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# WOMEN'S STUDIES AS A STRATEGY

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## FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE:

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### THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE\*

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**Carmen Barroso**

*Carmen Barroso entame son examination des types de changements en éducation qui ont été accomplis au moyen des études de la femme en Amérique du Sud par une définition de la "communauté de l'étude des femmes". Elle examine ensuite deux propos à l'ordre du jour pour le développement d'une stratégie efficace pour cette communauté: d'abord, le besoin de maintenir des liens étroits avec le mouvement des femmes, et ensuite, l'importance de garder une approche ouverte et flexible dans tous les domaines – dans le développement institutionnel, l'analyse autonome, le style d'expression et les choix méthodologiques.*

Recently, when discussing the criteria for nominations for the Brazilian Council on Women's Rights, someone suggested that the academy should be represented. An active feminist, and a former member of the central Committee of a leftist party, a well-read person, turned to me and asked: "Could you explain exactly what is 'the academy?' Does it refer to women who have doctorates, or what?" Certainly not, for in Latin America it is still possible to go quite far in an academic career without a doctorate. But anyway, it became obvious that the contours of the academy are ill-defined, not only for outsiders but even for those for whom the academy is the air they breathe. Let us agree for the moment that the academy is made of those who inhabit the universities or do research. When I refer to *the women's studies community* I am talking about *the fast-growing number of researchers and university professors whose main work has been on women as a response to the challenges posed by the feminist movement.*

My definition of the women's studies community seems simple enough, but it has three terms that leave room for ambiguity. First, who are the researchers? Some of us have jobs as researchers, but

others do research outside of any institution; some of us adhere strictly to orthodox methodologies, others write essays, choosing their sources and methods with greater freedom, and so on. Although there is no formal instance of certification (and therefore we can never be absolutely sure if a given animal is or is not a researcher), there seems to be some consensus that a researcher is someone who has – at some point in his or her life – adhered to and shown ability to use *bona fide* scholarly methods of inquiry. A second source of ambiguity is the reference to "main work"; more than a few feminist scholars have built their careers on work that has little to do with women, and occasionally have written a piece or two on women – sometimes of a very high quality. I don't see why they should be denied a women's studies ID card, but sometimes they are not interested in getting them. The third and more problematic area of ambiguity is the clause that requires the work to be a response to the feminist movement. I am not stating that all work is feminist, but that it aims at a dialogue with the movement. This is broad enough to accommodate a wide variety of theoretical positions (and some of us would prefer to be less ecumenical), but it also leaves out a lot of studies that do not question existing gender relations in the line of traditional scholarship that took them for granted and conceived inequality as natural.

And here maybe we could advance a little in clarifying what kind of changes we are looking for. Of course, I know the diversity of theoretical outlooks existing within the women's studies community, but I believe that, at the most basic level, we have a common objective: within wider projects of more democratic societies, *we are especially engaged in abolishing hierarchical gender relations in all their manifestations, and see as our special province the production of knowledge that is useful*

*for this transformation and the facilitation of access to this knowledge to everybody.*

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#### HAVE WE COME A LONG WAY?

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It is hard to avoid either triumphalism or skepticism when we evaluate the changes that have occurred in the last decades. Feminist ideas – in one version or another, and we may argue endlessly about the appropriateness of the most pervasive versions – have touched a responsive chord in the hearts of women throughout Latin America. And women's studies has been an important vehicle both for the very formulation of those ideas and for giving them legitimacy. In highly élitist societies, even feminist scholars share a small portion of the power and prestige accorded to the learned strata and they have put these resources to subversive use by disseminating egalitarian ideas.

In just a few years – for, aside from a few pioneers in the 60's (like Saffiotti and Blay, in Brazil) the scholarship on women in Latin America started to flourish only in the late 70's – we have discovered our own past, and gained better understanding of our plight in the present. From the unspeakable suffering and extraordinary resistance of African women who were taken to Brazil as slaves, we have learnt how strong and resourceful we are; from the struggles of nineteenth century feminists, from women's active participation in the labor movement in the early twentieth century, from Bertha Lutz' campaign for the vote won in the 30's and her battle to insert women's rights in the UN Charter, we derived pride in our achievements and a realistic assessment of the obstacles we face. From the sociology of work and the family, we achieved a better appraisal of our important contribution to the economy, an understanding of the mechanism of our exploitation, from which we can derive an agenda for social



reform or revolution against patriarchy. From studies on health and sexuality, we have perceived how women's wonderful reproductive power has been controlled for ends that have nothing to do with our needs for pleasure and love, and how we can begin to change all this. I could go on and on, but women of many countries have similar experiences of rediscovering our own selves, of creating a new sense of identity through women's studies.

On the other hand, when I look at the hard realities of very little change in the sexual division of labour inside and outside the home; when I check the appallingly small percentages of women in decision-making positions (even within the most progressive political parties or the lower level echelons); when I see how undemocratic those decision processes remain; when Brazilian politicians dare to joke that the small budget accorded to the National Council for Women's Rights is more than enough for their make-up; when, for instance, I visit a Latin American office of the ILO labor program and I find no trace of intention to change traditional attitudes with regard to women's labor, even at the level of data collection; when I see that the enormous amount of knowledge amassed by research on women has remained circumscribed within the closed circle of "womanists," and regular teaching goes on as usual, with no tint of recognition of woman's experience; when I see that formal schooling itself remains a privilege of urban sectors in most Third World countries, I get discouraged at the little efficacy of all the effort expended these last years.

Have we followed the wrong paths? Were our expectations too high? What are the best strategies for the years ahead?

#### STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Clearly I am not prepared to lay before you detailed plans for the take-over of the citadels of male power, nor an agenda for that much more ambitious aim of a cultural revolution, the "feminization of the world," coupled with a thorough democratization of access to knowledge and power. My objective is much more modest: I would like to go one step behind and discuss a strategy to develop a strategy – that is, some principles I think the women's studies community should follow in order to create the conditions for the pooling of our talents and experiences, so that together we devise the most effective ways to bring about those changes we all look for: they are, first, openness and flexibility, and second, the maintenance of close ties with the women's movement.

#### *Openness and Flexibility*

We should develop an appreciation for the variety of approaches that have flourished among us in all realms: institutional building, substantive analysis, methodologies, styles, objectives.

Our *institutions* are so diverse, even within a single country, that it is impossible to prescribe a recipe for all of them. No single model will be effective in all situations. In Brazil, for instance, women's studies have come, as have

many other educational innovations, from the top: from graduate studies and research. Individual researchers, with established professional reputations, had the autonomy to offer courses and to seek funds for small projects on women. The large expansion of graduate institutions, particularly in the area of social sciences, and the greater curriculum flexibility in this level of teaching (undergraduate, secondary and primary schools are subject to tighter federal control) allowed for these innovations. However, it was never an institutional initiative, it was only the loosening of institutional control that left space for individuals to take these initiatives at their own risks. We are now at a point where several nuclei of women's studies have been created within public and catholic universities. It seems that most of them have very little institutional backing, but at least they function as a support group, to lighten the burden that rested on the shoulders of individual professionals.

Even in the Carlos Chagas Foundation, the oldest and best known center of research on women in Brazil, we have a history that could hardly be duplicated anywhere else. From an initial group of a few interested researchers of the educational research department who started doing research on women in 1974, we have created a collective of research on women which has been very successful in a number of ways: I could cite: the production of top-quality studies in a variety of areas, like labor force participation, child-care, public policies, the family, sex-role socialization, sex education and so on; the administration of a large program of grants for research on women; the use of innovative methodologies and media, like participatory research, video and newspaper; and the maintenance of a cohesive and supportive group during all those years. But it has not been granted any kind of formal status so far. This is partly due to the institutional unwillingness to be identified with our more radical positions, and to our own choice as a strategy to enhance our ability to resist. The lack of a formal status does not preclude us from hiring new researchers, since we act as a lobby within the department of which we are researchers; it also does not preclude us from getting research funds from sources outside the institution, because these are sought by each individual researcher. On the other hand, we are at a

disadvantage every time an institutional policy is at stake. Although most of our efforts are directed towards research on women, and we have a very clear public image on that, each of us – in varying degrees – cultivates some of our former expertises so that we do not become isolated and vulnerable. Aside from this aspect of survival strategy, this double allegiance has advantages and disadvantages for, at the same time that it takes time away from a deepened analysis of our subject, it keeps us open for other sources of ideas and intellectual enrichment.

With regard to professional associations in Brazil, the women's studies community has not created any formal association for itself, but it has been present in every social science association, as a regular committee or organizing panels and symposia in every major congress. In spite of this integrated approach, however, a wall has encircled women's studies and it is very unusual to see a man in a room where one of our meetings is being held. It was a surprise to me that many men came to see our video "Portrait of Woman" when I presented it last month at the National Council of Research.

Publications have multiplied either in regular journals or special issues on women, or books. But again, they are seldom quoted outside the women's studies circle, and vice-versa. When we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of "mainstreaming", we should keep in mind that formal integration is not a guarantee of real integration, especially due to the increasing fragmentation in the social sciences and to the patriarchal milieu in which we develop a quest for an identity of our own.

In spite of the problems I have mentioned, the institutional approaches adopted so far have been responsible for whatever successes we have achieved. We need new approaches to go beyond that – and I would mention more systematic teaching in high schools (already started by a series of lectures sponsored by the S. Paulo State Council on Women's Condition), greater interchange among Latin American countries, perhaps through a bilingual journal, the polemical creation of National Associations of Women's Studies, and so on. Parallel to this need for new approaches, we should cherish those that have brought us thus far.



This same openness and flexibility should be applied to *substantive analysis*. We have wasted too much of our energies trying to determine what is the right theory, what is the true feminism. I am all in favor of the pursuit of rigor and I would be the last one to discard the theoretical efforts that have enlightened the understanding of our condition. In fact, I think we should pay much more attention to theory construction. However, we lose when one of these contributions is not thought of as one among others and narrow sectarianism takes place. We gain when we encourage each researcher to follow her own theoretical path; our paths may eventually cross sometime in the future when we tackle problems for which our own theory is not enough. In many countries in Latin America, women's participation in the labor market was once the most popular subject of study, and, as Marysa Navarro has pointed out, these studies were regarded by their authors – who did not see themselves as feminists at all – as mostly a strategy to understand the macro processes of capitalist societies.<sup>1</sup> It was some time later that research ques-

tions were phrased from the point of view of women, domestic labor gained prominence and these same researchers turned their attention to the articulation of reproduction and production, sometimes incorporating concepts like patriarchy which gave their theories a character quite distinct from the orthodox Marxism they started with.

Another point where I think the principle of openness and flexibility should be applied is *the area of style*. We had hard discussions about that when the Chagas Foundation collective decided to publish a newspaper. Journalists and some of the researchers were very critical of the academic tone of our writings. I think we should strive for communication with the non-initiated, and get rid of needless jargon and overburdening of tables and figures. But this is just common-sense for those of us who aim for larger audiences. It is not a sacred mission to search for the real feminine style that allows for no compromise with the evils of heavy male style (the terms in which this choice is sometimes framed). We should not get caught in any straight-jacket, either a free-flow-

ing intuitive one, or an objective, rational one. The larger the number of languages in which we are able to express ourselves, the better off we are – and this includes the language of power, through which we gain authority in certain circles.

*The objective of our studies* is another area where openness and flexibility can help us grow. As changes in the political environment in some of our countries have brought more democratic governments, new challenges were presented to feminists; we had to redefine our relations to the State. Many of us are trying to keep the autonomy of the movement in its radical quests, at the same time as we attempt to act upon the State to bring in the changes that might be possible in the short term. This is reflected in the academic community, where studies aimed at subsidizing public policies have evolved in recent years. This kind of study is crucial if we are to take advantage of the historical possibilities; however, we should not lose sight of the scholarly work aimed at understanding the roots of women's oppression, and the creation of new identities for women.

The last area in which we should keep ourselves open and flexible is in *the choice of methodology*. In the realms of both research and teaching, participant methodology is very akin to women's studies. If the broad aim of women's studies is to contribute to the breakdown of gender hierarchies, nothing appears more attractive than a methodology that promises to boycott the monopoly on the production of knowledge held in the hands (or the heads) of professors, researchers and so on. And in fact, we gained a lot when participant methodology opened space for the subjects of research themselves to define what the research questions should be, and to actively participate in a process of collective construction of knowledge. It was thanks to participant methodology that we have been able to enter the niches of daily life, where cap and gown methods did not dare to go. In Latin America, an area that has particularly benefitted from participant methodology is the study of sexuality, which has flourished in the last few years; the series of leaflets "This sex of ours" is one product of this. In university teaching also, participant methods have a great potential to increase student's motivation and creativity.

However, we should not allow

ourselves to forget the merits of more orthodox methods, for there remain many areas where they are essential. We should be aware that participant methodology so far has allowed for only a low-level of generalization, and that fits only too well the international division of intellectual labor according to which the Third World remains the importer and consumer of theories produced in the countries of the North. Of course, I am not attributing our difficulty in theory development wholly or mostly to participant methodology – for there are many other elements there<sup>2</sup> – but it certainly is part of a trend that is over-emphasizing the description of the concrete, as a reaction to our former fascination with Grand Theories, so broad they hardly explained anything.

### *Linkages With the Women's Movement*

Some analysts whose eyes were used to observing the women's movement in industrialized countries did not recognize its existence in Latin America in the 70's. In fact, there were many women's organizations that were fighting for changes in access to resources and in power relations between genders and different sectors of society. But their agendas and their tactics were quite different from those of social movements of the industrialized world. In Europe and the USA, these movements had a strong cultural connotation, as they called into question the values of industrialized society, the notion of the welfare state itself, and tried to reinvent the social and the political. On the other hand, the main thrust of the social movements in Latin America – although they were a new

phenomenon in the experience of popular classes – was directed towards the state, claiming a better distribution of social services. Therefore, they shared the belief in the state as an agency for the promotion of social welfare.

To the ears of democratic and affluent societies where a minimum of civil rights and comfort is already taken for granted by the majority of the population, the demands of the social movements in Latin America may sound strange: amnesty, water, light, schools, and so on. At the same time, a whole process of social change was transforming the status of women inside and outside the family and setting the scenario for new ideas: urbanization, migration, increased participation in the modern sectors of the economy, higher levels of school attendance, wider dissemination of feminist ideas coming from the North, the legitimacy afforded by the UN International Women's Year, disenchantment with the position of women in leftist parties. Many factors have helped to break the ground where feminist groups started to grow initially in the learned middle-classes of the large cities.

Although feminist groups had a distinctive place within the social movements, a common strategy around general principles was sought on several occasions, which led feminists to down-play specifically feminist issues like abortion, for instance, in order to avoid open conflict with the traditional left and the Catholic Church, whose progressive wing was offering support that was crucial in repressive regimes. On the other hand, in the mutual search for allies, women's studies practitioners and feminist groups had sought the support of each other since their very beginnings. This has resulted in a constant interaction that, although not free of conflicts arising from different outlooks and different positions in society, has nevertheless been a source of mutual enrichment and strength. These linkages have put women's studies practitioners under cross fire on some occasions. From one side, the colleagues of the academy, to whom we have to prove again and again that our work is scientific, not "mere ideology." From the other side, the feminists, to whom we have to show clearly that we are committed to a collective cause and not appropriating a fashionable theme for the sake of our own personal careers. Feminists for the academic



Credit: Federación de Mujeres Latinoamericanas

community and academics for the feminists, researchers have lived dangerously in a frontier zone of tension and ambiguity.

Even so, the feminist movement has been the very source of life for scholarship on women, suggesting themes, methodologies and helping to create a network of solidarity that is crucial for scholars confronting academic orthodoxies. What we now need is a clear definition of our role within the women's movement, so that we are allowed the distance needed for scholarly work, which may not respond to the immediate needs of political practice but may prove of greater relevance for the

women's movement in the long range. I am not arguing for a rigid division of labor that could reinforce hierarchies within the movement but, as our numbers grow, I feel we can share much of our responsibilities so that each one of us does not have to be on permanent duty for every protest, for every campaign, and we may acquire legitimacy for the systematic study that is so much needed, and that is our special contribution both to the movement and to the social sciences.

<sup>1</sup>Marysa Navarro, "Research on Latin American Women," *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn 1979).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, A. O. Costa, C. Barroso and C. Sarti, *Pesquisa sobre mulher no Brasil. Cadernos de Pesquisa* (1985).

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*\*CWS/cf gratefully acknowledges permission to publish from Florence Howe, an editor of the Women's Studies Quarterly (Hagerstown, MD : The Feminist Press).*

## ABC of development



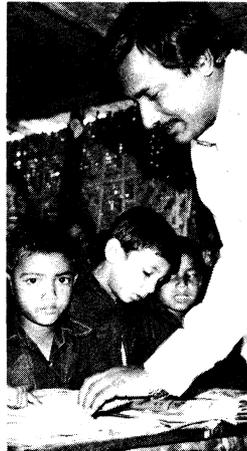
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## WHO AM I?

I am not the woman selling shoes and socks.  
I am the one  
You buried alive in the wall\*  
And thus became guiltless as the breeze.  
You did not know  
That bricks and mortar cannot bury voices.  
I am the same  
Whom you buried under the load of custom.  
You did not know  
That light never fears darkness.  
I am she  
From whose lap you took flowers  
And returned thorns and embers.  
You did not know  
That fragrance cannot be arrested.  
I am she  
Whom you bought and sold  
In the name of my modesty.  
You did not know  
That floating on a clay pitcher even Sohni cannot die.\*\*  
I am she  
Whose hand you gave away  
To unburden your head.  
You did not know  
That a nation cannot awaken  
While its mind is still enslaved.  
You traded me for my chastity and modesty,  
For my fidelity, my motherly love.  
But now is the time of flowers in the mind, in the lap.  
Selling shoes and socks  
I am not that half clad woman on the poster.

*\*refers to the story of a courtesan who was buried alive in a wall for falling in love with a prince.*

*\*\*refers to a love story in which the girl tries to cross a river on a pitcher to meet her lover, but is drowned because someone replaces her good pitcher with a clay one.*

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