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Feminisms and feminist studies: sex workers in the line of fire*

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Abstract

I propose here to use the idea of the long duration of a movement – feminism and feminist studies – to reflect on a particular style of engagement found at the Nucleus for Gender Studies – Pagu. By reconstructing a certain history in time, I emphasize what I consider to be one of the great lessons of the feminist field of reflection: the ability for self-reflection that provokes constant repositionings in relation to the ever-changing, complex contexts in which we live.

Key Words: Feminist studies, engagement, sexual work.

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Celebrating Pagu's birthday this year, it is hard to believe the Center is so very young – only 20 years old! Perhaps my disbelief is due to the way that Pagu has condensed a much older movement in its work. I propose to use the notion of a movement of long duration – a movement that stretches from feminism to feminist studies – to reflect on a particular style of engagement. Here, I do not intend to go through the different "waves" of feminist thought – a task already taken care of by colleagues far more familiar than I with the topic (see, for example, Machado 2010). Instead, by reconstructing a certain narrative in time, I hope to highlight one of the greatest lessons from the field of feminist thought: a capacity for self-reflection that provokes constant reconsiderations of the complex, constantly changing contexts in which we live (Fonseca 2004a).

In a brief introduction, I will use elements of my own trajectory, not only to "situate" myself historically, but also to illustrate the intensely personal dimension of feminism in many of our lives. I will then approach a theme to which Pagu's members have contributed greatly – the complex interaction of economic, sexual and affective exchanges. This theme is particularly relevant because, by highlighting analytical perspectives as they change through time, it brings to the fore an accumulated wisdom handed down through decades of feminist studies.

My mother, the daughter of a small-town building contractor in Southern USA, grew up at a time when women only worked outside the home when absolutely necessary. Such was my paternal grandmother's case – before the Great Depression – when her first husband was arrested for larceny; such was my mother's case – in the 1950s – when she found herself widowed, with two pre-adolescent children to raise. I thus grew up hearing complaints about the difficulties faced by women trying to get by in a male-dominated professional world. Not only did they have to work more for lesser pay, they were also vulnerable to colleagues' improper insinuations when their ring finger was bare. My generation, that of girls who grew into adolescence during the 1960s, reacted by demanding a lifestyle "just like the boys." This

demand had not yet been written into institutional life: in high school, carpentry was still restricted to boys and home economics to women. But my school chums and I, almost all of us daughters of white middle- class teachers, embraced a pattern of personal behavior that we labeled "feminist" – with strong ties of solidarity between women, freedom to come and go in personal relations, control of our own bodies and an almost unisex aesthetic style.

At the end of the 1960s, while I was writing my Master's dissertation, "women's studies" was emerging as part of a progressive agenda in American universities. It was thus no surprise that my research subject, based on fieldwork in Taiwan, included "women's equality" among other timely political concerns associated with studies of the Third World, such as "development" and "democracy." These iconic themes of Western modernity had already made their mark in the programs of international organizations. As a result, in 1970 I was recruited by UNESCO to work in a project of "functional literacy for women" in Upper Volta (West Africa). On occupying this institutional space (open only to female researchers), my curriculum vitae gained weight. The first two "waves" of feminism were paying off. But it was intense contact with my "local" counterpart, a woman I was supposed to school in the science of ethnology, that challenged my original convictions and pushed me toward what would become known, in the 1980s, as the third wave of feminism.

As well as being a mother to four boys, Scholastique Kompaoré was married to a man visibly enchanted by his wife and who seemed to share her strong Marxist and feminist inclinations. Aged 27 (a few years older than myself), Scholastique not only had more life experience than I, not only did she have profound knowledge of women from the country's various ethnic contexts, she also had accumulated years of experience working on behalf of women. Predictably, it did not take long for our roles to be reversed.

It was through Scholastique's guidance that I came to recognize that hierarchical relationships between the sexes vary tremendously not only between different ethnic groups but also

from village to village. Further, factors of class could count more against a woman than any "masculinist tradition." She taught me many things, but I particularly remember a discussion that we had about the excision of pre-pubescent girls – a common practice throughout the country at the time. I thought that Scholastique would agree with my indignation at what Western feminists named "genital mutilation." But, to my surprise, she wasn't particularly receptive to my offer of feminist solidarity. She herself had undergone the surgical initiation rite, as had most girls from her generation. Yet, she insisted: it did not stop her from feeling pleasure or from claiming satisfaction from her husband during sexual relations. She neither "defended" the initiation rite, nor advocated for its preservation, but she categorically rejected the pitying regard of foreign feminists and clearly expressed that this was a problem to be resolved by "African feminism."

Forty years later, as president of the *Marche Mondiale des Femmes* in Burkina Faso, Scholastique wrote a document proudly announcing that the country's Congress had approved measures to combat violence against women, criminalizing forced marriage, excision, and the voluntary transmission of AIDS in conjugal relations (Kompaoré, s/d). Nevertheless, she continued to insist that, although embracing transnational feminist solidarity and joining in the North/South synergy, women in Burkina Faso still forged their own style of feminism – establishing an agenda, choosing a language, making alliances and defining priorities that made sense in their particular situation. In other words, she was reaffirming the lesson she had taught me years before: the particular way in which feminists confront the complex reality of specific situations leads to the recognition that there is not just one feminism, but many (Kompaoré, s/d).

When I arrived in Brazil, almost ten years later, I found yet another type of feminism – one in which traditional themes merged with criticism of and resistance to the military dictatorship. It is no coincidence that, at the time, the only other woman in the Anthro department, Noemi C. Brito, was studying the first workers' strike to take place after the long years of dictatorship (Brito, 1985).

And, as Noemi insisted on pointing out, it was a strike organized by women who worked in the clothing industry. This same colleague introduced me to the many different interdisciplinary groups of feminist leaning[1] that filled the university's extracurricular spaces at the time. Some focused on feminist theory, others were more interested in practical strategies for promoting equality between the sexes in private as well as public spaces, while still others were more concerned with how feminism could enrich the country's process of re-democratization. At the national level, feminist scholars at the Carlos Chagas Foundation[2] took on a decisive role, not only by guaranteeing research funds, but also by articulating national and transnational networks that encouraged reflection on the condition of women and, later, gender relations. These efforts found an echo in a growing number of Working Groups and Round Tables offered in the spirit of women's studies at different national conferences. It was this environment, moved as it was by passion and friendship, horizontal debates and receptiveness to new ideas, that gave me a taste for academic life and the feeling that we were somehow going in an interesting direction – both in analytical and political terms.

Today, feminist studies groups have multiplied in practically every area within the humanities, going through transformations that point to new themes of sexuality and human rights (among others). It would be impossible to do justice to the extreme creativity of feminist groups working in contemporary academia in such a short space. Instead, I propose to focus on the topic of sex workers to highlight one of the fundamental elements of feminist analysis: the radical historical contingency of political tactics and the very production of knowledge. This perspective, already stated by my African colleague at the beginning of the 1970s, was consolidated by Donna Haraway at the end of the 1980s in a text known by most of us, in which the author puts forward the idea of

[1] The interdisciplinary groups of teachers brought together researchers who would come to be counted among the pioneers of women's studies in Brazil: Celi Pinto, Jussara Pra, Guaraci Louro and Anita Brumer.

[2] Albertina Costa and Cristina Bruschini especially.

"Situated knowledge": "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (Haraway, 1988:584). This idea, product of the convergence between feminist studies and sex work, allows us to enter into the complexity of lived realities.

Workers or victims?

The topic of sex work occupied my research interests for a long while. It was actually the focus of one of my first field studies with an NGO – the Center of Prostitution Studies (NEP, *Núcleo de Estudos da Prostituição*) in Porto Alegre (see Olivar, 2013). At the beginning of my research career, I had taken the conscious decision NOT to work with collective associations. Subject as I was to the individualist and existentialist beliefs typical of my primary education, I thought that people would behave more "authentically" if I approached them from outside an institutional setting. It was the feminist NGO Themis that broke down my resistances to institutional settings, when they came looking for university partners to help reflect on and promote female leadership in working-class neighborhoods (see Bonetti, 2001).

From female leadership, our team of researchers continued[3] – at times with, at times without our colleagues at Themis – to new partnerships with non-governmental organizations, the next being NEP (the prostitute's association). While the undergraduate researchers concentrated on investigating nightclubs and other nocturnal settings, I spent my afternoons talking to female prostitutes, most of them well into their 40s, who kept "office hours" in the city's central square. During my time with these

[3] The undergraduate students, Alinne Bonetti and Elisiane Pasini, were with me at each stage of my partnership with NEP. These two researchers later developed their studies under the supervision of other researchers connected to Pagu – Alinne on the popular participation of women in politics, and Elisiane (Pasini, 2005) on the political and professional organization of prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro.

women, I participated in discussions that went well beyond the challenges of sex work. We talked about the joys and worries of maternity, hopes and frustrations in romantic relations, and strategies for dealing with the high rate of inflation (Fonseca, 1996, 2004b).[4] People had no doubt about my marginal connection to NEP. Sometimes, I even helped with the distribution of condoms... But my interlocutors did not seem to shy away from me. On the contrary. Many of them were proud to claim that they'd been participating in the NGO longer than me, that they had a better grasp of the political intricacies of the organization and, in certain cases, were even closer to the coordinators. It was through some of these partnerships that I came to establish long-lasting intellectual, political and affective collaborations.[5] This new collaboration did not seem to diminish the intensity of contact with other interlocutors (whether supporters or critics of the NGO). However, I was obliged to recognize how the presence of this new actor – a political collectivity – changed the power play between me and the people I was dialoguing with. The NGO, run to a great extent by the professionals themselves, made it difficult to trace a clear separation between "us" and "them", bringing to the fore the complexity of my place as researcher and activist.

Nowadays, this separation still seems to raise its inconvenient head in a good number of intervention projects. According to certain observers (Fassin, 2012), the current "humanitarian age" favors a rhetoric of "help" and "protection", from "us" to "them", over ancient idioms of conflict and political confrontation. In light of this debate, questions emerge about the construction of the "victim": what are the power plays involved in defining who should be the object of humanitarian compassion and what are the effects in terms of new (or old) hierarchies of

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[4] See Tedesco (2014) for a similar approach on the occupational and familial trajectories of female sex workers from the Amazonian gold-mining regions.

[5] I am thinking especially of Tina Taborda, founder, and Carmen Lucia Paz, current NEP coordinator. As someone specialized in Human Rights issues, Carmen Lucia (Paz, 2008) brought her experience as a professional prostitute to the analysis of this category's political movement.

humanity? In the field of sex work, there is a tendency to confuse professional prostitutes with victims of trafficking. From a certain point of view, there might be gains in this shift from a traditionally criminal category to one of victimhood. However, an analysis of the various political and feminist positions at play in this debate obliges us to reconsider if this shift represents a gain or a loss for the women in question.

In his study on the existence of different competing categories of victim, Jean Michel Chaumont (2002) lists a vast array of figures, from those killed by the Nazis to those traumatized by child sex abuse. He extends his analysis to include even those "who do not want to be victims," that is, to foreign prostitutes (primarily in France) who are regularly portrayed as victims of sex trafficking. Based on a number of historical episodes, Chaumont succinctly describes something long affirmed by other social scientists (Kempadoo, 2005; Piscitelli, 2013): the endurance of a certain "style of reasoning" (Fleck, 2005) or the surprising resilience of certain ideas about prostitution and the trafficking of women, despite repeated empirical contestations to the contrary.

The author (2007) begins with an anonymous report that appeared in the *Bulletin of the Belgian Society for Public Morality* in 1879. The journalistic article is about a young Englishwoman who was found roaming "semi-naked" and wailing through the streets of Brussels. Two matrons were following her, trying to calm her down and take her with them, but the girl resisted, all the while calling for help in a language incomprehensible to the people who gathered around. When a man appeared who was finally able to translate her words, the public discovered the sad tale of a "white slave," tricked and taken to work forcibly in a Belgian brothel where she endured "the most shameful treatments."

Historians who describe the unfolding of events after this episode tell another version of the facts produced by the police investigation that followed. When another prostitute at the brothel had skipped off with the young woman's preferred customer, she had suffered an attack of jealousy and gone wailing into the streets. Her distress had been assuaged only by the alleged

policeman who had defended her on the night of her "escape" and with whom she had voluntarily spent the night before returning to the brothel. The police report could obviously have been as biased as the newspaper article, but what is interesting is that only one version of the facts remained in the imaginary of that period: that of the newspaper article, i.e., the story given by the "proper citizens" – philanthropists from the Belgian elite – that ran the Society for Public Morality.

Chaumont frames this tale by describing how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, various European countries were approving laws to help victims of sexual slavery. The idea was to repatriate foreign sex workers who were underage or who had been forced into prostitution. The problem was that no one could find "trafficked" women who wanted to take advantage of the salvation offered by the new laws. In the eight years that followed the implementation of the first of these laws in Belgium (1906), only four women had come forth to declare they'd been trafficked. The Belgian government therefore began to include a broader spectrum of women in the "trafficked" category. Any foreign prostitute would do. Girls who weren't interested in the option of voluntary repatriation would be deported anyway, making it clear that society's charitable "help" was not to be refused.

In the 1920s, to discover the extent of the trafficking of women and children, the League of Nations organized an inquiry, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, that included no fewer than twenty-eight countries. According to Chaumont, the commission of inquiry was unable to find a single young woman claiming she had been forced into cross national borders to prostitute herself. In response, once again, the category of trafficked woman was broadened to include any foreign woman working in prostitution. The official justification was that a woman engaged in this activity had to have been tricked into it.

At the time, there were many champions ready to save these misled women. Conservative Catholics found in prostitution proof of modernity's decadence, socialists found proof of capitalism's

ferocity, and feminists the example *par excellence* of masculine domination. Policemen, seeking to consolidate their international networks, also encountered in the "trafficking" scare a convenient way of raising political and financial support. Summing up, Chaumont argues that, rather than some irrational panic, the scandal surrounding the traffick of women revealed the rationality of well-organized actors, recruited from the ranks of the political and social elite.

The author further implies that this Victorian narrative resonates still today. Currently, in certain countries – France, for example –, a foreign prostitute's only hope of legalizing her residential status lies in calling herself a victim of human trafficking. Even if she accepts to be classified in this category, she will probably not be allowed to remain in the country. On the contrary, the country's way of "helping" the vast majority of such victims is through forced repatriation. Those who profit from campaigns against trafficking are to be found, for the most part, in other walks of life. Newspapers are practically guaranteed a sell-out edition when they splash the topic on their front-page headlines; national police forces find a moral justification for the expulsion of clandestine immigrants from poor countries; politicians, with an eye to the next elections, show how they are cleaning the cities' streets; and even local prostitutes are happy to cooperate, as crack-downs reduce competition by warding off foreign rivals. Finally, there are still certain feminist groups that throw themselves into the struggle against the trafficking of women in order to call attention to female vulnerability.

Chaumont presents the scandals concerning sex trafficking as a perfect example of the paradox written into the definition of "victim". First, the example underlines the rashness of attributing a category to subjects who do not identify with it. To insist on labeling a woman as "victim" when she herself does not see things that way seems to reduce her to the status of a child or mentally ill

person. It submits her to a pastoral power that knows better than she what is in her best interests.[6]

Second, one must think about the consequences for adult professionals of the sex industry who reject the label of victim. The idea of "trafficked woman" appears to presuppose the prostitute's original innocence. The notion is fed by Victorian images of the pure and defenseless woman who cannot understand, much less defend herself against, the exploitation to which she is subjected. Where then do women who admit to having voluntarily entered the profession stand? Are they to be understood as being "depraved"? Or as "accomplices" in a criminal activity? If so, how will they be able to take advantage of the most basic citizens' rights, such as the right to protection against mistreatment while exercising their profession? It seems that the category of "victim" tends to obfuscate that of "worker," leaving those who professionally pursue the activity without the legal safeguards created precisely to protect workers against physical and moral violence.

The style of reasoning in public policies that define prostitutes as victims of trafficking never seems to change, despite repeated proof of its inefficacy (if not total irrelevance). On the other hand, on reviewing the last twenty years of feminist studies on this theme, I was impressed by certain dramatic shifts in perspective. Judith Butler's interview with Gayle Rubin (Rubin and Butler, 2003), translated to Portuguese by *Cadernos Pagu,* furnishes a wonderful example of the critical self-assessment and capacity to grow through empirical experience and debate that, in my view, characterizes the field of feminist studies.

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[6] In conversations with Cecilia Varela and Santiago Morcillo, two Argentinian researchers who participated in Pagu's anniversary celebration, I was given a perfect example of female infantilization. In Argentina, the courts use a technique of "no-harm testimony" to investigate the "trafficking of women." In this type of interview, originally developed for children, court officials are hidden behind a one-way mirror while a psychologist interviews the "victim." This technique, which is already questionable for children, is proof of candid paternalism in cases dealing with adult women.

In the interview, Gayle Rubin – author of perhaps the most cited text on the "trafficking of women," written at the beginning of the 1970s – rethinks her own work. She begins by underlining the prevailing intellectual climate at the time of the text's production: one of enchantment with Marx, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, together with the"second wave of feminism," and still without the contribution of LGBT theoreticians or post-colonial feminists. To explain the transformation of her thinking on prostitution since then, Gayle talks about the influence of Carol Ernst, a lesbian activist that worked in a massage parlor before becoming a truck-driver. In both forms of employment, Carol was involved in organizing strikes to demand better working conditions. Since she considered prostitution work as dignified as any other, she didn't understand the manner in which Gayle – a feminist colleague – used the rhetoric of prostitution to persuade her readers about the horrors of women's oppression. She believed that, even as a technique of persuasion, it increased the stigma (and thus the oppression) of women in sex work. After much debate, Gayle ended up agreeing: "[I finally understood] that my rhetorical gain did not justify attitudes that rationalized the persecution of sex workers" (Rubin, 2003:173).

Aside from an openness to the empirical world's complexity and the refusal of radical polarizations or intransigent attitudes, we find in the Gayle-Judith dialogue yet another characteristic I associate with the field of feminist studies: the courage to "put one's neck on the block" of political debates and take responsibility for the consequences – that is, the desire to connect with the "real world." I believe we find this type of courage in many other feminist texts (also) found in the pages of *Cadernos Pagu* – particularly those in which the authors discuss prostitution and human rights. By addressing a public that includes some of the primary actors in the current scene – public policy administrators, law enforcement officers and feminist NGOs – these articles create a reflective space wherein different versions of "the facts" are brought into dialogue.

Is it enough to talk of human rights

Does the notion of "human rights" helps to clarify controversies concerning the trafficking of women? A consideration of two articles – one by Kamala Kempadoo and the other by Adriana Piscitelli – reveals the tactical polyvalence of this term (Foucault, 1977). According to Kamala (2005), there is a certain polarization in North-American discussions, which tends to duplicate that found in international organizations and treaties. On the one hand, there are the abolitionist feminists who see all prostitution as a form of sexual slavery; on the other, there are those feminists with a more plural conception (incorporating perspectives from Africa, indigenous peoples and other non Euro-American traditions) who see prostitution in terms of human rights or social justice. The latter see the problem of sex industry workers as being, above all, about dangerous working conditions, involving discrimination, disrespect and inhuman treatment – conditions that are aggravated in the case of foreigners, since they are perceived as something between criminals, whores and illegal immigrants. In international treaties, an emphasis on the control of movement across transnational borders – with the criminalization and punishment of people involved in "illegal" migrations – appears to obfuscate the human rights agenda projected by feminists who observe, not without irony, that "anti-trafficking policies and legislation have not decreased human rights violations" (Kempadoo, 2005:67).

Writing on her experience in Spain with the national Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (*Plano Espanhol de Combate ao Tráfico de Pessoas*), Adriana Piscitelli (2005) shows how – in this case – the "human rights" slogan is brandished by people who want to *abolish* prostitution. In a context of intense debate between different NGOs, those who consider sex workers' rights – legislative guarantees for dignified working conditions – declare themselves to be "more feminist." On the other hand, activists associated with humanitarian religious organizations tend to condemn all forms of prostitution, considered incompatible with

women's dignity. It is the latter who use the rhetoric of human rights, having perceived that "the articulation with municipal entities and the police is more effective when the idea of 'human rights' is emphasized" (Piscitelli, 2011:22). In other words, the rhetorical use of human rights appears to be a relatively efficient tactic to obtain documents for foreign women, "victims of trafficking," who want to stay in the country.

The polyvalence of the term "human rights," used both to promote better working conditions and to fight against the very existence of sex work, has been observed by many researchers. The inherent ambiguities in this type of political banner appear in the feminist movement itself. However, it is also thanks to feminist studies that we have learned to deal with these ambiguities not as an anomaly – to be remedied – but as an integral part of heated debate, revealing much about the different tensions and articulations that underlie the current political scene.

Many of our feminist colleagues underline the power of language. They invest in the creation of new concepts that break with traditional classifications that feed on discriminatory stereotypes. Such an investment is certainly important, but it has its limits. Gayle Rubin's story teaches of the eminently contextual character of our choice of concepts. In certain contexts, it makes sense to talk about "trafficking"; in others, because of new and different power plays, the term may well become counterproductive. With "human rights" we have seen how concepts – even the most revolutionary of concepts – are malleable. As with new forms of legislation, terms are captured by various groups, "clarified" in different ways, and used for ends that often seem far distant from the original intentions of those who formulated them.

To recognize the contextual nature not only of the content but also of the very choice of concepts we use implies recognition of the political struggles entangled in our topics of research. It draws attention to the need to study the concrete articulations of these struggles and to learn techniques for following the results of our research right into the political arena. In other words, the

research process does not end with academic debate. This is one of the major legacies of feminism in feminist studies: think strategically, and value collective action – not only for the "oppressed" (who are constantly encouraged to "organize" themselves in collective movements), but also for researchers themselves. It is through this particular combination of critical thought and *engagement* that the convergence of feminism and feminist studies has willed a legacy for an ever larger number of "heirs."

To see history in terms of a long-lasting confrontation between antagonistic styles of reasoning means to accept that the past's ideological contentions, that we so easily imagine dead and buried, can return again and again. It means recognizing that history cannot be boiled down to a great "march of progress," with irreversible "conquests." There is no ready-made package of necessarily associated elements in relation to the "liberation of women," for example. In practice, this slogan's ins and outs are in constant dispute, making "the package" fragile, unstable – something to be renegotiated with each new context. In other words – and this is the connection that people like Scholastique brought to the discussion very early on – political engagement cannot follow a fixed and immutable formula. It goes well beyond the application of a slate of rules or principles. "Advancement" does not lie so much in the final product (whether it be a concept or law), as in the process, that is, in the criticisms and self-reflections that come with the "making-of". It is through this process, in the struggle with (an always novel) context and (never entirely predictable) diversity that the alliance between feminist studies and activism finds its particular force.

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