

The construction of an agenda concerning gender, socio-environmental disasters, and development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to discuss issues related to development, socio-environmental disasters, and gender, which, for being important elements of the public debate in Brazil today, should be addressed in research and public policy strategies. The relationship between gender, class, race/ethnicity and socio-environmental disasters is presented, and key concepts about development, the environment and equality are examined in the context of recent economic policies. This essay reflects on the condition of women found in a subaltern condition in capitalist society who suffer the consequences of socio-environmental disasters. It concludes with suggestions for including a focus on gender in the preparation of research and action strategies.

Keywords: Nature, Society, Development, Disasters, Women.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo discutir questões relacionadas a desenvolvimento, desastres socioambientais e gênero, as quais, por estarem inscritas no debate contemporâneo brasileiro, constituem elementos que devem pautar pesquisas e estratégias de ação. Apresenta a relação entre gênero, classe, raça/etnia e desastres socioambientais, examinando conceito-chave sobre desenvolvimento, meio ambiente e igualdade no contexto das políticas econômicas recentes. Reflete sobre a situação das mulheres inseridas em uma situação de subalternidade na sociedade capitalista, que sofrem as consequências dos desastres socioambientais. Conclui com sugestões para a inclusão nesses processos do enfoque de gênero na elaboração de agendas de pesquisas e de ação.

Palavras-chave: natureza; sociedade; desenvolvimento; desastres; mulheres.

Introduction

Floods, fires, earthquakes, mud slides, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, tropical storms, droughts, among other natural disasters point out to situations to which human beings are exposed to. They may constitute catastrophes, the unraveling of the social process precipitated by environmental events, but they are, nonetheless, based on social and economic relationships and in patterns of historical development.

The interest about the environment has intensified in the last three decades due to the gradual exhaustion of natural resources, both renewable and non renewable. The rise and concentration of population, the super-exploitation and the inadequate management of natural resources lead to the environmental degradation of eco systems, which, in turn, is leading to the increase and frequency of catastrophes. These situations are worrisome because they surpass the proposals for solutions in course, pointing out to a process which implies the elaboration and implementation of research agendas and actions consistent with the theme.

This recent increase in attention toward the effects of social-environmental disasters, due by in large to the superimposed relationship between society and nature, is expressed through the emergency of environmental movements, in conferences and in international agreements, which, in turn, have generated theoretical perspectives and political actions. It is also expressed in international research in the fields of social sciences and applied sciences, which direct to aspects related to gender and social-environmental disasters.¹ However, this has not been a reoccurring theme in the theory produced in Brazil.

The roots of this subject justifies the interest in introducing elements such as class, race/ethnicity and gender, which affect women involved in the preventing and dealing with situations of socio-environmental disasters. The goal is to elaborate an agenda for research and action strategies which will, in turn, enable this subject to be incorporated in society in practical terms and to move beyond the periphery of either well articulated speeches or the good intentions registered in official documents.

Initially, I present the relationship between gender and the situations of socio-environmental disasters and the ways by which women are affected. In the second section, I reclaim the key concepts within the analysis about development, environment and equality. Finally, I present some suggestions for the inclusion and focus on gender in future research agenda and action strategies aiming at getting to know and learning about the multiple and multilayered aspects relating to the inclusion of women in this process.

Disasters, the situation of women and the ways to construct an agenda for research and action

In 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, due to socio-environmental issues the governments came together for the first time to talk about climate change. During that meeting the leaders created the United Nations Fourth Convention about Climate Change (UNFCCC). The third article establishes the following:

The parties in this contract should protect the climatic system for the benefit of the present as well as future generations based on equity and in agreement with common responsibilities, but differentiated and with its respective capacities. Therefore, the developed countries should take the lead in combating climate change and its adverse effects.²

At the same time, it was during the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters (1990) that women and children were identified as being “the key to prevention.” In the years after that, women got organized and came together in gatherings and conferences about this subject, in many cities and countries³. The results of these initiatives raised new questions to planners because it analyzed catastrophes through “women’s lenses” thus identifying gaps. It presented a critique of the juridical and institutional systems and it brought gender issues to the fore front as an important component for the prevention and intervention in situations of socio-environmental disasters.

Nevertheless, according to Sue Armstrong,⁴women were not represented neither in the UNFCCC nor in the Kyoto Protocol⁵.

It does not take even a simple search through the Convention-Board of the United Nations about Climate Change and in the Kyoto Protocol, two important treaties about the efforts in combating climate change on a global scale, to realize that the words “gender” and “women” are not mentioned in neither of them.⁶

Therefore, considering that the impact caused by the relationship between society and nature do not affect men and women in the same way because the interests and needs of women have not been significantly included in the government agenda nor in the agenda of different institutions, I will present in this section, elements which justify the creation of a research agenda and action strategy with an alternative approach, which combines justice (social, environmental, economic), gender and development, all of which aimed at preserving the environment as well as preventing socio-environmental disasters.

Gender relations and socio-environmental disasters are socially constructed under the influence of economic, political, cultural and social factors and under complex geographic conditions that reflect particular conditions that impact men and women and are also influenced by class, race/ethnicity and gender.

In December of 2007, four international institutions gathered with environmental ministers and leaders, during the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Bali⁷ to affirm, for the first time in its history, that a world coalition of women wrote manifestos about the perspectives regarding women and gender issues regarding the most urgent matters negotiated during the Convention.⁸

Because the women got united and organized themselves, the countries who signed the accord and the United Nations Committee for Climate Change were challenged to acknowledge that women are powerful agents of change and that their participation in policy making and in the initiatives of adaptation and mitigation of climate is crucial. Therefore, it is also a must to guarantee that women and gender specialists take part, in a critical and qualified manner, in all the decisions relating to climate change issues, taking into consideration the predominance of the theoretical production, which have emphasized the insertion of women in the process of minimizing socio-environmental disasters.

Kellie Tranter⁹ demonstrated that more women than men die as a direct or indirect result of socio-environmental disasters. For instance, 90% of the 140,000 victims of the cyclone that devastated Bangladesh in 1991 were women; likewise, more women than men perished during the heat wave that afflicted Europe in 2003; the tsunami that hit Sri Lanka in 2006 killed three to four women per each man. What would be the reasons? Why are women more prone to suffer the consequences of disasters than men?

Based on these questions and on the concept that the “the human being is nature,”¹⁰ I will propose some elements that should be taken into consideration when approaching this subject.

The economic, social and cultural conditions of each person can increase the effect of socio-environmental disasters, exposing them to new losses and damages, for example, in relationship to work. Therefore, it is not simply a “technical” issue, but also social as it exposes the ability of the person, the neighborhood, the municipality, and the country to anticipate, plan for it, survive and recover from the devastating effects of these events.

The current economic globalization, for instance, makes women more vulnerable, especially women who are head of the households, in regards to employment and wages. In addition, they suffer with the cuts deriving from structural adjustment which impact the quantity and quality of social services available to them. The process of urban migration¹¹ is also reflected in the insecure living conditions in large urban centers because women and their families are more exposed to pollution, to floods and landslides. Furthermore, still in the scope of environmental degradation, drought brings innumerable effects to women who are farm workers and/or deforestation to those who depend on wood.

However, situations of socio-environmental disasters also affect men. In the sexual division of labor, they are the ones who take upon themselves activities such as rescue, dealing with adverse situations and feeling limited in their ability to ask for the help needed due to strict norms regarding masculinity.

The relationships between men and women are powerful forces in each culture. The manner by which these relationships are defined creates different roles and responsibilities for men and women, which in turn, translates into unequal access and control of resources (to inherit land or to obtain credit from a bank, for example) and decision making power (occupying a seat in community counsel and/or rights and commissions). The combined effect of these differences and inequalities mean that women and girls, men and boys face different types and levels of exposure to the impacts and consequences of socio-environmental disasters. The adoption of behaviors and stereotypes about men and women may contribute to the increase of differences between the genders and sometimes it can lead to devastating consequences. One example of this cultural influence during a disaster can be seen in Sri Lanka. In that country, swimming and tree climbing are activities taught mostly to boys. Social prejudice prevents girls and women to develop these abilities decreasing their chances of surviving a flood.

Another example is what happened in Blumenau in 2008, a town in the south of Brazil, during the floods followed by mudslides in which women were found dead with their children in their arms. Some accounts from survivors describe women clutching to their babies inside houses that were buried and other people hanging off trunks of trees to resist the torrent of water. These women, filled with their responsibility as mothers and caretakers, took a long time aiding their children which delayed their evacuation from their houses leaving insufficient time for them to find shelter.

In addition to cultural aspects, there is class inequality, which manifests itself in the difference of income and maximizes the impact of socio-environmental disasters on women and their families. Furthermore, socio-environmental disasters increase the work load for women from the moment when the disaster is anticipated, during it and afterward. A higher number of women suffer from post traumatic stress symptoms. Furthermore, there is an increase in domestic violence and violence against women and girls in the context of disasters.

Women carry the main responsibility for the domestic affairs, performing activities such as cooking, taking care of children, the elderly and the disabled. They are the care givers and as such they are not free to migrate to find work after a disaster. Men migrate in large numbers, more frequently leaving a large number of women as heads of the household.

During a catastrophe, the home is usually destroyed. Therefore, many families are forced to seek shelter or temporary homes. Although they may be referred to as “temporary residences,” many families end up spending considerable amount of time there, according to Rosana Freitas and Cristiane Marques.¹² In the case of the floods in the Itajai Valley, in 2008, until the present moment there are still 250 families living in shelters. Those shelters are inadequate places with shared kitchens and bathrooms, which increases the domestic work load and limits their freedom of movement and action. It also makes it harder for them to find alternative sources of income, jeopardizing their role as providers for the family. The women who are mothers living in these temporary residences also notice such living conditions increase the chances that their children may experience sexual violence.

The image of suffering women and children is very popular in the media. But what the media does not show is that women play a vital role in the rescue efforts, acting either within socially prescribed roles or transcending it. Freitas and Marques also point out that public legislature, attitudes and behaviors of technicians and professionals also reveal prejudice; they reinforce an essentialist view of women and reiterate the sexual division of labor in the process of addressing situations of socio-environmental disasters.

In this decade, there are new approaches presenting the need to work together to prevent events that may be tragic and destructive. Such focus, based on gender analysis, indicate the importance of valuing the knowledge and abilities of women, which have been neglected up to this point, in contexts considered threatening or high risk.

An approach to socio-environmental situations from the gender perspective does not restrict itself to women’s participation pos-disaster, celebrating their compensatory activities together with the losses and damages that occurred. This type of approach is only justifiable when issues of class and the social relationship between men and women are acknowledged as a force present in people’s lives, in each culture that produces and reproduces differences and inequalities. This type of insertion, of perception, of economic and social interests of men and women reinforce, implicitly or not, a “development” model and also it influences the relationship society/environment and its consequences, which manifests itself through the danger of socio-environmental disasters.

The majority of the problems do not come from cultural or religious norms and it can be transformed through the kind of political intervention that promotes critical thinking and contributes to changing the “roles” and behaviors attributed to women, which are, as mentioned before, social constructions. This educational process is complex because it is not to expect that it will come from countries considered developed for they are actually part of the problem by exacerbating their decisions and actions in favor of a developmental model guided by a destructive rationality.

Development, socio-environmental disasters and the gender equality challenge

In order to understand the relationship between development, the environment and the gender equality challenge one needs to quote Karl Marx to make the relationship between human beings and nature explicit:

[... human beings live off nature, that is, nature is their body, and they need to maintain a continuous dialogue with it in order not to die. To say that the physical and mental lives of humans are linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself since humans are a parte of nature.¹³

Although Marx expressed this relationship including the “conditions imposed by nature” as well as the ability of human beings to affect this process, he yet still demonstrated a profound preoccupation with production, with the ecological limitations and with a “flaw in the metabolism.”¹⁴ The relationship between humans and nature and their relationship with development issues did not constitute in a central element of the Marxist perspective until the 70’s.

The emphasis on the environmental questions and its relationship with the economic development came to surface in the context of the 80’s, when the long expansive cycle of capitalism on an international scale gave in to a recessive cycle, development became conditioned to the fight against inflation, to state induction and to the distribution of wealth. This position was embraced by the neo-liberalism as it submitted all the demands from the subaltern classes to the filter of monetary stability and “development.”

In the decades that followed, the mercantilization of the economic, political and social was consolidated. Therefore, there was a need for a counter hegemonic movement of de-mercantilization , in other words, to prioritize the public sphere, an open process, the object of political and ideological dispute. The outcome, even nowadays, depends on social organization and, therefore, on women.

It was also in the 80’s that the concept of sustainable¹⁵ development emerged with a reoccurring emphasis on local autonomy and self-determination, regional and national, which have unfolded into approaches ideological and political of both progressive and conservative nature in terms of the ways by which to conceive development as well as different approaches about the management and the quality of life. The term “sustainability” refers to a category that, for being imprecise, makes it possible for different appropriations: it can serve to learn about the need for a new model of development, but it can also enable the neo-liberal discourse about sustainability based on the valorization of business efficiency and on environmental education without engendering the contradictions of the capitalist system.

As István Mészáros points out,¹⁶ during a long time there was the belief that all human problems would be solved through “development” and “modernization” and that they were socially neutral and that technology would surpass all obstacles. Even today, there is still hope for corrections that are strictly technological, even though they collide directly with the interests for survival of the species. The quest for economic growth without any restriction to financial capital and to production reiterates the accumulation of problems for the future generations. There is a relationship of interdependence between growth and development and both deserve to be the focus of a critical analysis that the discussions about gender cannot ignore and/or abort tangentially.

Mészáros proposes “[...] the need to qualify all future development and sustainable development as a way to create a concept with a content that is at once factual and socially desirable.”¹⁷ According to him, sustainability means:

“[...] to be really in charge of cultural, economic and social processes that are vital and through which humans not only survive, but also can find satisfaction according to the goals established by themselves instead of being at the mercy of natural forces that are unpredictable and quasi-

natural economic determinations. The current social order is based on the structural antagonism between capital and labor, therefore requiring the exercise of an external control of non-submissive forces. Adversity is the necessary companion of such system, regardless of the economic and human waste it may cause for its maintenance.”¹⁸

The adverse nature of the capitalist system of production and reproduction for the subaltern classes e for nature, especially in the case of Brazil, has to be dealt with and that is why the question of substantive equality cannot be avoided today as it was in the past. The considerations made by this author are important because they sustain the nexus between the determination of the social condition in Brazil, the material inequality and the way in which they are reinforced by men and women who internalize their “role in society,” more or less consensually, becoming subjected to those who make decision in their names. This culture was created in parallel with the formation of unequal structures of capital and on the unequal foundations of the past. There was a reciprocal interaction between the reproductive structures and the cultural dimension, creating a convergence that reduces each individual to his/her domain of action.

In recovering the recent analysis of the so-called environmental issues, I realize that Ronaldo Coutinho¹⁹ has a critical approach to the “environmental crisis” based on concepts that defend the possibility of creating economic practices and alternative ways of operating transformations expressed in the relationship between society and the environment, under the light of the “sustainable development” paradigm, with the internalization of a new ethic inspired by an “ecological awareness.”

Likewise, for Coutinho, an examination that pays the most attention to sustainable development would reveal that the development of a country (or region) based on its own potential, that is, endogenous, would be compatible with an ecologically balanced mandate. Besides that, this new development “model” would take into consideration a new ethic, in which the economic goals would be subordinated to the workings of the ecosystems and within the parameters of quality of life for the people. According to the author, therefore, there are at least two aspects worth noting: the first is about the inherent contraction in proposing an endogenous model of development exactly in a historical moment marked by the internationalization of the financial markets and by globalization; the second concerns the need to formulate a concept capable of solving the challenge of yearned subordination of the economic interests and actions of the market to the management of natural resources regarding people’s quality of life.

In Coutinho’s understanding, these approaches, regardless of its multi-sectorial character, adopted by the environmental movement since the 1980’s and the development of studies and actions aimed at protecting the environment heading toward an ideological and economic formulation that is geared to the construction of a true utopian and liberal version of socio-environmental justice, which ultimately will take place within the mercantilist logic of the capitalistic modes of production. This, according to the author, suggests an apparently naïve form of reformism.

François Chesnais and Claude Servati,²⁰ on the other hand, argue that the strategy of financial capital based on the oligarchy, which transfers industrial activities from multinational groups to countries where the cost of labor is low and the workforce is skilled, and if possible, an international demand would add an important dimension. In other countries, the exploitation of natural resources remains the goal of capital.

Michel Lowy²¹ points out that the environmental question is the main factor stimulating renovation in the tradition of Marxist theory. The author advocates an economy in transition to socialism,

incorporating the natural and social environments; a transition based on democratic choice of priorities and investments by its own population rather than the market forces.

Mary Garcia Castro and Miriam Abramovay emphasize that in the discourse about conservation “[...] the purely biological perspective has prevailed, without considering the relationship between men and women and the distinct forms of organization that surrounds them.”²² According to the authors, “[...] we refer to the relations that the human beings establish among themselves and with other beings in nature, through creations that are simpler or more elaborate, or even contradictory, like in the context of society at large.”²³ In their study, the authors emphasize the conservationist approach in the environmental science. But they also affirm that this line of thought limits itself to propose alternative solutions to the environmental problem without taking into consideration, in many cases, that the environmental problem is a symptom of a larger problem that is usually not addressed and that includes economic, social and political problems.

One aspect worth paying attention is the fact that by addressing the subject, one needs to ask who should conserve or not, how and why; on the contrary, one may presuppose and make generalizations that add little value to the comprehension and intervention in reality.

Regarding the environment, the intention is to comprehend and to establish a relationship between nature and human action. In last instance, I agree with Abramovay,²⁴ it is not only about learning about natural and social processes in a isolated form, but it is to know in which ways different social groups make use of existing resources and how they interfere with the natural processes that affect the quality of life for men and women; to know in which ways alternative uses are possible, so negative impact may avoided or minimized. Therefore, this paper reiterates the importance of including gender issues as transversal questions in this discussion.

The situation of women has made important strides in the last two decades, but these changes were not homogenous in time and space. There are still significant inequalities that constitute an obstacle to substantive equality. However, the struggle of women against prejudices of class, gender, race and ethnicity has been devising new outlines for feminist political action, also enriching the discussion on the gender issue as well as the issues women face in disaster situations.

An agenda for research and action strategy: final considerations

There is a need for establishing goals and a commitment to a societary project in order to grasp questions involving development, socio-environmental disasters and gender.

An agenda for research and action strategy should include the following aspects: social, economic, political and cultural leading to the search to answers to multiple questions, some of which stand out.

Can countries considered “developing,” dependent” or “peripheral” alter the misery chart, the spatial lack of organization, the problems in education, health, and safety without damaging the environment? Should they, in the quest for development, demand the right to consume, to pollute and to destroy following the model created by the countries considered central? How and in which way gender relations, development patterns, and changes in the environment affect women and men and expose them to the impact of socio-environmental disasters? Considering the losses and the damages, how do women, in specific contexts, organize themselves politically in order to contribute to the preservation of the environment and to the prevention of socio-environmental disasters and in the recovery efforts once they happen?

In order to overcome these questions, it is necessary to develop a gender strategy, to invest in specific research about its relation with development, with the preservation of nature and with the socio-environmental disasters.

It is also important to establish a system of indicators and criteria sensitive to gender, so the governments can utilize them in the planning stages, during its execution and evaluation of social policies in a transversal perspective.

In addition, it is also necessary to analyze and to identify the specific impacts on gender and the measures of protection in the case of floods, droughts, heat waves, disease and other changes and socio-environmental disasters. Since it is a given that millions of poor women affected by the climate change live and work outside the boundaries of the formal labor market, there is a need to create and to implement mechanisms for providing for and for making financial help available to them to alleviate their need.

In addition, it is necessary to include the interaction “development, nature and gender” in a counter-hegemonic agenda in relation to the “society and nature,” because any policy designed to repair or reduce the effects of this relation – including during socio-environmental disasters - will hardly help women in a subaltern position. However, it is worth noting the importance of the proposals being sent to and grasped by national as well as international organizations.

Considering the lack of perspectives in terms of gender as far as prevention and recovery efforts in situations of eco-environmental disasters, as well as the lack of dialogue between managers and professionals about the ways in which the socio-environmental question overlaps with gender issues, I suggest another “look” at the participation of women or about the goal of enabling women to have access to the centers of decision making. This new perspective and political positioning should depart from concrete experiences, derived from the experience with the disaster not aiming at the insertion of women as mere “objects” of the programs, but also as its managers. This way, there will be less vulnerable to practices that reinforce inequalities, discriminations and violence contained in localized actions, programs of intervention in cases of an emergency that do not contemplate a knowledge that is profound, prospective, innovative and interdisciplinary.

Currently, there are different approaches to gender and to the participation of women in the process of prevention and recovery in situations of disasters. However, there are two tendencies that come to the fore front. One indicates the participation from the standpoint of a “municipality-ecologist,” that privileges attitudinal changes on the part of a certain community and underscores the importance of municipalities in attending to socio-environmental disasters. The second tendency is focused on “participation-social development;” it is sustained by social participation and it emanates from an emancipatory perspective. Furthermore, it questions the relation between society and nature, the foundations of the capitalist system and, as a consequence, the causes and answers to socio-environmental disasters.

There is a need to indicate the importance of elaborating an agenda of research and action strategy that is transversal between gender, development and socio-environmental disasters, aimed at the production of a knowledge that will enable the implementation of action that necessary and possible.

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¹ Among the researchers, these are the one worth noting: Alicia H. Puleo; Cristina Segura e María Luisa Cavana; Elaine Enarson; e Carmen Díaz de Rivera.

² UN, Convention-Board of the United Nations about climate change, Brazil, 1992.

³ Countries such as Australia (1995); Pakistan – Duryog Nivaran (1996); Brussels (1996); Washington DC (InterAction, 1998); British Columbia (1998); Miami (2000); and Bangladesh (2000).

⁴ Sue ARMSTRONG, 2001.

⁵ The Kyoto Protocol was rectified by 120 nations committed to reducing the emissions of carbon, mainly greenhouse gases to 5,2% below of the 1990 levels, until 2007.

⁶ ARMSTRONG, 2001, P. 1.

⁷ The gathering in Bali was the 13th annual meeting of the United Nations group called the Convention of Parts (COP). This group had the decision making power in the “United Nations Conference about Climate Change,” name given to the treaty that originated after “Rio 92,” the UN Conference that brought together leaders from all over the world to Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to discuss climate change.

⁸ For more information please consult the World’s Boletim on Tropical Forests, available at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy>. It was accessed on May 22, 2010.

⁹ TRANTER, 2008, p.1.

¹⁰ For more information on this topic, I suggest reading The Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts by Karl Marx, written in 1844 (MARX, 1987, p.11).

¹¹ Russel SCOTT, 2007.

¹² FREITAS e MARQUES, 2010.

¹³ MARX, 1974, p. 328.

¹⁴ Expression used by John Bellamy Foster in *The ecology of Marx – materialism and nature* (FOSTER, 2010).

¹⁵ Sustainable development is a term inspired by the concept eco-development coined by Ignacy Sachs during the World Conference on the Environment in Stockholm. The term was created in 1987 by the World Commission on the Environment and Development (Brundtland Report), which means to tend to the necessities of the present without jeopardizing future generations.

¹⁶ MÉSZAROS, 2001, p. 6.

¹⁷ MÉSZAROS, 2001, p. 8.

¹⁸ MÉSZAROS, 2001, p. 8.

¹⁹ COUTINHO, 2009, p. 21.

²⁰ CHESNAIS and SERVATI, 2003.

²¹ LOWY, 1999 and 2000.

²² CASTRO and ABRAMOVAY, 1997, p. 36.

²³ CASTRO and ABRAMOVAY, 1997, p. 36.

²⁴ ABRAMOVAY, 1993 apud CASTRO and ABRAMOVAY, 1997.