Invited Article: Provocations

No News from the Front: Women in the Labor Market

Nada de Novo no *Front*: As Mulheres no Mercado de Trabalho

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■ ABSTRACT

In this provocation, I consider some data from history and classic feminist concepts to support the argument that everything changes to continue as it is. This provocation proposes a reflection on the difficulties faced by women in daily life, both at home and at work. We argue that when entering the labor market, women did not change the organizational structures and they end up reproducing the male hierarchical models. In addition, care work, offered in private life, also remains under the responsibility of women, which has intensified the double working day. Women are exhausted because there has not been a radical transformation in the ways of organizing organizations, private life, society, and the self itself.

Keywords: feminisms; women in the labor market; male models.

■ RESUMO

Nessa pensata, retomo alguns breves dados históricos e conceitos feministas clássicos para suportar o argumento de que tudo muda para continuar como está. A pensata propõe uma reflexão sobre as dificuldades que as mulheres enfrentam na vida cotidiana, tanto no espaço da casa como no espaço do trabalho. Argumentamos que ao entrar no mercado de trabalho as mulheres não alteraram as estruturas organizacionais e elas acabam por reproduzir os modelos hierárquicos masculinos. Além disso, o trabalho do cuidado, oferecido na vida privada, também continua sob a responsabilidade das mulheres, o que intensificou a dupla jornada de trabalho. As mulheres estão exaustas porque não houve uma transformação radical nos modos de organizar das organizações, da vida privada, da sociedade e do próprio *self*.

Palavras-chave: feminismos; mulheres no mercado de trabalho; modelos masculinos.

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INTRODUCTION

Women are exhausted because there has not been a radical transformation in how institutions, private life, society, or the self are organized. In 1991, in partnership with Maria Irene Stocco Betiol, I published an article in *Revista de Administração de Empresas* entitled 'Executive women and their work relationships' (Betiol & Tonelli, 1991). Frankly, I don't remember all the research questions. However, from memory, I know that the article's conclusion is valid even today: "If women are sweet, they haven't sweetened work relationships in organizations." The entry of women into the world of work reproduced the modes of conduct prescribed for men, but care work continued to be carried out only by women (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974). This model is also repeated when it comes to other groups minoritized by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, described indeterminately as 'diversity,' an odorless, colorless, and neutral word that mischaracterizes precisely what it wants to say. Gays, lesbians, black women and men, queers, older people, and all identity groups, without exception, need to play the game requested by companies, which has always excluded private life and its problems from the world of work, as if these spheres of life were autonomous (Tonelli, 2001). The famous acronym DEI – diversity, equity, and inclusion, a current mantra in organizations, does not question the almost insurmountable inequality built by differences in social classes and power relations.

To me, this is one of the paradoxes that the struggle for women's emancipation has faced since the 'Declaration of the Rights of Women and of the Female Citizens,' written by Olympe de Gouges in 1791, and the work 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,' by Mary Wollstonecraft, in 1793. Although at the end of the 19th century, there was already a distinction between the suffragist movements, considered well-behaved feminism, and the anarchist movements, which questioned the capital/labor relationship, established sexuality standards, traditional marriage, and education, well-behaved feminism won (Fraser, 2019; Pinto, 2003)

After the Second World War, student movements in France, political movements, the Prague Spring, the burning of bras by feminists in the United States, and the Black movement, with the strong presence of Martin Luther King, caused a change of mentality in various spheres of social life. But even though some social transformations occurred, they were not enough to transform organizations (Gherardi, 1994; Gherardi, 2005). The invention of the contraceptive pill in 1965 allowed the search for free sexuality and the entry of women into the job market, always threatened by a possible pregnancy. What prevailed at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century was the greater participation of women in administrative staff and, even so, with many limitations, such as the participation of women as CEOs or on company boards. In this essay, we revisit some data from history and classic concepts to support the idea that everything changes to remain as it is.

FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

In 1872 Brazil, women constituted 76% of the factory workforce. In the 1930s, Pagu's novel, 'Industrial Park' discussed the issue of rich women and working women. Socialist feminists published two journals, *A Mensageira* (The Messenger) (1897-1900) and *Revista Feminina* (Female Journal) (1914-1936), discussing the benefits of women's work outside the home. The first strike in 1903 over women's work occurred at the Aliança e Cruzeiro factory with the dismissal of a woman who had had a child with the employer. In 1906, numerous manifestos by anarchist women workers occurred. Surprisingly, in 1950, women made up only 23% of the factory workforce (Del Priore, 2017).

What could have happened during this period? The nuclear family model, which had become predominant in bourgeois families in northern societies, began to guide the model of working-class families with post-war industrial growth. This meant a change in social and work organization: men in the public world, women in the private world, emotions at home, and a (supposed) rationality in the company. The image of the perfect family presented in advertisements on television was the model that permeated the imagination of the time.

In industrial capitalism, the man was the worker, head of the household, and the main breadwinner. The domestic and the care and reproductive work were unimportant.

In the 60s/70s, emancipatory movements showed that the 'personal' is also 'political' – our subjectivity is linked to how society works. During this period, injustices were revealed in power relations within families, everyday life, and cultural traditions. Feminist movements even questioned the sexism of the left wing. They sought to be democratic and more participatory in seeking gender justice.

As mentioned previously, several social movements promoted mindset changes during this period. Furthermore, the emerging consumer society required resources that men's salaries could not always support. Women from the upper and middle classes, who were beginning to graduate in Brazil, entered the job market more strongly. Playing the piano was no longer enough to give the couple glamour; having a profession and working gave her husband status.

From the 1970s onward in Brazil, there were several movements organized by women: in 1975, during the military dictatorship, the women's movement for amnesty; in 1980, the feminist movement for re-democratization; also in 1980, academic feminism, with numerous research conducted by the Carlos Chagas Foundation; in 1983 the Council of Women was created in São Paulo (called *Conselho da Condição Feminina*); in 1985 the National Council of Women was created; in the 90s many groups began to flourish (such as Geledes); in 2003 the National Secretariat for Policies for Women was created; and, since the 2000s, there has been an explosion of women's movements for better working conditions for women. However, these movements are linked to what is today called 'liberal feminism,' a struggle for the inclusion of women in the job market, which does not alter either the organizational structures or the organization of care work, always provided by women, with the famous double burden (Bruschini et al., 2008). In liberal feminism, gender is seen as a variable, and women reproduce male models in the job market (Alvesson & Billing, 1997).

Women want equal salaries, work in C-level positions, become board members, and participate in decision-making: legitimate issues that cannot be carried out within the organizational model that is hierarchical and doubly unequal, as it predominantly includes women from the middle and upper classes of the population (Andrade & Carvalho, 2015; Carrieri et al., 2016). The poor face additional class difficulties. Not even the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provoked questions about life at work and home, seems to have provoked structural changes (for deep discussions on life at work and home, see (Bourdieu, 2010; Whitehead, 2013).

In this period of volatile capitalism, paradoxically, women's movements prosper as feminist discourse adheres to the new spirit of capitalism. Rather than economic criticisms, the criticisms are cultural. Women enter the job market en masse, and the dream is linked to capitalist accumulation (Buarque de Hollanda, 2019a). With traditional marriage models falling apart and the absence of breadwinner husbands, women become heads of households (the case of almost 50% of households in Brazil). In this scenario, survival is preponderant (Tonelli & Carvalho, 2023), and women enter the world of subsistence entrepreneurship. This is not about glorifying the past of patriarchal structures, but by assuming work in its existing forms, the double burden increases exponentially since society recognizes some of the feminist demands but does not propose a redistribution of roles and a new social contract (Fraser, 2019; Shafik, 2021).

SOME CONCEPTS…

Nowadays, women are the most affected by unemployment. Despite the reduction in poverty in Latin America, the number of poor women is increasing, and we are facing the feminization of poverty and old age. There is an incidence of early marriages, and data from Latin America indicate that 34% of 19-year-old women are mothers. Early motherhood indicates a lack of educational conditions on sexual and reproductive health, leading to school dropout, restricted freedom of movement, and a higher incidence of violence. Furthermore, the intersectionality of prejudices is evident: discrimination is greater among women in situations of social vulnerability: Indigenous, Black, migrants, girls, and older women. In addition to physical violence, symbolic violence directs the gaze: racism, objectification, and hypersexualization (Gonzalez, 2019).

However, private and public life spheres are not autonomous, and subjectivity arises from a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 2004). The feminist debate shows that the notion of gender is central to understanding all social relations, institutions, processes, and patterns of subordination, inequalities, and oppression. Through language, gestures, and symbols, reality is permanently constructed and reconstructed, even though we have the impression of a stable and objective reality. Our identity is associated with a social temporality, a mixture of a (very short) time in our daily interactions, our short lifespan, and a long time in history. Reason and mind were associated with masculinity and action, while body and nature were with the feminine, named after the masculine.

We build a persona at work, we build another in the family, with friends, and on social media, we perform various 'selves.' Still, we have reified and naturalized ideas about gender, age, and our own identity (Martin, 1990). For Mearleau-Ponty, a critic of Cartesian thought, the foundation of Judith Butler's thought, body and mind, man and nature are linked; consciousness is corporeal, always temporal and historical (Butler, 1997). For Heidegger, philosopher of action, 'being' reveals itself in experience and is constructed in the world, in existing. The subjective identities of men and women are shaped by social norms and symbols, defined in relational performances, which do not operate without each other. Throughout the 20th century, several currents studied gender issues, among others, studies on the origin of patriarchy, the Marxist tradition, French post-structuralism, schools of psychoanalysis, race studies, and decolonial studies, which, however, were not yet sufficient to change the current structures (Buarque de Hollanda, 2019a; Buarque de Hollanda, 2019b; Buarque de Hollanda, 2020).

At this moment, discussions about the social construction of science, technology, and new power sources point to a new working class, a new class of excluded people, new sexualities, new ethnicities, new work characteristics, new family forms, and new subjectivities. The linguistic turn (Iñiguez, 2004; Spink, 1999) showed no subjects outside language, culture, and power relations.

SOME HOPE…

What does the future hold for us? Donna Haraway's vision in a text written in 1991 is extraordinary: we are facing the computerization of domination, which goes from an organic industrial society to an informational polymorphous society with surveillance systems and ideologies of sexual reproduction that are disconnected from conceptions of sexual roles (Haraway, 1991). We have a new working class in the work dimension, with structural unemployment and work activity being 'feminized,' i.e., it is worthless. As we have already mentioned, in the changes we have experienced, we have the feminization of poverty, with households headed by women without state protection, with the intensification

of migration. Still in the work dimension, the persistence of the sexual and racial division of work, with work done at home, outsourced, and we are living the commodification of experiences. If Haraway had written this text during a pandemic, it would no longer be appropriate. We have seen the intensity of scientific illiteracy and the growth of anti-scientific mystical cults in the pandemic and the growth of cynical theories, extreme domestic violence, the explosion of feminisms, and, paradoxically, the erosion of gender itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic that, at first glance, seemed to have provoked a deep reflection on our strange way of living is over. We are in a time of great uncertainty. However, if subjects are constructed and rebuilt, there is still hope for a society that is not based on violence and domination.

To conclude this text, I return to Minouche Shafik (2021), who proposes a new social contract for the present time so that we can take care of each other. A new model of social organization that takes care of children, old age, and the dimension of work in our lives. Furthermore, with bell hooks (2019), I reaffirm that love is fundamental and that a loving ethic should guide our lives.

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