on women, based on the so-called International Women's Year. And this was right in the middle of the dictatorship.

AB: But the question I ask is the following: at

that time, maybe we had not accumulated enough strength to legitimate the initiative for creating the Council. We based ourselves on a document that Brazil had ratified. Could it be that we still lack such legitimacy, given our practice, our gains, and the changes that have actually been occurring and that have allowed us to have a kind of discourse that is not forced to rest on what we might call an international formulation of such rights?

JP: I think that the legitimation process occurs through a meeting of as many voices as possible, joining the agenda. For example, to succeed in taking the issue of genital mutilation to a United Nations forum, overcoming cultural relativism, means imposing our agenda on the United Nations. It is women who are doing this. It is Muslim, African, Brazilian, American, and European feminists who are doing this, and it is the women's agenda. When you have one or two delegates using the expression "genital mutilation", that's a victory! So, the relationship between the women's movement, its agenda, and the international United Nations conferences is a two-way street. This *démarche* does not necessarily mean trailing along behind, but to be contemporary. Besides, what does one's own agenda mean in a globalized world?

REF: The Brazilian national feminist meetings were supposedly the forum where this agenda was built. But they exhausted themselves as forums for proposals, giving way to the international global agendas. To what extent has there been communication between the two?

JP: What has happened with the national feminist meetings? I'm asking you because I did not actually go to the last meeting, but I heard comments that it was extremely dispersive. And this was not because some international agenda was being discussed. I think it has a lot more to do with the internal dynamics of the women's movement itself. Maybe it was a moment when the movement was there for reasons other than to establish an agenda.

REF: One assessment of the last national meeting - in Caldas Novas in 1991 - is that it

lost steam because feminists, particularly those who belonged to NGOs, were overburdened with an agenda of international meetings. For economic reasons, whether because of a crisis or lack of funding, this meeting, which used to be held every other year, is now going to take place every three years. This is seen as a sign of its exhaustion.

WS: I agree that there is a predominance of these agendas, these dates, and these articulations, in which the NGOs are particularly involved. This depletion of the national meetings in the Brazilian case dates back to 1987, in Garanhuns, when feminists experienced extreme difficulty in coping with something called the popularization of feminism. Many feminists said, "Very well, I come here to deal with feminist issues, and these women say that they're feminists, so you have to tell the whole story all over again, starting from the beginning. We've lost our place." There was a block in communications between various women's groups. This problem is not just Brazilian, it's a Latin American problem, because you can find the same criticism in Latin American feminist meetings.

AB: I disagree with Wania's assessment of what she's calling the depletion of feminist meetings. I think one of the important things in this last five or ten years in the feminist movement has been precisely this possibility of us - from the major urban centers and with a middle-class background - no longer being the only feminists. Feminism has undergone a process of popularization. There may not be huge demonstrations in the big cities, but things are happening in the interior that never happened there before. Many of the so-called historical feminists, who have been involved in other activities, feel that they are not available for this kind of so-called grassroots work. There is a degree of arrogance in this view, which indeed is a mistaken one, since one can learn a great deal through the experience of such women.

REF: Is the emergence of a Black women's movement a reflection of this diversification of the social base of feminism in Brazil?

WS: There are three new developments: the Black women's movement, a repositioning of women within the churches, and the organization of rural working women. As for the latter, one has to acknowledge that they are operating in a difficult field, that of trade unionism, land ownership, and land tenure. The Black women's movement has reclaimed an identity that is not only gender-based, but racial as well. In fact, many women recompose their racial identity first, before recovering their gender identity. This is quite a new development.

REF: Has the Black women's movement given greater priority to the issue of race than that of gender?

WS: Since the women's movement has proven incapable of perceiving the racial issue as a central one in Brazilian society, in the forums where white and non-white women meet, racial differences become polarized. It is impossible to talk about gender inequality without discussing racial inequality. On this point, Black women have put up a hot struggle within the Black movement itself, and they have gained respect within the movement. The Black women's movement has succeeded in becoming independent. The challenge is how to maintain relations with the women's movement on the one hand and the Black movement on the other.

REF: In the American women's movement, the major opposition is between Black feminists and white feminists. This is the watershed in the movement today, and apparently it has proven impossible to negotiate common strategies. Could the same thing be happening in Brazil?

WS: Well, I think the situation is a little more low-key here because there is an issue of social class, a discussion which has been secondary in the United States. Here in Brazil, one of the major criticisms by Black women and the Black community in general regarding the white community is that the latter tends to deny ethnic specificity, underestimating it vis-à-vis the class issue. It is not just a class issue. So much has been said about self-esteem and women's pride, and they have ignored self-esteem from a

racial perspective. This has been an extremely serious political and theoretical mistake, since we have been subjected to a strictly class-based analysis. The Brazilian women's movement, the feminist movement, needs to readdress the ethnic issue. And not just readdress it! It needs to incorporate and understand what it means in greater depth.

REF: What are the difficulties in doing this?

WS: The difficulty is acknowledging that we live in a racist society and that we have a racist monster inside us, Black women and white women. Racism is a daily practice, and as such it has to be understood first in order to be exposed. Black women have been trying to organize since 1975, within the Black movement. But in fact it was within the perspective of a feminist organization that we found the strength to organize autonomously. It is important to point out that the first National Meeting of Black Women was decided on during a Feminist National Meeting, in Garanhuns, Pernambuco State, in 1987. We held the first National Meeting of Black Women (Valença, Rio de Janeiro State, 1988) before the Black movement had held its first national meeting (São Paulo, 1991). This is a major historical triumph for the women's movement. Without a doubt, workshops and other methodologies from the meetings in the women's movement have reached the Black movement. We should value the positive aspects of this relationship, although it is still a conflictive relationship, with distrust on both sides.

REF: In Brazil today, the reproductive rights issue appears to be the watershed in the women's movement. Do you all agree with this?

JP: In the first place, I would like to challenge the notion of "movement", because it's a fiction. I would prefer to say "among feminists". I don't know what I'm referring to when I say "movement". I don't think there's a feminist who isn't struggling for reproductive rights. In my opinion, reproductive rights mean decision-making autonomy in relation to one's reproductive life. They imply both option and responsibility.

Other feminists tie down reproductive rights, giving priority to certain reproductive rights

over others. For example, I believe that little is being said in Rio de Janeiro today about abortion. Few feminists have raised the banner of abortion as an inherent, fundamental issue in reproductive rights. Yet the sterilization issue is given priority. In this context, an essentialist perspective may emerge that can lead to biologism through the notion of mutilation. And what about abortion? Is it also an act of mutilation? Within this logic, it is. There are thus some feminists who struggle against sterilization without joining the struggle to decriminalize abortion. I wouldn't say that they take sides with the anti-abortionist campaigns, but neither do they come out publicly in favor of decriminalization. So there is a real division there, which is expressed in different political agendas. But that's all right! I believe that the movement has never marched forward homogeneously.

Regarding population, the most significant share of Brazilian feminists, those who were involved in ECO-92, have taken a stance against population policies, favoring so-called social policies instead. This line enjoys legitimacy in Brazil, but it's a minority stance elsewhere in the world. International forums have proven this. It's the case for Africa and Asia, and for Mexico, Chile, and Argentina in Latin America.

WS: This nationwide consensus on population policy issues did not exist before, and it was produced as a political fact during the Hotel Glória Conference.

AB: I disagree. I think this position had already appeared in the Charter of Brasília in 1993. In Brazil, the population debate occurred in the midst of the discussion on the environment, as a function of ECO-92. I would like to talk about the environment, and I don't want it to be shackled to the population issue.

WS: During ECO-92 there was a division amongst the NGOs, and the women's movement was left in charge of the population issue, in what was called Agenda 21.

JP: It isn't "politically correct" to talk about population policies today. But we should understand that population policies also

have to do with factors relating to mortality, natality, demographic variables, migration, and so on. This is called population policy. We should address these policies by questioning not the concept of population, but the use made of it by the government, private agencies, etc.

In this specific case, I think that to deny the use of the expression "population policy" in order to be "politically correct" is to restrict one's self, to shut one's self off. On the other hand, what we all want are social policies: to ensure access to information, decision-making, and abortion, too.

WS: I'm not a specialist in the debate on reproductive rights, which is a discussion for specialists. It's an internationalized discussion, one that is criss-crossed by the various NGO positions, and if you miss one of these major conferences you never catch up again.

My fundamental issue in relation to reproductive rights is not whether or not to have children. It's sexuality. And that's where the international agenda really changed the focus of the analysis, because in the discussion over reproductive rights, nothing is said about sexuality. I'm referring to a radical change in the way people in general - and not only women - experience their sexuality. If I don't want women to be sterilized, I don't want them to take contraceptives right and left, either. If the discussion on sexuality were developed properly, reproductive rights would be the last point on this agenda.

REF: Do you think that sterilization in Brazil has hit the Black population the hardest?

WS: The Black women's movement is against population policies. Because historically, the focus of population policies has been the non-white populations. There is a given cultural identity that (the powers-that-be) do not wish to see preserved over the course of history. And this is not just an issue of social class or poverty.

It is a fact that the Black population has been affected the most by genocidal actions. The worst of these in the Brazilian case has been miscegenation and mass immigration. This was a public policy

generated by the Brazilian national state from its outset. This is not just political discourse or rhetoric. National immigration policy (a series of Brazilian governmental incentives for European immigration, following abolition of slavery, in 1888 - translator's note) was aimed entirely at controlling the Black population.

For example, take the propaganda by (gynecologist) Elcimar Coutinho in the mass media in the city of Salvador, with Brazil's largest Black contingent, showing a Black child, with the following caption: "factory defect". Or another piece of propaganda showing a pregnant Black woman with the caption, "Some people are whining, while their bellies are full." Take the State of Maranhão, with a huge contingent of sterilized non-white women! On the other hand, I'm against the idea of Black women as baby factories. I don't want a throwback to slavery, when Black women reproduced for the slaveowners. So neither do I want that image of Black women bearing little Black kids to reclaim the Black unity lost at some point in the past. I want for women to have the possibility of doing other things in their lives besides raising children.

AB: I have an observation about what Jacqueline said at the beginning of the debate on population. The population issue was addressed by the Committee on Reproductive Rights in the State House of Representatives when it began to discuss sterilization, thus four years prior to ECO-92. What we ascertained was a process of mass sterilization. We discovered that the Brazilian Federal government was at least an accomplice, and at most a co-author, in implementing this enormously successful policy. I agree with Wania that the sexuality issue has been overlooked, and I disagree with Jacqueline when she adopts a liberal discourse about each individual's right to opt. The right to individual option has to be read in light of this country and the conditions in which women live. It's democratic to opt when you have the conditions to do so.

HP: If we compare feminism in Brazil with the rest of the world, we notice that violence

against women and abortion have been the issues around which women have organized elsewhere. Here in Brazil it has been different, since feminism has been marked by the struggle to redemocratize the country, by citizens' rights and equality. In 1975, nobody talked about abortion. This issue was only presented with force more recently, as a function of the international agenda and population policies.

Here in Brazil there's another issue, that of the Catholic Church and its power over government agencies working in the field of health. At any rate, I believe that if we were to hold a plebiscite, abortion would

pass, because Brazilian society is very permissive. It depends on how you put the question to the population. If you ask, "Are you against abortion?", everybody is! But if you put the question differently, like "Do you think that a woman who has an abortion should go to jail?", there would be a unanimous **no**.

REF: We would like to draw the debate to a close and to thank you for taking part. We hope that this initiative of raising polemical issues characterizing the current stage of the feminist debate will help it gain greater vigor and presence in the Brazilian scenario.