

Feminism deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I briefly describe some examples of observations I made, while involved in a health care research project, on situations faced by women. The purpose of the exercise was to emphasize the need for an interaction (dialogue) between knowledge, health care practice and feminism. I also discuss some aspects of the interaction (dialogue) between epistemology and feminism in the light of the work of Bachelard as opposed to the views of Dorothy Smith, Alison Jaggar, Susan Bordo, Gayle Rubin and Teresita de Barbieri. Lastly, I attempt a synthesis of what I consider to be the major epistemological ruptures promoted by feminism, primarily regarding language and work.

Key Words: Feminism; Research; Sex-Based Division; Epistemological Rupture; Health; Work.

Introduction

Discussing feminism's impact on research in the field of Social Sciences, in addition to being a tremendous challenge, redeems the relationship between this movement and scientific knowledge, granting it due credit.¹

¹ Text presented at the roundtable discussion "The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Contemporary Sociological Research", at the Encontro Nacional da Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia – SBS, in Belo Horizonte, from May 31st to June 3rd of 2005.

From what perspective do I contemplate that relationship? From that of a researcher and activist who seeks to place herself within an intellectual and political movement in the field of one of the most important social movements of the XX century, feminism.

The relationship between feminism and the construction of knowledge may be found in the idea that the method or reflexive exercise of perception of a given reality or the expression of the subject/object relationship is communicated in the way that the researcher frames reality and is framed within it. In that line of thinking, feminist researchers brought the dimension of daily life to the Human Sciences; that is, the different experiences of women, with their life stories which are marked by their places in the world of work and by sexual and reproductive life.

In this critical dialog which feminist researchers in the Field of Human Sciences are engaged in, I believe it to be both useful and appropriate to cite a contemporary Italian feminist theoretician that can illuminate our reflection: Laura Terragni, who points out that the feminist critique of sociology “[...] was due to the fact that it [sociology] functioned through categories of masculine thought, utilized in an acritical manner, which excluded the social experience of women from the analytical perspective itself or, in this case, observed the latter through a ‘culturally-distorted lenses’ ”.²

Feminism, as a field of study which undoubtedly moves between women’s macro and micro daily life, revives the art of dialogue so as to function in the process of the construction and deconstruction of knowledge. Thus, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of field as a reference. Field is something which “[...] is, in a certain sense, a conceptual shorthand for a method of construction of the object that will lead – or guide – all practical research options,”³ which acts as a red flag pointing to the non-fixity of the object, as the object is never alone nor fixed, rather it is in a set of relationships. For the author, the real is not real until it is related to historical, social, political, gender and racial uncertainties. He sees phenomena as configured as realities from the moment in which they become problematic. This is the case of feminist and gender studies which question the a-sexual character of social relations, demonstrating the asymmetry of power, whether at the macro- or micro - level, believing that their own objects are constructed through social and sexual practices and thus transforming themselves into subjects/objects rather than just objects of research.

I begin by considering that the art of dialog has been the path to the construction of knowledge through the experience of the human being and of concrete activity. It is a movement of circularity of dialectical thinking which flows from the very dynamic of historical phenomena. Within dialectical logic, knowledge is not contented with confirmation of the real but works with conflicts, starting from the premise that the subject is constantly involved in a relational process of uncertainties and the unforeseeable.

In recent decades, an enormous change has been occurring in social research, with respect to both theory and practice.⁴ This regards a shift which, both in epistemology and methodology, affects research techniques more directly, especially when the research is focused on the sexual and reproductive lives of women, gender violence and the entire field of knowledge of reproductive and sexual rights. These changes are expressed in the

² Terry KANDALL, 1988, cited by Laura TERRAGNI, 2005, p. 144.

³ Pierre BOURDIEU, 1983, p. 21.

⁴ Alberto MELUCCI, 2005, p. 25.

attitudes of the researchers, demanding the establishment of a relationship of confidence and respect. Without a doubt, we are witnessing growing interest and broad debate about the contribution of feminist scholarship to the social sciences, but I would say that this debate goes beyond social sciences. It has an impact on other areas of knowledge, such as, for example, Health Sciences and Medicine.⁵

Considering these theoretical assumptions, I will briefly discuss some examples of situations faced by the women I observed while carrying out my research in the area of health, in order to emphasize the need for dialog between feminism and knowledge and health practices. I also discuss aspects of the dialog between epistemology and feminism, highlighting Gaston Bachelard's position on the one hand, and those of Dorothy Smith, Alison Jaggar, Susan Bordo, Gayle Rubin and Teresita de Barbieri on the other. Finally, I summarize what I regard as the major epistemological ruptures promoted by feminism, referring to language and work.

The Practice of Research with the Feminist Focus

Experience with research in the area of women's integral health has been useful in bringing visibility to the need for dialog between feminism and the social sciences, insofar as it indicates the importance of an interdisciplinary approach.

Within the range of studies which have been developing in the area of women's integral health, I noted three situations which can help in understanding this need.

The first situation was observed during the research on abortion care which I am currently conducting in the city of São Paulo, aimed at understanding the complexity of objective and subjective factors influencing the construction of the mentality and attitudes of both professionals and women resorting to abortion. This situation illustrates the Via Crucis which women must traverse when they decide to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in a particular moment of their lives, as evidenced by the following statement:

[...] I went to the hospital around 5:00. There she said lie down over there, I'm going to examine you. Just like that, really rough, like to scare me. Then she said, you didn't cause this abortion, right? I'll be able to tell if you did. And then she stuck a huge instrument inside me and was messing around inside there with a scissors [...]. She said, I'm going to put you down for an ultrasound at 6 a.m. Then I asked but when am I going to be seen, Dr. A, because I'm in alot of pain, I'm bleeding [...]. Look, I don't know when you'll be seen, child, you're going to have to wait [...][...] I was in such pain that I felt like jumping her ...getting treated like that at a public

⁵ COMISSÃO GULBENKIAN, 1996.

hospital made me so traumatized that I was scared to go to the doctor. I went home and I told my friend, If God wills, if I have to die, I'm going to die at home. And I never went to the doctor.⁶

This research takes an interdisciplinary approach to gender, focusing on the situation of the clients who require public hospitals (SUS) to terminate a pregnancy. From an operational standpoint, the results aim to contribute to the improvement of care, which, as shown in the above statement, remains precarious and violent. From a theoretical point of view, my analysis also makes use of Hannah Arendt's contributions, insofar as my point of departure is the understanding that, in choosing to abort, women assume political action over their lives, breaking through the walls of solitude and prejudice (in this case, gender-based) and coming to public hospitals in the fight to have their rights granted.

The fact that abortion in Brazil is prohibited by law puts women in permanent, unbearable circumstances of physical, psychological and emotional violence. The first research site, the Vila Nova Cachoeirinha Maternity Hospital, provides details of the various forms of aggression and violence that women have been subjected to.⁷ This encourages us to adopt Jurandir Costa's theoretical contribution for interpreting violence as that which occurs when the women themselves feel that they are abused or have had their reproductive rights violated. The author states that "[...] when the abused subject (or external observer of the situation) perceives in the abuser the desire for destruction (the wish for her death, the wish to make her suffer), the act of aggression attains the same meaning as an act of violence [...]".⁸

The second situation I observed took place during a survey to assess care services for women who were victims of sexual violence. This research was conducted in three public healthcare system (*Sistema Único de Saúde* – SUS) hospitals in the city of São Paulo from the years 1998 to 2004⁹ and reinforces the need for dialog with feminism regarding the scars "that stay with women".¹⁰

Most often, women who are victims of sexual violence manifest problems which can not be reduced to the immediate consequences of the violence they've experienced; rather, they bring forth complexities that require interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary input, such as the scars that remain on their sexual, emotional, social and professional lives.¹¹ Care and caregivers may heal these wounds, but scars are the visible and invisible marks of aggression and lack of care, as only one who takes care of others cares for him/herself as well.¹²

Sexual violence occurs between strangers and acquaintances or family members and with adult and adolescent women and children. Sexual violence against children occurs

⁶ Eleonora OLIVEIRA et al., in the press. Fragment of words from an interview.

⁷ As mentioned in this text, the research underway is being carried out at three public hospitals of the SUS in the city of São Paulo: Hospital Arthur Ribeiro de Saboya, Hospital Vila Nova Maternidade Vila Nova Cachoeirinha and Hospital Universitário São Paulo. All three hospitals are 100% SUS to which women are referred for integral health care.

⁸ COSTA, 2003, p. 30.

⁹ OLIVEIRA et al., 2005.

¹⁰ Jurandir COSTA, 2003, p. 41.

¹¹ OLIVEIRA et al., 2005.

¹² FOUCAULT, 2004.

mainly at home, and is perpetrated by parents, step-parents, brothers or other relatives; against adolescents and women, between strangers and familiar people.

From our work on the care of these women, we have taken some narratives that can be considered examples of the human tragedy they endure: scars on the physical body – many women do not show physical marks on the body, although there is a recurrent narrative about their feeling dirty and contaminated inside and out, leading them to take several baths with soap and even with bleach. The feeling that they will never get clean, that they will never be clean, can be seen as a link with the symbolic meaning of that dirtiness, which makes them wish for a change of body. Many do not want to recall the experience, and when they become pregnant, they want to abort as soon as possible, to rid themselves of the ‘filth’ that is inside of them, as they say when interviewed: “[...] this filth doesn’t come out even with lye, it has to be removed with an instrument [...]”. Through the scars on their sexuality they say that “I never want sexual relations again [...]”. If the act of sexual violence occurs directly on the body’s real and symbolic locus of pleasure, a long and tender process is needed for the women to begin to believe that pleasure was not destroyed in their lives; the emotional scars on the body – all the emotional life with friends, family, a boy/girlfriend, a partner remain compromised. These feelings of shame, guilt and fear take over these women’s lives. Here, too, it takes a long time to process the experience; there are scars on the social body as well. I believe that one of the biggest social scars is the dissociation of self as the subject of rights. The person exists, but not the woman as the subject itself. She manifests tremendous difficulty in overcoming the experience and regaining self-confidence for new interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, there are scars on the working body – the body that works to survive is unable to return to work, it is cornered and once again afraid and ashamed to face co-workers and boss. There is shame at having to ask to be excused for treatment, the fear of walking the same route or path, of taking the same bus or subway, etc. And there are also scars on the body of mental health – we learn during the women’s followup care that traumatic experience cannot be processed while the woman is in a state of shock. Therefore, she may process the rape she experienced in several different ways and times a) psychotic processing, going insane, b) melancholic processing, that is, beginning a process of melancholy and sadness with serious symptoms (not eating, only sleeping, not leaving home, not talking and in most cases, being unable to cry); c) processing through neurotic obsessive phobias d) processing through suppression of the experience, and e) processing through the frameworks of psychological dependence and/or licit or illicit substances.

The sociability of these women is a complex construction. However, on seeking treatment, on confiding in professionals, they are reconfiguring relationships of alterity, above all by the security they come to feel through the process of being listened to. Being listened to and respected provokes powerful feelings and a time for the construction of new female subjectivities and a healthy desire for revenge.

One one of the interviewees states: “ At night I used to wake up several times, I had to take a tranquilizer in order to sleep, it seemed as though someone was watching me.”¹³

If dialog regarding abortion as a reproductive right was repressed historically, feminism has shown, especially in the area of women’s integral health, that women, on

¹³ OLIVEIRA et al., 2005, p. 378.

deciding to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy, break with strategic mechanisms for control over their bodies and their sexuality. This leads to parallel deconstruction of the patriarchal language that informs discourse on reproductive rights, even when women are exposed to an institutional violence that contributes to an increase in their suffering.

The third situation makes it possible to shed light on the influence which paid work for women has on their psychological equilibrium and on the course of transformation of their psycho-physical suffering into increased self-esteem, with emphasis on the impact of the productive restructuring of the life and health conditions of women workers. As Helena Hirata said when she brought up the example of new production technologies,

[...] if, on most occasions, women are absent as social actors in the different disciplines of the humanities, and even 'invisible', as in the expression used in a large number of studies, they are when the the themes of 'technology' and division of labor are broached as well.¹⁴

Some studies which I have developed in the area of work, women and health¹⁵ show that gender inequalities add onto other social differences, explaining the different positions of power women and men occupy in the world of work, and which must be identified in order to understand how differently work impacts on the health of men and women. In the study I carried out in the Ford auto factory in São Bernardo, in São Paulo state,¹⁶ I observed that female workers who have medical restrictions have much lighter jobs and have job stability, but they suffer prejudice on the part of workers and supervisors:

I've already suffered a lot (*of discrimination*), we acquired a label which I think we'll never get rid of. You can be the best but you'll never be the best. You can work around hearing that you're never doing things perfectly; I've heard a lot of things like this: — *Ah*, she doesn't want to work. She's a bum, and I don't know, she's lazy [...] — So it's a label you can never get rid of. I really suffered a lot of this, really a lot.¹⁷

Workers that have no medical restrictions (*RM*) are more sought after, and carry out heavier work, while those with medical restrictions cannot work in these rotations; thus, the others may feel resentful. This in turn generates a break in solidarity between the workers, since, as has already been said, illness is seen as the responsibility of the worker him/herself.

¹⁴ HIRATA, 2002, p. 197.

¹⁵ Ângela ARAÚJO and Eleonora OLIVEIRA, 2006.

¹⁶ ARAÚJO and OLIVEIRA, 2006.

¹⁷ Fordworker, LER carrier.

In many of the interviews, the real need for that job in order to maintain the family income became clear, as many of these female workers are heads of households. One notes, "IF I lose my job, it complicates the situation at home."¹⁸ Those that are not heads of households contribute significantly to the family income.

For these studies, we may resort to Jurgen Habermas's notion that "[...] the unit of knowledge with interest is confirmed in the dialectics which rebuild the element held back through historical traces of repressed dialogue¹⁹" reinforces the feminist option for an epistemology that includes the category of gender as a mediation between theory and scientific practice, providing evidence of the interest that established knowledge has in silencing the power between the sexes, in an allusion to the prohibition of dialog between sexes. For feminism, this means the revealing of silences that have been imposed upon different subjects and social actors, in the process dimension of knowledge in which the subject is constructed; not a fixed point of departure but a two-way road.

The feminist methodological option that focuses on everyday life and subjectivity is grounded in the theoretical approaches that reinforce the need for critical hermeneutic reflection as an analytical strategy for transforming the science of a foreign object, distant from our lives, into something near and familiar, with the capacity to communicate to us its failures and limitations. Thus, the feminist studies already cited early in this article, grounded in political practice, have shown that knowledge is fallible and that truth is always approximate and provisional, causing one of the most important crises of the paradigms of the XXI Century as they reveal that multiple intelligibilities of the real are impelled by external social practices. Gender Studies illustrate this position, generated as they have been within the arena of rebellion against women's subordination, a rebellion that made its first mark in the 1970s with the dissemination of feminist practices,²⁰ in close connection to several other theoretical-methodological currents: Marxist, structuralist and post-structuralist²¹

On bringing our studies closer to those two approaches – Marxist and post-structuralist -, we are in agreement that the crisis of paradigms or the de-dogmatizing of science has demanded a hermeneutic critique of epistemology and a deconstruction of the binary and universalizing discourse of positivist science through the critique of Cartesian approaches. Scientific discourse will only be socially understandable if we adopt a hermeneutical attitude towards it which enables plausible rather than absolute interpretations in both the natural and social sciences; in the latter, the objects/subjects of study speak, think and feel, as posed by feminist epistemology in its explanations of the social character of science, the relativity of systems of truth and the politicization of discourse.²²

Gaston Bachelard²³ highlights the debate between Cartesian and non-Cartesian logic starting from discussions within the mathematical sciences and Euclidian geometry and arriving at non-Euclidian theories of the indeterminism of science. He discusses and

¹⁸ Ford worker.

¹⁹ Jürgen HABERMAS, 1975, p. 300.

²⁰ HIRATA, 2002; OLIVEIRA, 1997; and Joan SCOTT, 1990.

²¹ Carmen ELEJABEITIA, 1987; and Michelle PERROT, 2005.

²² Sondra FARGANIS, 1997, p. 226.

²³ BACHELARD, 1985.

demonstrates the complexity of the phenomena, casting doubt on the certainty of “geometric parallels” and demonstrating the necessary evidence of uncertainties on the methodological path. For the author, this path of a new scientific spirit is possible only with the dialectical logic which places phenomena within deep and complex relationships.

On rereading Bachelard, feminist studies not only dialogue with the author, but release the social sciences from the Cartesian logic of interpreting phenomena, and further, introduce the dimension of daily life and subjectivity into dialectical logic, pointing to the specificity of the social sciences in relation to their object of study. Consequently, methodological repercussions unfold through the double dimensions of critical hermeneutics, that is, by being the object/subject of the social sciences or being human, with face, body, sex, social practices, race/ethnicity, socially competent subjects which interpret the world around them to better act and interfere in it and on it. Studies such as those of Patrizia Romito²⁴ and Eleonora Oliveira²⁵, on engaging in dialogue with Bachelard,²⁶ argue that the political actors interact socially in accordance with the reflexivity of knowledge in the context of their actions. For this very reason Farganis states that the feminist researcher,

aware of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, wishes not only to analyze themes relative to science, but also to know how he/she can act as a scientist, and at the same time honor his/her commitment to feminism, which, understood broadly, seeks to eliminate the oppression and domination of women.²⁷

If all conceptual definition is relational, the basis of this definition resides within a hierarchy of power which establishes itself on all levels of the different social relationships, of gender and of race, existing in the social fabric, the political and legal spheres, in family, work and domestic relations; in the subjective sphere which constitutes a private sphere, with repercussions in the different dimensions of the public sphere

This critical stance in relation to the prejudices of Cartesian knowledge moves in the same direction as Dorothy Smith’s criticism when she defends “the importance of recognizing that both the observer and the observed have specific social biographies, that each is a particular individual represented in body and occupying a moment in time, and that each one has his/her values.”²⁸

The analysis of the sexual division by feminist studies as a sociological category uncovered not only the different implications of such division on women’s and men’s bodies, in both the public and private sphere, but the different places they occupy in society and, further, that the world(s) of work has/have two sexes.

²⁴ ROMITO, 1997.

²⁵ OLIVEIRA, 1997.

²⁶ OLIVEIRA, 1997.

²⁷ FARGANIS, 1997, p. 229.

²⁸ Cited by FARGANIS, 1997, p. 230.

It can be said that there has been an incorporation of feminist issues in different fields of production of scientific knowledge, from the outside in, as, for example, in the Marxist camp on rereading the works of Engels and Marx. This has changed the solitary focus of analysis on social and economic production relationships, while, within fields of the natural sciences, promoting de-biologizing and de-naturalizing ways of looking at phenomena.²⁹ Feminism informs the concept of gender, but it must be stated that there are different concepts operating in fields which are not necessarily the same. For example, for some currents,³⁰ feminism is a social practice, and thus it refers to the action of organized women, while gender is a category of analysis which is useful for the explanation of hierarchical relationships of power between the sexes. Both concepts have been gradually incorporated by the feminist thought of the different authors cited in this article; however, they still suffer from serious difficulties and restrictions within the social sciences.

One of the most important contributions of feminism to social sciences, more specifically to research, has without a doubt been the construction of categories of analysis such as daily life, experience and emotion: daily life to consider the locus where personal and emotional relations and those of work and of leisure, among others, take place; experience to consider the different experiences throughout the lives of women and men which make their mark on the body and on sexuality; emotion as a category both neglected and obscured by positivism. This places me in agreement with Alison Jaggar when she states: “[...] I believe that the recognition of certain neglected aspects of emotion make possible a more accurate and less ideological consideration of how knowledge is and how it must be constructed.”³¹

In feminist research, emotions are considered not as involuntary and individual reactions to situations, but perceived by the very subjects of research. They are interpreted as social constructions, not only as a factor which operates within the scope of the biological. The example cited from the study of abortion care includes emotion as a structuring element of scientific knowledge, as women on their paths in search of access to their reproductive rights become actively engaged, allowing the construction of new projects of society.³²

In seeking to consolidate feminist studies as a field of knowledge within the social sciences, there has been an expansion of the concept of gender as a category which no longer corresponds to anatomical and physiological sex as in the view of the Biological Sciences. According to Joan Scott, gender is socially-constructed sex, it is “a primordial way to indicate relationships of power, or rather it is a field within which or through which power is articulated.”³³ And this is important to mention, in speaking of sex or differentiation of sexuality, because it incorporates relationships between sex, gender and subjectivity. One of the important ramifications of Scott’s definition is that it tells us that changes in social relationships correspond to changes in representations of power and that this does not always move in one direction but takes shortcuts in daily life and demands a relational approach to the phenomena that are studied.

²⁹ HIRATA; 2002; OLIVEIRA, 1998; and Tereza de LAURETIS, 1989.

³⁰ OLIVEIRA, 1998.

³¹ JAGGAR, 1997, p. 160.

³² JAGGAR, 1997, p. 160.

³³ SCOTT, 1990.

Teresita de Barbieri's theoretical approach to gender, also in the field of social sciences, defines gender relationships as

[...] sets of practices, symbols, representations, social norms and values which societies draw from physiological - anatomical sexual difference is what gives meaning to the satisfaction of sexual impulses, the reproduction of the human species and, in general, to the relationship between people. In Durkheimian terms, it is the actions of social relations which determine the relationships of human beings as sexual persons.³⁴

We are in agreement with Barbieri when she sexualizes relationships between people, forcing another important epistemological rupture initiated by feminism, which in the 1990s solidified the concept of sexual rights.

Gayle Rubin has argued that gender is a concept of greater generality and understanding – since it leaves the possibility open that there are different forms of relationship between women and men, between male and female, male domination, female domination or equal relationships: “It leaves open as well the possibility of distinguishing different forms in different historical periods, and, with utopia, to suggest the liberation of women through different forms of social organization.”³⁵ And it points to the strategic mobility of the concept of gender. These are just three of the various feminist theoretical approaches to knowledge which represent important developments in research in the social sciences.

Of the epistemological ruptures spoken of in philosophy, this is perhaps the most important one of the last twenty years in social science. It represents the recognition of a dimension of social inequality which is the sexual division, previously neglected and subsumed within the economic sphere, whether in theories of social class or the theories of social stratification.

This critique of the dominant positivist science called Western Science by Alison Jaggar and Susan Bordo questions the traditional concept that there is something called objective nature which is clearly discernable and which the human mind can grasp through the simple and direct process known as reason.³⁶

It is important to emphasize that the majority of the feminist researchers believe that women can reason and do science just as well as men, but that they may practice science in different ways, with a different methodology which allows them to observe and understand diverse and complex phenomena with intentionality, and thus include emotions - hitherto proscribed from scientific knowledge and explanatory categories of analysis.

Thus, to recognize social phenomena is much deeper than to know them. This is to say that the Euclidian parallels aren't as parallel as determinism would have it, thinking

³⁴ BARBIERI, 1993, p. 16.

³⁵ RUBIN, 1993, p. 3.

³⁶ FARGANIS, 1997, p. 227.

dialectically about the uncertainty of certainties, and it was in this gap that feminism has shown that every social phenomenon is sexualized. Inspired by Bachelard,³⁷ I think about a theoretical approach to analyze the impact of feminism on social research on three levels: firstly, to break from the common prejudices that must be reconstructed, recognized, highlighted and explained; secondly, through the qualitative research process which construes the object as tied to the subject; and the third, which refers to the stage of verification, that is, the need is implicit here to monitor epistemological processes in order to control them.

Finally, en route to a rereading Bachelard³⁸ and towards feminist inspiration, I recover three strategies from the author to disrupt and deconstruct knowledge in the internal realm of epistemologies already in place.

The first is common everyday language. We know that there may be a break in that language, and we feminist researchers and activists know this very well because we discovered it in the 1970s, when it was argued that men treated male and female subjects through universalization.³⁹ In that moment, feminists discovered the importance of language as fundamental in breaking from the patriarchy in the sexual division of the world. Thus it was that the approach that deals with sexual division made it possible to break away from the traditional categories of the Humanities, and, according to Hirata,

With one of the Marxist concepts of cleavage, extremely simplistic, between the productive (production of values) and the reproductive (production of use values) spheres, to move towards the development of new concepts which, on one hand, exceed the apparent universality of the categories, often based on the male model, and on the other, to do away with the rigid compartmentalization of the disciplines which characterize the humanities today.⁴⁰

The examples of what this rupture meant are diverse, apparently rooted in common sense and utilized for scientific knowledge. I will limit myself to those which are closest to my objects of research.

It is necessary to recognize in domestic and sexual violence against women acts which constitute and structure the hierarchical relationship of power between the sexes and work as disciplinary strategies of control over the body and mind of women within the patriarchal system.⁴¹ In domestic violence, as part of the social contract of marriage, and in sexual violence, that which occurs as much within the confinement of domestic spaces as in the public spaces of the street, women find themselves with no power to react, whether in the sphere of subjectivity or of objectivity.

³⁷ BACHELARD, 1985.

³⁸ BACHELARD, 1985.

³⁹ ROMITO, 1990.

⁴⁰ HIRATA, 2002, p. 134.

⁴¹ Carole PATERMAN, 1993.

Another example is the fact that women occupy professions in the worlds of work seen in terms of quality and vocation as an extension of the activities they are involved with in the domestic world and not as a qualifying and valued social utility.

Some studies show that domestic chores, though repetitious, quick, necessary and lonely, are fundamentally unpredictable and full of variation.⁴² Whatever comes up in the realm of the home demands an immediate rethinking of priorities, such as illness of the children, husbands, absence of the maid or whatever it may be, changing the order of priorities. Nevertheless, it doesn't change women's capacity for functions that require these abilities; on the contrary, it sets them up for discrimination in the world of work.

In the sphere of health, the eternal persistence in pathologizing and medicalizing the complaints of these women, principally those that speak about their sexual and reproductive lives, whether pregnancy, homosexuality and a lack of libido, is most prevalent.

Feminists have discovered that, in order to live in this world, they would have to rename things, like several which have been mentioned here. Over the past twenty years we have been learning how to rename "things" in order to make them visible, which they had not been, and defining as unacceptable that which had been put forth as acceptable.

The second strategy concerns the work to demystify the economic prejudice attributed to the labor supply of women in the world of capital, often attributed to the fact that women can potentially become pregnant and the employers are obliged to pay worker's compensation. Yet this is a fallacious argument, since women's salaries are lower and their career-advancement and leadership positions are compromised.

The third strategy concerns illness in the world(s) of work, in which the great majority of specialists in the area of work-related health or occupational medicine⁴³ do not consider the sphere of suffering and mental strain which statistics do not capture or interpret. When the category of gender relations is introduced in research as an explanation for the different places occupied by women and men in the social organization of production and in working conditions,⁴⁴ it deconstructs the universalizing and medicalizing notion of both the worker and the universal male subject - such as the notion of psychopathology of the worker developed by Christophe Dejours⁴⁵ - through the sexualization of the construction and the social production of the symbolic meanings of fear, loss, suffering and danger, universalizing workers as masculine subjects.

The strategies put in place by feminist studies include questioning naturalist and psychologizing interpretations as something used spontaneously to attempt to understand the behavior of others. We can return to some of our own studies to provide illustration of the above, for example, in situations in which women complain of tiredness, the dominant interpretation has been that they have psychological problems and hormonal imbalances. The strongest example of this is the Repeated Stress Injury, known as RSIs (*Lesões por Esforços Repetidos*, or LERs).⁴⁶

⁴² Aracky RODRIGUES, 1992.

⁴³ Carlos Mynaio GOMES and Francisco LACAZ, 2005.

⁴⁴ Jussara BRITO, 2005; Margarida BARRETO, 2003; e Eleonora OLIVEIRA, 1998.

⁴⁵ DEJOURS, 1988, p. 9-19.

⁴⁶ OLIVEIRA e BARRETO, 1997.

In the case of abortion, which in Brazil is only considered legal in cases of risk to the life of the mother or pregnancy resulting from rape, women who wish to terminate a pregnancy for other reasons are subject to the risks of an unsafe abortion, and possible complications, such as infections, hemorrhages and their consequences (such as infertility and even death). Given that these deaths and damage to women's health are preventable, an important issue must be considered: the respectful and dignified care of women in the public hospitals.

With these reflections, I have sought to help clarify how epistemological ruptures have come about, ruptures necessary for understanding social phenomena with an eye to the relationships of power between genders in society, in the private as well as public spheres. Speaking in Foucaultian⁴⁷ terms, these ruptures are mediated by the body and by sexuality, the locus of infinitesimal power in micro and macro social relationships. They do not come from within the scientific world, as noted by Gaston Bachelard,⁴⁸ but are the result of the impact of social actions.

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