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"Rowing one's own boat": the centrality of work in the world of single women[*]

"Remar o próprio barco": a centralidade do trabalho no mundo das mulheres "sós"

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ABSTRACT

Several notions attributed to single women in social theory and in the common sense refer to some ideas proclaimed by feminism. Education and qualified, paid work are considered the privileged path to conquering autonomy. When broadened, this autonomy would allow a set of women, mostly those from the urban middle classes, greater opportunities to make choices, to make decisions by themselves and even to break with the old stereotypes of "spinsters". To understand how notions associated with the "independent woman" and their paradoxes are intertwined requires a review of some ideas that marked the emergence and the consolidation of feminism as a political movement of "modernity" in its expansion from the 1960s on. In this article, I examine the connection between education and professionalization and non-marriage in the present day, taking into account narratives of middle class, childless single women living alone.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Work, Single Women, Marriage.

RESUMO

Várias das noções atribuídas às mulheres "solteiras" presentes na teoria social e no senso comum remetem a algumas idéias proclamadas pelo feminismo. Educação, trabalho qualificado e remunerado são considerados a via privilegiada para a conquista da "autonomia" que, ampliada, possibilitaria a um

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conjunto de mulheres, sobretudo das camadas médias urbanas, maiores chances de realizar escolhas, decidir por si mesmas e até mesmo romper com os estereótipos clássicos da "solteirona". Compreender como se entrelaçam as noções associadas à idéia de "mulher independente" e seus paradoxos requer revisitar algumas idéias que marcaram a emergência e a consolidação do feminismo como um movimento político da "modernidade" em sua expansão a partir dos anos 1960. Neste artigo, examino os nexos entre educação e profissionalização e o não casamento na contemporaneidade, a partir da análise de algumas narrativas de mulheres "solteiras" de camadas médias urbanas, sem filhos e que moram sozinhas.

Palavras-chave: Gênero, Feminismo, Trabalho, Solteiras, Casamento.

A woman unafraid of men strikes them with fear.
Simone de Beauvoir, 1980 [1949]

Many of the notions attributed to 'single' women present in social theory and common sense refer – positively or negatively – to some of the ideas proclaimed by feminism, mixing the experience of living alone with notions of the 'new single woman' or the 'independent,' 'free' and 'modern' woman. In this scenario, education and qualified paid work are taken to be the primary means for winning the 'autonomy' that, amplified, will allow a group of women, especially those from the middle classes, greater chances of making choices, deciding for themselves and even breaking away from classic stereotypes of the 'spinster.' In a way these notions evoke Virginia Woolf's concern at the start of the 20th century over the lack of autonomy of the woman in her circle in England, expressed in *A room of one's own* (1929), where she attributes great importance to a woman having her own annual income and the space to develop creative work, framed by the idea of a room of one's own.

Once won, this autonomy is also frequently claimed to conflict with the interests of married life and heavy emphasis is given to the mismatch between 'old men' and 'young women.' This apparent paradox (almost a cliché) appears recurrently in the media and emerges in the dialogues of middle class educated women with established careers. However it has received very little attention from feminist scholars, who tend to regard the phenomenon under the narrow rubric of a 'gender gap.'[1]

Understanding how the notions associated with the idea of an 'independent woman' are interwoven with its paradoxes requires revisiting some of the ideas that marked the emergence and consolidation of feminism as a political movement of modernity during its expansion from the 1960s onwards. In this article I examine the connections between education, professionalization and non-marriage[2] in contemporary life, based on the analysis of a number of narratives of 'single' women from the urban middle class, without children and living alone.

Gender, feminism and work – some approaches

[1] The expression *gender gap* is frequently found in academic articles and the media when comparing social indicators for the sexes, emphasizing the inequalities. The term has also been used to refer to female achievements that emancipate women, leaving men out of step.

[2] Although the research includes women with various affective and sexual trajectories, their narratives are not identified here under the category of 'sexual orientation'; the analysis refers to marriage in its 'traditional' heterosexual form.

Labour relations represent an aspect of gendered social relations, comprising an important locus of what is defined as male and female (Lobo, 1992) and it is in the world of work that men and women face each other as apparently free and equal individuals (Durham 1983:35). Feminist-inspired anthropological studies present the sexual division of labour as a universal fact, emphasizing the dominance of activities in terms of power and prestige associated with men (Rosaldo 1979). In contemporary industrialized and capitalist societies, where autonomy and prestige depend on the circulation of capital, financial independence is extremely important (Millet 1970). The search for individualization and financial autonomy depends increasingly on paid employment (Gordon, 1994), which is why the feminist demand for equal employment opportunities and pay continues to be so pressing in these societies.

According to Nicholson (1986), the right to work is a notion present in all currents of second-wave feminism.[3] The liberal approach had a more direct influence on the struggle for rights in the public sphere by linking the fight to reverse women's subordination to obtaining rights at a formal level, particularly acquiring equal opportunities for training and professionalization. While work was no less important for radical feminists, the discussion raised more destabilizing political questions – a rupture from the heterosexual norm, the end of the marriage contact, the critique of the family and control over women's body, maternity as a voluntary choice, and so on. Generally speaking, though at different scales, second-wave feminists criticized and rejected the public/private spheres and their dichotomies founded on sexual difference.

Friedan (1963) proclaimed that formal work – paid, outside the home, in a wide range of options accompanied by professional training – would provide equal relationship conditions to women who would be welcomed into the social 'whole.' In the formulations of liberal feminism – more programmatic than theoretical – the public world (male, creative, objective) is not submitted to critique and is conceived in opposition to the private world (female, subjective, tedious). The critique of the separation of these spheres is based on a notion that emphasizes the transformations of the private world as a form of offering women equal opportunities in the public world, overcoming the "problem that has no name" characteristic of domestic confinement. Failing to acknowledge some culturally important gender meanings, these formulations were obviously directed at middle class women who, like Friedan, were married, had studied at university and wanted a degree of independence.

The centrality of work

Studies of lifestyles in contemporary complex societies take the social identities of individuals to be to a large extent constructed more emphatically in the domain of work than those of the family and kinship (Velho, 2002), implying new and different relational perspectives. The rapid change in social relations, above all the pattern 'male provider/female carer' that shaped the 'nuclear family,' is pinpointed as the key element explaining how work has become fundamental in the life of a considerable portion of women in today's 'western societies.'

Even so for some professionalized women from the middle and upper classes, married, living with a partner or with the family, their wage may be considered part of the domestic budget or a 'complement' to the husband's wage or that of the family. This is not the case of the women that I interviewed,[4] whose wages cover all domestic and extra-domestic expenditure. For these women, work

[3] Feminism is typically divided into two waves: the first spans from the end of the 19th century to the end of the Second World War, while the second wave starts at the end of the 1960s when an attempt to theorize the oppression of women is undertaken in earnest (Rupp 2002). From the 1980s onward theories critical of the second wave emerge and gender studies grow in importance (Piscitelli 2002, Simpson 2005). Some authors also argue, albeit controversially, for the existence of a third wave identified with *post-feminism*.

[4] I interviewed 12 middle class women, single, childless, aged between 29-53 years, with a variety of professional careers, living alone in Goiânia, Goiás state, in the period between 2003 and 2005. This is a diverse group in terms of race,

emerges as a striking category, both as occupations, jobs, in different phases of their lives, and as a profession or career. Though not the only factor, all the women stressed the importance of paid work in enabling them to live alone. The majority of the interviewees began to have their own income even before leaving university, showing that work, the existence of the profession in contemporary contexts, organizes or influences – not to say determines – other spheres of the life of middle class women, particularly those living alone.

The first formal work opportunities open to women were concentrated in low-prestige jobs with exhausting hours. Although the problem still persists among working class women – including in Brazil – the gradual increase in schooling from the 1960s onward provided entirely new prospects for middle class women, as well as allowing them a degree of social mobility. As Sarti observes, analyzing the relations between gender, work and class in Brazil, the considerable increase in female participation in the labour market over the last two decades did not have the same impact on all women, but mainly affected those who benefitted from the expansion in the educational system:

> Poor women, on the other hand, without access to secondary and higher education, remained with the same structural conditions of participating in the work market, whose expansion, in their case, did not necessarily entail a new situation capable of shaking the foundations of intra-family relations (Sarti 1997:154).

On the other hand, women who had access to education and professionalization were able to explore paths previously denied to women or restricted to a few. Apparently all professions were conquered, although women still tend to be more present in supposedly 'feminine' careers – social services, healthcare, teaching/education and so on (Rosemberg 2001, Lobo 1992, Bruschini 2000). According to Bruschini & Puppin (2004:108), "the expansion in schooling, to which Brazilian women have increasing access, is one of the biggest influences on women's entry into the labour market."

Feminist studies focusing on 'single women' in large cities around the world (Trimberger 2005, Simpson 2003 and 2005, Byrne 2000, Gordon 1994) have reached the same conclusion: 'single women' without children tend to invest time and energy in work and since they are almost always better qualified, they also have higher incomes. In Brazil studies of the labour market show similar results. Comparing indicators from the 1990s with earlier data, Bilac (2002:5) argues:

> In a stark contrast with previous situations, the best female work situations are found among young adult women living alone: they show the highest levels of participation with the lowest rates of unemployment and the highest levels of income. But it is highly probable that just the fact of living alone already identities a different form of insertion in the labour market – higher qualifications, greater formalization and stability – which interferes in the life trajectory since projects may be postponed or abandoned in pursuit of a professional career.

Though making no distinction between 'single women' and women who live alone, Bruschini (2000) and Néri (2005) reach similar conclusions: more years of study and time to dedicate primarily to work is a growing reality among 'single women' without children, especially those in high-prestige technical and scientific occupations.

Feminism produced a profound critique of those models rooted in the division between productive and reproductive work and of the sexual division of labour, which condemns women to services and jobs associated with their 'nature' (Daniele Kergoat 2002). As heirs of this 'revolution,'

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generation, religion, geographic and class origin, and sexual orientation. The indications of race/colour mentioned in the article were self-declared.

most of the interviewees, particularly the younger women, had not faced any great challenges in pursuing their chosen profession, since – apparently – all the doors had already been opened for them.

Literacy and access to education

Literacy[5] has functioned as a portal to knowledge, clearing the way for other adventures, as the interviewees observed in the accounts of their childhoods, full of school and literary references, the influence of which is predominantly attributed to parents. As Vaitsman points out (1994:92), in Brazil from the beginning of the 1960s, parents began to steer their daughters towards study, marriage and professionalization, in this order. However study and work plans were a complement to marriage, not a substitute.

Breaking with a historical tradition in place since women won the right to study, none of the interviewees went to teaching college or was a primary school teacher. As Corrêa (2001) and Vaitsman (1994) demonstrate, passing through teaching college was common to a generation of women who undertook university courses in Brazil in the 1960s. However while none of the interviewed women went to teaching college, five went on to become university academics, confirming an upward trend in the participation of women in higher education jobs too (Rosemberg 1992 and 2001). The correlation between higher academic training, 'female' professions and 'singlehood' was analyzed by Louro (1997), emphasizing the ambiguity surrounding the 'spinster' academic as a woman who had failed in her destiny to become a wife and mother, but, on the other hand, had ensured her economic independence, which allowed her to circulate publicly, enjoying some 'male' privileges. Meanwhile Nádia Amorin's study of 'single' women in Maceió shows that of the 66 women interviewed, 50% were teachers – "women who did not marry had to become teachers" (Amorin, 1992:84).

The importance of parental stimulus towards literacy is illustrated by Helena, 44 years old, a white university professor, when she talks about her desire to publish the stories she has cultivated since childhood, a period when her mother also encouraged her to learn 'domestic skills' and, at the same time, bought her and her siblings large collections of books "sold door-to-door."

> My mother used to say that the first louse she killed on my head, she squashed with a newspaper so I would learn to read... [laughs]. Afterwards when I used to walk around everywhere with a book, she would say "ah... I really regret I did that, I should have killed that first louse at the sewing machine, that way you would have been a seamstress."

As Gordon asserts (1994:57), parents frequently send contradictory messages to their daughters. Mothers in particular encourage school education and the pursuit of financial independence and, at the same time, emphasize the importance of being adept as spouses and housewives. The 'regret' expressed by Helena's mother shows this ambivalence in the context of a family considered traditional in their interior town, whose concerns over her daughters also included preparing them for the function of being a wife, mother and 'talented housewife.' In this period (1960s/70s), women were still mostly portrayed as dedicated mothers, feminine and kind wives or suitable wives-to-be. Bassanezi's analysis (2000) of the representation of bourgeois women in the 1950s shows the recurrence of the 'bride-to-be' prototype in women's magazines. Over the course of the interview, Helena describes with some pride her domestic skills – cooking, cross-stitching and embroidering – because she can engage in these

[5] Literacy (*letramento*) is a more political than technical concept and goes beyond the idea of schooling. Pinto (2004) argues that reading, in the sense of decoding and using letters does not mean literacy, which should be understood within a historical perspective, taking into account power structures rather than individuals, enabling the explanation, for example, of the declared difficulty for women with high educational levels to produce written texts to be published. On literacy, see Kleiman 1995.

activities in her free time as a hobby. By expanding her range of possibilities and consequently her choices, what was once an obligation can now be pursued as a pleasure.

Education or the investment in school life and academia, at the cost of other areas of life, marks the choices of these women in a definitive way, as well as the entry into the labour market and the responsibility for making decisions. Consequently study and professionalization function as ways of combatting women's dependence.

Many of the messages 'archived' from childhood are related to intellectual curiosity and the wonder over the discoveries obtained from reading. These memories, loaded with emotion during the interviews, were listed as a partial explanation for the relative disinterest in marriage. Camila, a 43-year old black psychoanalyst, recalls that she was taught to read and write by her father at home and that a childhood surrounded by books allowed her to explore literature from an early age. As her father also taught the domestic maids, she would sit by their side, so that she already knew how to read and write when she started school. Her 'restlessness' for knowledge is associated with a childhood spent with other children who also liked to read, an influence she believes decisive in terms of the choice of the two higher degree courses she took.

Laura, 47 years old, a white university professor, emphasizes her huge curiosity since a young age:

> ever since I was small, I wanted to be a scientist, a researcher, you know, I never wanted to be a mother (...) I'm not a fountain of intelligence, my intelligence is completely normal, but I always wanted to study, you see?

Madalena, 42 years old, white, working in public relations, emphasizes the learning acquired outside her parents' home:

> In my case, I went to live in Paris for nine months and ended up staying much longer and after I had finished my schooling there, my studies... it was my first experience outside my family, it was fantastic, I think that what I have at a cultural level came from living in Paris, I had the chance to travel the world, I was successful as a Brazilian woman abroad, I went because I wanted to study.

While intellectual curiosity marks these narratives in a particularly positive way, the notion of acquiring independence through work very often presents contradictory meanings. Some of the interviewees expressed pride and a high level of self-esteem in what they do and, at the same time, feel threatened by the competitiveness of the public world; they are confident in their capacity to 'manage their own life,' but make explicit their 'needs' and the desire for protection. Their professional work provides considerable doses of pleasure and achievement, but also leads to tiredness and exhaustion, making it necessary to find 'time for themselves.' The relationship with the money may be extremely carefully calculated and planned, or perceived as completely out of control. Financial independence may occasion a specific type of dependence on male figures – the woman's father or a brother – while, at the same time, may also be cited in positive terms: "I am the owner of my life," "I don't get bossed about," "I don't owe anyone anything." But expressions signalling a certain ambiguity are also frequent: "my independence scares away men, they're afraid of women like myself." However the physical, mental and emotional independence, which makes them self-sufficient, also seems to be diluted by the fear of becoming sick and growing old: being old means being unable to work anymore.

Having money, earning a living – the meanings of work

The mass entry of women into the job market necessarily changes the notion of work itself. Work is so predominantly conceived as a male sphere that the term ‘feminization’ is used when women rise to positions historically dominated by men and can be depicted just as much as a victory for women in the field of equal opportunities as the loss of prestige of the profession in question (Picot, 2002).

The relation between women and work has been analyzed with a particular focus on the double working day, low ages, wage disparities and the question of the production/reproduction dyad in the capitalist system (Prisca Kergoat, 2002). In this sense, the analyses mostly concentrate on exploitation, sacrifices and losses, rather than the meaning of the achievement and satisfaction gained from exercising a profession. By primarily emphasizing the sexual division of work and its implications for the lives of married women and mothers, Gordon (1994) argues that studies centred on the relation between women and work neglect analyses that take into account the position of unmarried women, for whom entry into the workplace performs the role of rite of passage similar to marriage, since it elicits a significant change in the woman’s way of life, comprising a large part of these women’s sense of identity. Mentioning how she is affected by the pleasure given by work, Camila relates:

> There’s something that stirs a lot, studying, in my case, exercising my profession, hum, look, it’s the best orgasm you can have [*laughs*], it’s really pleasurable. I have a deep love for what I do, it mobilizes me, shakes me from head to toe. (...) Frequently what some people find heavy going, for me is the opposite, it’s pleasurable, because it gives me pleasure: I mean, studying, reading, writing, designing, assembling projects, putting things into practice, it’s all extremely pleasurable for me. Listening in the office, for me it’s like sunshine, I think this feeds my life enormously, it’s my food.

Interestingly Camila’s remarks appear in a sequence in which she is talking about how society finds it strange when a woman does not want children, that she does not ‘mobilize’ herself with motherhood in mind, because what really ‘mobilizes’ her is her psychoanalytic profession. Camila’s feeling is similar to that of Helena, who refers in a particularly affection way to her relations with the students she supervises. She considers them ‘friends’ because “they transcended the limits” of the formal professor/student relation and speaks of her relationship of this work in vibrant form:

> (...) giving classes, undertaking research, the contact with students... it’s an enormous satisfaction to see my supervisees do a good job, I adore having this relationship to writing, a well-written text, it gives me a real pleasure, a satisfaction that is almost physical [*laughs*].It’s a really good feeling!

Sometimes the feeling of pleasure is accompanied by a high appraisal of their own worth as professionals, a feeling that seems to compensate for the lack of socially valued ‘feminine’ attributes, showing that overcoming barriers of class, gender and ‘race’ produce a positive and strong self-image.

> I do what I’m doing, I fought to do what I enjoy and I’m good at what I do, okay? So, without being vain, I’m not one to blow my own trumpet all the time, I know that I’m good at what I do, from the feedback that I get, in Brazil I’m the only person studying what I study (Évora, researcher, black, 44 years old).

In the executive world, it is common to find younger women without children (Bruschini & Puppin, 2004) and the requirements are high for them to ‘succeed’ in reaching high posts in public and private institutions and corporations. Invited for an interview with a multinational financial institution,

Sarah, 29 years old, white, a financial executive, felt challenged and somewhat afraid, but was ready to take up the gauntlet:

> For me it would be a challenge of the type: "oh, you can do it, you have to try" and that's what I did, I think I was really brave, I learnt over time. At first it was all difficult, everything was difficult for me, the word I most pronounced was difficult, today I've torn up my dictionary, the word no longer exists.

In a world symbolically and objectively marked by gender, some women face other challenges that also contribute to shaping their subjectivities. Mariah, 42 years old, an engineer, *morena* (dark-skinned), with three different jobs in different cities, says that she 'joines together' from Monday to Monday. Working in a professional world dominated by men, her account emphasizes changes, something which has also been described in relation to women who become 'masculinized' by occupying positions of power:

> As there are few professionals working in my area here in Goiás, I'm in heavy demand everywhere (...) I've become very well know, I know my work is good, I don't want to be too modest or to praise myself too much, I just try to do my job well and seriously. I've acquired a lot of knowledge in the area of engineering, so I didn't become specialist in one subject only, I've a very wide range. Now engineering is very exact, they are very aggressive, the market demands that you be aggressive, so you end up drifting to that side too. So I keep myself in check a lot. Working in the exact sciences makes you very cold, very calculating, especially when you work with a business, a contractor. To make up for it, I try to read more philosophy, direct my leisure time more towards the emotional side.

Like Mariah, for Cândida too – 36 years old, a university professor, white – the pace of work, especially academic work, elicits other needs such as the desire for solitude, perceived as a route back, a much-needed pause. At the time of the interview, Cândida divided her time between three different and highly demanding activities and emphasized this 'time to herself':

> Now what I am most missing is having the time to actually read. I work all day, I get back home at seven in the evening, exhausted, I don't have any break, it's very tiring. I ask my friends who have careers in academia, because I would like at least Saturday and Sunday for myself, and most of them tell me that they choose Saturday **or** Sunday, nobody in my circle of friends has both days free. That scares me a bit, because I'm feeling the lack of another space to produce meaning, I need space to be alone, because I deal with a lot of people.

This lack of space is also lamented by another two university professors:

> I earn as I work and sometimes I don't stop even for lunch. I sometimes work Saturdays too. When I have nothing to do I enjoy my free time alone because, if not, we end up just fleeing from work and forgetting our own life, we forget our personal life (Évora).
>
> My life just gravitates around work and that isn't healthy. My doctor already asked me where I was, where the person was, because he could only see the professional. So I stopped to think and said "it's true, I have to make some space for myself, because the professional part of my life I do fine" (Laura).

It is important to note that the narratives reiterate the inside/outside, personal/private and collective/public separations commonly found in some sociological texts that value the intimate sphere as protection against an inhospitable world. This sphere of intimacy, normally represented by the nuclear family – and here by solitude at home (the 'nest') – becomes an antidote to the dispersion and disintegration of the world of work, inscribed in public space (Lasch 1991).

Generally speaking, work is so central to the majority of these 'lone' women that the possibility of losing their job or the capacity to work represents the loss of all their achievements.

> Ah, God help me if I no longer had my job, how would I do the things I like doing? You know, I get a little bit terrified by the idea of not doing what I like, what I want, being able to travel, being able to continue the life I now have. I think I've done very well for my 29 years, but I think I can do better still, I'm always looking, my life spins around this (Sarah).

These women associate the loss in productive capacity with a notion of finitude, represented by sickening and aging. The limit to independence through work is old age or any incapacitating condition, as Laura emphasizes: "old age begins when I can no longer work, when I can longer do the things I do alone." Mariah says that she has no time to be sick: "I see myself working until I die, I don't want to stop ever." Madalena turns to models that help her think of life as an always open possibility:

> I'm afraid of becoming ill, not being able to work anymore. Something that startled me the other day was someone calling me *senhora*, I didn't like it very much. But when I think "gosh, I'm already forty, my God, oh no, am I wasting the best years of my life?" No, I look at Roberto Marinho, he launched his newspaper at the age of 68, I'm still on course (Madalena).

The time dedicated to work may provoke feelings of bitterness and exhaustion. Hence another dimension of this separation or the perception that life is consumed by work – which to a certain extent reiterates the public/private opposition – resituates the question of femininity as a space that requires protection, the space of live, as we find in Sarah's narrative:

> (...) to tell you the truth, happiness for me is… love comes first, more than my professional life, despite all my independence. If I found someone who turned to me said "you don't need to work," obviously I would look for another way to stay busy, but I would like someone to protect me, I would. I'm tired of protecting, always having to take the lead, always making all the decisions.

As the interview continued, filled with ambiguity, Sarah reacted to her own complaint, saying that she would feel bad in such a situation, because this would generate dependency, and instead she emphasized her desire to construct something together: "I want someone with whom to leave this place and achieve something together, move to our own apartment, 'let's do this together...' great, that's what I wanted."

Since the feeling of independence is linked to financial independence, acquired in formal paid work, money is a recurrent element in the narratives, signalling distinct forms of dealing with it. For most of the interviewees who explain their freedom and autonomy as the result of their economic independence, "I don't owe anyone, I earn my own money," being the boss of one's own money is like having destiny in one's own hands, being able to govern it, holding the reins of one's life. Using the metaphor of "rowing one's own boat,"[6] Sarah emphasizes the importance of money in the material and

[6] As in "I'd rather be a free spirit and paddle my own canoe" (Louisa May Alcott [1868] *apud* Federman 2001:187).

symbolic sense to the notion of autonomy in the life of 'single' women. However a bold attitude in financial terms does not always correspond to a sensation of security in the woman's personal life. Évora says: "in my personal life, I'm a failure, in my professional life, I'm excellent!" referring to her incredible capacity to 'make' money for the university and the 'lack of control' in her personal life caused by excessive spending. Sometimes money is just a vehicle for obtaining what they want, signifying little in terms of status and prestige. Those women who received an inheritance or help from parents at the start of their career express a more 'hedonist' attitude to money, emphasizing the consumption of products for themselves or those dearest and closest to them, and prioritizing 'life's pleasures' – 'eating well, travelling and having access to cultural goods deemed fundamental (music, literature, art).

For the US feminist philosophy Nancy Hartsock, the possibility of women earning and generating their own money, conducting financial operations, forms part of the list of recent feminist successes. Comparing the new generations with her own from the 1960s, the author recalls her personal experiences from a time when control of financial transactions was restricted to men:

> After I got married, in 1965, I applied three times for a credit card, and each time they "lost" my application. I finally talked to someone who said they didn't issue credit to married women, but they would give my husband a card based on my credit rating. I was a (presumably responsible) college professor! (Vogel, 2001:1)

The form in which each interviewee deals with the financial issue emerged at different moments of the interviews, when talking about their more 'spendthrift' or more 'economizing' profiles, their professional successes and personal failures in this area. It is notable that some of the women perceived that earning money gives them another status, making them admired and envied, although their dialogues also express that the journey is not as glamorous as it seems.

> I think that I'm ahead of a lot of people, you know. I'll confess to you that there are a lot of people would like to be the way I am. But nobody knows how difficult it is to live independently, with my apartment, my car, my job, with the trips I make, everyone says, "wow… how I'd like that…" But nobody knows just how difficult it was to reach where I am, how it is difficult to keep up, how difficult it all us… ah, it's complicated [*sighs*]. I don't know how to put it… I just keep going… (Sarah).

Money is the crowning product of work and gives meaning to being/belonging to the world, although, from the specific viewpoint of heterosexual relation, for some women it signifies a complicating factor. Thus certain patterns of behaviour or rules of sociability marked by gender are re-examined via the premise of the power produced by financial independence, emerging from the notion of 'being in control.'

> I don't have this problem, if I want to go to a good restaurant, I go, I can afford it. (...) I don't have any problems, I always split the bill with men, I don't like letting the guy pay everything, just like I don't like paying by myself, I think it has to be split. But, [if I say] "ah, let's go to that place," and he says "I can't go there, it's too expensive," I'll happily say, "fine, okay then, you can let me pay the bill, I'll get it." But sometimes, if the guy really insists, I don't mind, the guy can pay, as long as I don't end up controlled by him (Mariah).

For some interviewees, financial independence allows the 'single woman' to live without having to submit herself, a position contrasted with marriage, which is perceived as a place of oppression, generating bonds of financial dependency, among others. 'Bite your lip,' 'explain yourself,' 'be subjected' pervade the narratives on marriage as a relationship that oppresses and subjugates the woman, while being 'single' means not being submitted to the ownership or control of a husband.

> Look, São Paulo and Goiânia have their differences. Like A. [a friend] says, here there's the institution of the wife, women whose only objective is marriage, it's the end of everything. I can understand when it's the generation of my mother, who is over seventy, how many times has she said to me, "ah, at your age I already had two children, at your age I don't know what... you have to get yourself a husband, get married." But in her generation that was important (...) she believed that the best thing for me would be marriage. Today she no longer thinks that, she said to me, she recognizes that I did the best thing for my life, Because I don't have to explain myself to anyone, I don't have to bite my lip, I don't have to subject myself to a series of situations because I earn my own money, I have my own life. (...) Just because I am woman doesn't mean I have to follow set ways, I have to get married, have children, find a husband (Laura).

Laura highlights the generational distance between herself and her mother, emphasizing that her trajectory is permeated by the social and political context that inaugurated an alternative course of life for women, one not centred solely on marriage. Laura does not cite an incompatibility between career and marriage, as the fundamental contradiction so dear to feminism (Showalter 1993, Brandon 1990): instead she explains her rejection of a formal type of alliance that serves only to give her the status of a married woman.

Between career and marriage: still an impasse?

The correlation between education, work and conjugal status in heterosexual marriage has been widely discussed in social theory, in particular in population studies, which focus on the 'imbalance' in the matrimonial market, suggesting a 'disadvantage' for women that is amply reinforced by the media.[7]

However this correlation is not recent. In the past educated women who intended to establish themselves professionally and pursue a career had to choose between their work and marriage. Corrêa (2003) presents a snapshot of this situation when she comments on the unmarried status common to the women pioneers of anthropology, passing along 'female' lines of the discipline in the British, American and French traditions. Although in the course of the work Corrêa analyzes the single or 'lone' woman status of some female pioneers in the field of anthropology and other sciences – the case of Heloisa Alberto Torres – her description of the lineages refers to the specificity of singlehood among the pioneering women who undertook fieldwork, a category separate from the 'wives of (male) anthropologists.' The dedication to a demanding profession that required trips to the field, very often unknown regions distant from their countries of origin, was considered a 'devotion' incompatible with marriage:

[7] News stories on this relation are easy to find. Cf. *Veja Especial Mulher* (May 2006) – **"**A desconhecida lição das mulheres solteiras," "Pesquisa mostra que estudo é um estímulo ao progresso profissional feminino, mas não ao enlace matrimonial", *Folha de São Paulo*, Cotidiano, 18/09/06. The front cover of *Veja* (edition 1984, 29/11/06) carries the headline 'The chances of marrying,' announcing the special feature 'Life without marriage,' which shows exactly the same 'negative' correlation between independence, literacy and marriage. For a broader view of this discussion, see Gonçalves (2007: chap. 2).

> Following a tendency of professionals at the time, many of these female pioneers never married: Audrey [Richards] left an interesting comment on the subject ("many of us had the feeling that we were an especially devoted group who would not marry because we had more important things to do. There was the feeling that a young woman who got engaged was already almost dropping out."); some of the women seem to have wanted to marry (...); others perceived that, if they did, they would be abandoning an independence that at the time did not seem to be compatible with marriage. (...) Devotion appears to be a key term for defining some of these women whose biographies we know about (Corrêa 2003:192).

Corrêa's analysis coincides with information contained in biographies of illustrious women – among them, Bertha Lutz in the science field and Florence Nightingale[8] in nursing, the latter in the 19th century – raised to the status of heroines who crossed frontiers, serving as a model for other women (Vicinus, 1985).

During eras when marriage and motherhood were considered the 'natural destiny' of most women, the explicit rejection of heterosexual marriage seemed to be a strategy intended to build new possible ways of living. Some feminist studies that mention or focus approaches on 'single' women in other historical periods[9] demonstrate that not marrying possesses different meanings in specific historical periods and contexts where gender, generation, 'race' and class play a crucial role. In this sense it makes a difference whether we think of singlehood as the result of the non- reconciliation of career and marriage (a notion still in vogue) or as something connected to wider political objectives (the pioneering feminists of the 19th century) and the defence of a particular 'lifestyle' voluntarily chosen in response to subjective needs, as the 'new single women' from the 21st century are presented.

Zeldin (1994:102) asks: "is it inevitable that, although they become ever more adventurous and create higher expectations in relation to life, women encounter ever less satisfactory men?" What are the connections between being an 'independent woman' and the social and personal expectations in relation to marriage in the contemporary world?

Although the contemporary discussion, especially feminist, on 'singlehood' and living alone foregrounds the notion of choice, some interviewees point to various factors that 'explain' their 'condition,' sometimes even establishing causal connections with the fact of their being 'single.'

The popular saying "escape the father's clutches to fall into those of the husband" expresses a view of heterosexual marriage as the place where the woman is 'under control.' The universe of the interviewees contains common elements: at specific moments of their trajectories, the women looked to escape some form of control that they had found oppressive or uncomfortable in their parental homes. Looking for a place for individual expression, as Sarah suggests, she first had the desire to 'leave the [restrictive] little worlds' represented by staying in her parents' home.

While for some women leaving home, studying and working represent a premeditated script whose final destination is marriage, for the interviewees 'classic style' marriage was pushed into the background by their experiences of relationships in other modalities. Some of the women wish to marry one day and 'invest' in this direction, others, like Tália, 53 years old, a public worker, retired, *morena*, make no effort at all. It is impossible to establish a relation of direct causality between these factors given that other women, equally highly educated and financially independent, choose to marry, have families, raise children and even when not marrying, do not live alone. The question is one of understanding how – rather than why – certain trajectories are constructed without the need for marriage. Even in a small sample of twelve women, the expectations concerning marriage and the

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[8] Florence Nightingale is compared to Joan of Arc for her heroism and self-denial (Vicinus 1985).

[9] See Vicinus 1985, Bennet and Froide 1999, Holden 2002 and 2005, Showalter 1993 and 1989, Brandon 1990, Lasser 1988, Vicinus 1985 and Faderman 2001.

modalities in which it can occur vary, showing that no factor in isolation (middle class individualism, for example) encompasses this analysis, as Scott emphasizes (2001).

Intimidation or marks of the gender gap

The narrative of the interviews do not endorse the traditional career/marriage dichotomy due simply to the incompatibility between being in the public and private world at the same time. Among the arguments presented by heterosexual women as an 'explanation' for not marrying – non-investment, focus on careers, etc. – are the lack of suitable men and the fear that independent women produce in them, the 'gender gap,' a notion widely found in popular thought.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1980 [1949]:459) reports hearing a young man say: "the woman who has no fear of men strikes them with fear," and among other adults: "I'm horrified when a woman takes the initiative" (Id.ib.:459). Allowing for the distance and very different contexts, the remark by the young man in France in the 1940s reverberates with today's relations between men and women, revealing that, from a gender viewpoint, and in the cultural context under study, these notions continue to produce echoes. Although it was not the general tone, the feeling of intimidation that a 'single' woman provokes is clearly stressed in the dialogue of some of the interviewees:

> At least here, a large part of the male population is afraid of women like me, true? Look, I'm someone who earns a relatively good income, if you were to compare it with the Brazilian population, I have a stable job, I earn a reasonable amount, I have a car, it's not the car of the year or whatever, but it's a car, I can afford to travel... So if you were to see what we are in relation to the population, including the country's female population, we live in a privileged position. So, think about it, the Goiás man, or the Minas Gerais man, I don't know, or the Bahian man, one of these who lives here in the Mid-West, how does he deal with this kind of women? A woman with a good education, a woman who has financial independence, he can't dominate her (Laura).

Originally from Brazil's Southeast, Laura identifies the geographic location as a differentiating factor and considers the men of the Mid-West region rougher and less able to deal with women like herself. Similar considerations to those of Jussara, a 34-year old public worker, *morena*, concerning the local reality:

> Men can't handle the fact that I live alone. They are afraid of me. I'm not the first to say this, I've heard other women say the same, women who live alone. Men like dependent women. For example, my own [former boyfriend], I analyze it like this, why doesn't he sort himself out? Why does he think he won't be able to control me, that I'm too independent, that he wanted someone like that, who he could control, who depended on him... No, I'm someone who works outside, I didn't depend on him, and that makes them scared.

Both women emphasize the domination and control that a man can exert over a woman who is not independent. Their notions express the 'old' pattern of heterosexual relations that presume hierarchies with the function of stabilizing the relation in a formula of supposed complementarity. Various works by Mirian Goldenberg deal with this issue. In *Sobre a invenção do casal* [On the invention of the couple], responding to the logic of the gender gap and the question "why do relationships fall apart?" the author writes:

> An easy explanation for this problem of couples living together is the greater female autonomy and independence, relatively recently acquired, the result of their immersion in the work market. Women have begun to demand much more from their affective-sexual relationships. The more economically independent the woman, the more demanding she becomes of her romantic partner. The current situation of female work demonstrates that there are more than a few women who can now freely 'choose' an amorous relationship according to their own desires. (...) They prefer to live alone than with bad partners and are more afraid of living a life of solitude within a couple than a life without a romantic partner (Goldenberg 2001:5).

The notion of independence remains present in other lived situations in the context of sociability and referring to the feminist struggle for equality at all levels, but collides with a number of social expectations. Though relating to distinct class contexts, among others, the relations between men and women were affected by the advent of social equality in everyday life. Hence some women express an ambiguity in their expectations of equality by mentioning social situations in which they expect a different, more 'gentlemanly' behaviour from men.

Maintaining certain 'privileges,' a better education, in a reality of greater economic independence appears to be a paradox and has been recurrently described as a difficulty faced by both sexes, men and women, in dealing with new social situations. It is worth noting that this interpretation is not entirely new since it frequently appears in the analyses of the emergence of feminism as a social movement at the end of the 19th century. The 'new woman' depicted by feminist historians and literary critics (Showalter 1993 and 1989, Brandon 1990, Vicinus 1985, Bennet and Froide 1999) is constantly grappling with the difficulties of relating to the 'old man.'

Women 'pay a price' – final considerations

For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995:63), 'single' women, whether rich or poor, 'pay a price.' Comparing 'single' women who are separated with few resources ('husbandless women') with independent women, the authors argue that "at the other end of the scale, there is another problem emerging, affecting those women who pursue an independent career but most in many cases pay a high price, the loneliness of the professionally successful woman." The authors presume that conjugal heterosexuality is at the base of happiness, since single women have been the target of modern therapies for their complaints of unfulfilled needs. It is practically unthinkable to project this social analysis onto 'male losses' in relation to the domestic world, caring for children or the lack of intimacy that a heterosexual relation may offer.

On the other hand, the trenchant feminist critique developed by Stacey (1986) of the 'pro-family' model dominant in some theoretical strands of feminism,[10] is disappointing where it analyzes women's 'involuntary singlehood' as one of the consequences of the paths taken by second-wave feminists in their attack of the family and motherhood. According to the author (ibid:237), the feminists of the 1970s wanted to avoid marriage and motherhood in order to free themselves of domestic slavery and fight for gender equality. One of the outcomes of the radicalization of the choice of living independently or marrying and being a mother was a 'personal trauma' occurring in three dimensions: involuntary singlehood, involuntary childlessness and single motherhood. As Butler suggests, this search for the origins of feminism and its potential 'failures' indicates that 'singlehood,' such as it is presented, becomes an identity defined as an origin and a cause when, in fact, it is an "effect of

[10] Stacey's article (1986) analyzes the 'pro-family' premise in three books by feminist authors published in the 1980s: Betty Friedan (*The second stage*), Jean B. Elshtain (*Public Man, Private Woman*) and Germaine Greer (*Sex and Destiny*).

institutions, practices and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (Butler 1999:xxix). Why would 'singlehood' and non-motherhood inevitably be 'involuntary'?

Stepping back a little in history, Faderman emphasizes the connection between pursuing a career and remaining single as the condition of most of the women who, in the past, took the path of independence through work in the United States and Europe:

> Considering the great commitment it must have taken for a nineteenth-century woman to be willing to pioneer and to be able to achieve eminence in a particular career, it comes as no surprise to learn that of the 1,470 biographies of the most distinguished and celebrated women of their era, collected by Frances Willard and Mary Livermore, in 1893, more than 25 percent of their subjects never married and one third of those who did were widowed early and remained single; in other words, more than half spent most of their lives unmarried (...) and of women who received Ph.D.'s in American universities from 1877 to 1924, three-fourths did not marry (Faderman 2001:186).

Since the main conquests – the right to vote, education, paid work, sexual freedom and greater opening in the political world – there still persist notions that relate women's independence to 'sacrifice and losses,' paying a high price for the 'difference' of their 'experience.' As Joan Scott points out (1992:25), it is not enough to recognize the difference, we need to understand how they are established and how they work to form subjectivities. The naturalization of the need for a partner and marriage within the context of a heterosexual and reproductive framework still situates the 'single woman' who lives alone as an 'other' whose alterity is defined by the 'married' woman, silencing other possibilities. But as Rubin asserts (1994:70),

> (…) frustration with the enduring quality of certain things sometimes leads people to think that they can't be socially generated. But the kind of social change we are talking about takes a long time, and the time frame in which we have been undertaking such change is incredibly tiny.

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