

Gender and Democracy¹

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If democracy had to be defined, we could say that it is a society in which it is not only permitted to be a person: it is required.

María Zambrano

Gender is the social construct imposed on a sexed body. As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, we are not born men and women: society makes us into men and women. That is, it creates an identity for us according to what each culture expects of men and women.

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This is the concept of gender, central to feminist theory because it makes it possible to discern the creation of the cultural role of the sexes. In doing so, it opens up the possibility of critiquing it and transforming it according to the needs, interests and ideals that every social group at each moment in history considers desirable.

Gender theory is the tool underpinning feminism as the political ideology

that aims to positively change relations between the genders. It holds that men and women should have the same roles in society and highlights the fact that discrimination and inappropriate social institutions have denied women support in the home and access to development.

Despite women's going out to work in what has traditionally been considered men's world, they continue to should-



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der “their” tasks while men have not entered into the world of women. That is why it is said that we have a double work day.

EQUALITY

Let us first of all address the question of equality between the genders because equality is a necessary condition for talking about social and political democracy. Democracy involves equality in wielding private and public power, the participation in the decisions that concern all of us and the idea that each individual is worth just as much as another and has the same rights. Let us look first at gender and equality in the personal sphere, which means accepting gender equality in all interpersonal relationships.

In today’s world, men are almost universally more highly valued than women. Both custom and social and political institutions subordinate women to men. This does not mean, though, that women have no importance in a world in which they give birth, care for children and work. However, the imposition of patriarchal power—the power of the father, the boss and the eternal father, which dominates the political, social and economic life of human organizations—means that men the world over evolve into playing a central role and women are left on the sidelines. Patriarchy did not form overnight: it was a process that took almost 2500 years, from about 3600 B.C. to 600 B.C., and in some societies it formed at a different time and speed (Lerner, 1990).

To achieve gender equality, it must be maintained that women are human

beings; that the two genders are equal in the most important ways, and different as sexes and individuals; that this equality must be publicly recognized; that those qualities traditionally associated with women—what can be called “the feminine principle”—are at least as valuable as “the masculine principle;” and that this equality also must be publicly recognized.

Finally, it also must be maintained that the personal is political. This means that the value structure of a culture is identical in both the private and public sphere, that is to say, everything that goes on in the bedroom is totally relevant to what goes on in the halls of power, and equality demands that both genders control both the bedroom and the halls of power (Hierro, 1994). In brief, in the political sphere, equality and gender mean the struggle for democracy.

DEMOCRACY

In most countries, the discourse on democracy does not put a priority on the question of women. This darkens the achievements of freedom movements the world over and makes it difficult to come close

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to a real democracy because it does not take into account the interests of half of humanity, women. Gender democracy is realized when important groups of women attain a humanist feminist consciousness. When that happens, the reforms they champion tend to free them from oppression within the family, the locus of patriarchal power. They also fight for the right to equal participation at all levels of society, the right to control their own bodies, that is, the right to freely decide about their own maternity, to good health, and to change legislation on marriage and divorce as well as work, etc. All of this means equality in gender privileges.

The fight is for real equality retaining gender difference. We women do not want to be men, but women. We do not want to govern like men or create like men or love like men. We want to live our lives from inside the woman’s body we have. We want to work, love and share with men the creation in Mexico of the “other form of being human and free,” as Rosario Castellanos proposed, in the spheres of the family, society and politics in our country (Hierro, 1992). To do that, a change in consciousness is needed, a change that supports personal and political development, for example taking part in social movements. The political women’s movement is the expression of widely shared suffering. However, people take political action when they feel that the government has some responsibility to help them solve their problems. A great many hopes and fears, however, are never given a political voice because people tend to visualize their problems as personal, and they look to themselves or their relatives or friends for solutions instead of demanding action by public officials.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Changing beliefs consists of turning personal problems into political ones and, as that occurs, both women and men must fight and demand economic, social and political opportunities even if they have never done so in the past, since just having a difficult life and being part of an oppressed or exploited group does not bring with it an interest in politics. People tend to blame themselves for their problems. It is only when they become aware that their problems are shared by others like them that the group is able to attribute the source of their concerns to social conditions like discrimination or oppression and decide to seek political solutions.

Women and men had to recognize that they have certain problems precisely because they are women and men in order for the feminist movement to emerge. However, for psychological identification with a group to develop there must also be a rejection of the traditional def-

inition of that group's status in society. Another prerequisite is the emergence of a new identity for the group itself based on a critique of the old identity.²

When the traditional image of the oppressed group has been rejected, it is possible to accept its alternative, based on gender equality. This occurs, first, because the social context for learning is not static: periods of rapid change follow one after the other caused by different social conditions like economic disasters and war. Technological change, like the existence of contraceptives, also have an influence. All of this fosters new forms of behavior to better adapt to changing conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

The meaning of being a woman has changed in the course of this century. The changes in families and work have caused gender politics to emerge, politics that involve non-traditional women's

identities and social changes that foster two regulatory tendencies: gender equality and social and political democracy as basic conditions for being able to speak of humanism in our time. ■■■

NOTES

¹This article is part of a larger piece published in *Participación política de la mujer* (Mexico City: Cambio XXI- Fundación Mexicana, A.C., 1992).

²Here, it is important to mention a political movement that has emerged in different parts of the world around the struggle for a "new masculinity" for the same reasons that the feminist movement arose.

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