

Maria Collier de Mendonça and Patrícia Fonseca Fanaya

In Conversation with Jacqueline Pitanguy and Iáris Cortês

Introduction: Exploring Feminist Voices and Activism in Brazil

This 'in conversation' aims at exploring some voices reflecting recent decades of feminism in Brazil and how women's rights activism has been experienced in this context. For this purpose, we have interviewed two Brazilian women whose careers have contributed extensively to the Brazilian feminist movement. The two interviewees, Jacqueline Pitanguy and Iáris Cortês, belong to a privileged class in terms of education and socioeconomic brackets in Brazil. They both have held powerful positions as public policies makers, in the State bureaucracy, during the late 1980s. Jacqueline Pitanguy and Iáris Cortês were members of the National Council for Women's Rights (CNDM - Conselho Nacional de Direitos da Mulher), a committee that worked to ensure the implementation of women's rights during the elaboration of the new Brazilian Constitution of 1988. After the 1980s, an important period marking Brazil's re-democratisation, they have been working with feminist non-governmental organisations dedicated to a wide range of feminist issues and women's rights agendas.

Our first interviewee, Jacqueline Pitanguy, is a 65 year old sociologist and political scientist, who is the founder and director of CEPIA (Citizenship, Study, Research, Information and Action), a Brazilian non-governmental and non-profit feminist organisation based in Rio de Janeiro. This organisation works from a gender perspective, focusing on human rights, health issues, sexual and reproductive rights, violence, access to justice, public policies, poverty and employment. Its members promote the debate among different social groups and organisations regarding different issues related to women's rights. After the overthrow of the military dictatorship in Brazil, in 1985, Jacqueline was appointed as the President of CNDM. The CNDM was responsible for the development of public policies and programs related to reproductive rights, violence, access to justice, labor rights, health, education, black and rural women's rights. In this sense, while working

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at CNDM from 1986 to 1989, she was able to continue on with the work she developed previously and extend it also to the incorporation of gender issues into the new Brazilian Democratic Constitution (1988) as well as to the design and implementation of public policies aimed at improving women's rights afterwards. In addition, Jacqueline has been an active member on the boards of several international organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the Global Fund for Women, and the International Human Rights Council.

Our second interviewee is Iáris Cortês, a 73 year-old feminist activist and lawyer, who is one of the founders of CFEMEA (Feminist Center for Studies and Advisory Services), a high profile feminist research-based organisation. From 1986 to 1989, she coordinated the Legislation Committee of the CNDM during the Constituent Assembly of 1988 under the leadership of Jacqueline Pitanguy. She is also one of the authors of 'Nova História das Mulheres no Brasil' (A New History of Women in Brazil) an interdisciplinary publication organised by Carla Bassanezi Pinsky and Joana Maria Pedro, launched in 2012, which tells the story of women in the 20th and 21st centuries in Brazil.

Initial Engagements with the Feminist Movement in Brazil

In the early 1970s, Jacqueline Pitanguy worked on a social research project that consisted in a quantitative survey of the labor force demographics in Brazil, carried out by the Sociology Department of the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ). During this project, she found out that there was a huge inequality between men's and women's wages, and also that most leadership positions were occupied by men while women remained in less challenging jobs requiring fewer qualifications. Consequently, her interest in working with gender issues emerged from this project. By 1972 she had already joined a feminist group whose objective was to discuss women's conditions in Rio de Janeiro.

Back then, the Brazilian political context was very tense. A military dictatorship was installed in the country; ruling was accompanied by severe repression on political activity and freedom of speech. Several people were tortured or murdered by the military regime: from students to professors, from mothers to journalists. Violence spared no one, regardless of gender or professional occupation. In this sense and in the words of Jacqueline Pitanguy:

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In Brazil, the feminist movement emerged during the military dictatorship, which shaped it very differently from those in other countries. We were living under adverse conditions of violation of the human rights, and under an arbitrary and torturous government; we had no freedom of association, no freedom of the press... So, women who joined the frontline of the movement at that time were also fighting for the re-democratisation of the country. Therefore, since the beginning, issues related to the human rights, democracy and freedom agendas' were integrated as parts of the feminist movement in Brazil.

Moreover, the feminist movement not only had to be developed in the face of an adverse political environment but also under widespread resistance from patriarchal values shaping all other spheres of life. Indeed, in the early 1980's, the lawyer Iáris Cortês got divorced and came to realise during court procedures how unprotected she was by Brazilian law compared to her ex-husband's. She pointed out that this gender discrimination was not even mentioned by her professors, while she was an undergraduate student in the early 1970's. She explains:

When I decided to put an end to my marriage, I realised that I had no rights, since I was a woman! I studied Law, but during college or even after graduation, I didn't realise how laws were discriminatory against women. None of my college professors had ever mentioned those discriminations to us. They only showed us differences between women's and men's rights as natural, usual and necessary. We, the students, on our part, did not question it; we only studied and learned the text of the laws - what was allowed and what wasn't.

Feminist Narratives and Activism in Brazil

In 1975, the United Nations promoted the International Women's Year. Under the auspices of the United Nations, Jacqueline Pitanguy and her peers organised the first week of feminist debates in Brazil. This was an historic event, which took place at the Brazilian Press Association Headquarters, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This event also motivated the foundation of the Brazilian Women's Centre.

Jacqueline Pitanguy: In 1975, we organized one week of debates about the condition of women within Brazilian society. It took place at the Brazilian Press Association, in Rio de Janeiro. We were extremely successful and were well received by a considerably large audience. It showed us that the issue was latent by then. That week is considered to be a milestone, a starting point for the Brazilian feminist movement by people who try to retrieve the history of feminism in Brazil.

During the last 40 years, the Brazilian feminist agenda encompassed a broad range of issues, such as work, reproductive rights, legal abortion among others; however, back in the late 70's, the fight against domestic violence was paramount within the feminist struggle because many women were

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being beaten and even murdered by their husbands, partners or lovers, whose lawyers defended their actions as the legitimate defence of honour.

In early 1980's, different activists and political groups integrated a pro-democratisation popular movement to protest against the military dictatorship in Brazil. All political parties were still illegal and this collective fight adopted the slogan: 'the people united will never be defeated'. In this sense, Pitanguy emphasises that it was very important to make it clear to society that the Brazilian feminist movement was supporting the country's re-democratisation process, but that it also had its own specific causes: the defence of gender equality and women's rights. In her words:

There was an overlap between the fight for democracy and the feminist fight for the re-qualification of the very concept of democracy through the introduction of another power dimension, another inequality dimension, besides class struggle. That happened at a very difficult moment because the progressive political forces were trying to fight united under the slogan 'the people united will never be defeated'.

This concept of 'people' could not comprise the idea of gender or race and could barely embrace the concept of social class. The idea was the development of a formal and united oppositional frontline to the military dictatorship. Consequently, the feminist movement acquired a double militancy: on one hand, we had to make clear that we were supporting the fight against the military dictatorship; and on the other hand, we needed to clarify that the feminist movement had the proposition to re-qualify the concept of democracy, adding the idea of gender equality into it.

In 1985, the process of re-democratisation of Brazil started when the last indirect presidential election took place and a civilian - Tancredo Neves - was elected by an Electoral College, formed by Federal Deputies and Senators, who were members of the National Congress. Soon after, Jacqueline Pitanguy was appointed as the President of the CNDM and Iáris Cortês was invited to coordinate its Legislation Committee. In their opinions:

Jaqueline Pitanguy: It was a period of the emergence of women's councils, and also the beginning of the creation of public policies both on state and federal levels. That represented a great change.

Iáris Cortês: Taking part in the team called "the Lipstick Lobby" (how the press called the Brazilian National Council for Women's Rights) during the National Constituent Assembly was crucial for me to awaken to gender-related issues.

Along this persistent journey, many important women's rights demands were fulfilled. Feminists' collective efforts have had remarkable victories. Amongst a considerable list of achievements, the interviewees highlight three specific legal accomplishments: new Brazilian laws assuring maternity

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and paternity leave rights to women and men respectively; adopting new concepts regarding marriage and divorce; and ‘naming and shaming’ violence against women. The interviewees explain:

Jacqueline Pitanguy: It was a very interesting moment when the legal basis of the country was being re-written, and this Constitution [1988] brought us crucial improvements: the whole chapter regarding the family re-established equality between men and women. Another great victory of the feminist movement was the paternity leave, which came with this Constitution, in order to change the role men played in the family and also with children. We also won the right for the prisoners to breastfeed, and, along with the ‘sanitary movement’, we were able to include in the Constitution the right for women to decide the number of children they want to have, as well as to establish by themselves how many years between each pregnancy by ensuring them access to public funded family planning programs and policies for the free distribution of contraceptive methods.

Iáris Cortês: The 1988 Constitution put men and women in a position of equal rights and obligations. It also gave women who are incarcerated the right to stay with their children in prison, during the breastfeeding period. The duration of maternity leave was extended to 120 days and the Constitution also included the paternity leave right on it. In several chapters, the Constitution ensures the protection of motherhood, especially to pregnant women, children, teenagers and the elderly. It provides free assistance for children and dependents (from birth to five years old, in day care centres and pre-schools) and it also determines in primary education free access to children and teenagers, from 4 to 17 years old. Finally, the concept of the family was detached from that of marriage, under the protection of the State. That enabled the expansion of new family configurations, since common-law relationships were considered to be at the same level of marriages...

Present Issues and Future Challenges facing the Brazilian Feminist Agendas

According to Iáris Cortês, despite the fact that laws have improved considerably in Brazil, and women have been able to access important rights, a lot still needs to be accomplished in terms of equality. For instance, she argues that the Brazilian society still follows a predominantly patriarchal model, in which chauvinist values and behaviours remain usual and natural in the familial and social spheres. That is why the interviewee thinks Brazil still needs a domestic ‘revolution’. In her opinion, many Brazilian men do not yet participate in either household chores or child care activities. She argues that many men still expect their wives and partners to take up these roles. Nevertheless, with the rise of contemporary notions on work and employment, it is expected that both partners become responsible for breadwinning. Iáris further asserts that:

Iáris Cortês: The ‘macho/ chauvinist’ values are deeply rooted in Brazilian society and it is extremely difficult to change this. Even though we have achieved some success regarding women's empowerment, we are still far behind when we talk about family life. Women are

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still responsible for taking care of the house, the children, the elderly and the sick people in their families. Today we talk a lot about men's participation in the domestic work, but, honestly, the majority of men are only willing to 'help'. The problem is that 'to help' only means to do something when he is available, or in a good mood, or when his favourite soccer team is not playing on TV, or he was not invited to have beer with friends. I am talking about a younger generation, whose men are still below 50! The older generation, that is, men above 50 years old, still behave like their fathers and grandfathers. If they are polite enough they say 'please'... Or 'honey'... Or 'sweetheart...go and get some icy water for me' or 'go iron my shirt' or 'did you fix my dinner?' and so on!"

Jacqueline Pitanguy emphasises that there was a huge collective effort from many feminist activists and organisations, which generated relevant progress along the last 40 years. At present, 25 years after the promulgation of the New Democratic Brazilian Constitution (1988), Pitanguy states there is greater equality between men and women in Brazil in terms of legal rights. However, Brazilian women's wages still remain 30% lower than men's, and most leadership positions, as well as the most important working posts, are still held by men.

Jacqueline and Iáris stress that, although a woman (Dilma Rousseff) has been elected in 2010 as President for the first time in Brazilian history, the Brazilian parliament still has less participation by women than any working sector in the country. In this sense, Iáris says that it has become harder to be a feminist in Brazil. Some young women tend to believe that feminism is outdated fight for women's rights since they are already protected by progressive laws in Brazil. In her opinion, it is very risky to believe that – only because Brazil has elected its first female President – women's rights are guaranteed in the country. Brazil still needs to undergo many other social and cultural changes in order to solidify women's gains. The interviewees contend that:

Jacqueline Pitanguy: From a formal and legal perspective, there is equality between men and women in Brazil. However, it does not mean that we have achieved an ideal condition because inequality persists in the market place where women earn 30% less than men and the majority of leading positions are still taken up by men. But things have been changing. There have been great changes in the role that women play in Brazilian society; I would say that, contradictorily, although Brazil has a woman as President, the sphere that still suffers the most from women's lack of participation is the political one.

Iáris Cortês: The main challenge for the Brazilian feminist movement from now on is to empower women to participate and reach 50% of the working posts in the Executive, Legislative and Judicial powers in Brazil.

Pitanguy adds that Brazil's government still must think of laws as parameters and instruments to monitor society and guide the implementation of public policies. That is because, in her words, 'one

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can only lay a claim if there is a legal parameter; without it one cannot lay a claim.’ A similar opinion is expressed by Iáris:

The 2002 New Brazilian Civil Code ensured that husbands and wives have the same rights and duties with regard to their children, including married couples and common law partners. Biological and adopted children have also equal rights. It means, both men and women have equal rights regarding their power within the family and custody over their children (which was predominantly given to men by law, before the approval of this new Code). Family planning was also included in the 2002 Civil Code and in the 1988 Constitution, as the free choice of each couple, ensuring that the State provides educational and scientific resources for the practice of this right. A specific law regulating family planning was approved, even though its passage demanded a hard struggle from the Feminist movement. It allowed Brazilians the right to choose when and if to have children. Unfortunately, these laws haven't always been supported adequately by public policies in many municipalities. So, there is still a significant lack of governmental support in terms of health and social services, which must be offered to women and men by law, such as instruction in contraceptive methods and educational programs related to family planning. And this lack of family support services occurs in several areas, such as daycares, preschools, and social and leisure facilities.

Pitanguy maintains that the construction and implementation of a feminist agenda is an ongoing process. She points out that society, especially women, need to keep monitoring public institutions, social services and facilities, to guarantee access to all types of support which women need for health, violence, work, children, family and other issues. These issues are often intersected and exacerbated by other social equality issues such as persisting poverty. More specifically, the interviewees say that:

Jacqueline Pitanguy: When one talks about violence against women he or she is talking about a vast topic. It goes from the prevention of violence to the very difficult legal issue, which transforms the victim into a defendant during trial: she is the one to be judged; it is her behaviour that ends up being judged. [...] The feminist movement in Brazil has embraced issues like the rights for working class women, for female domestic workers, for female rural workers; and, yet, we still embrace common feminist causes such as violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, equality, the right to education, equality of pay, besides other relevant social causes.

Iáris Cortês: The specialised police stations for women - considered to be the number one equipment to fight violence against women - are still very few. According to the Bureau for Women's Polices there are only 374 of those police stations in the country; this means that only about 7% of the 5,500 municipal districts can count on that equipment. This insufficiency is the result of the lack of money in these districts.

Jacqueline Pitanguy: There are victories that can disappear: especially those regarding sexual and reproductive rights; we still face powerful and violent enemies... Conservative powers such as the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. Nowadays, we have a protestant minister

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who is presiding over the Human Rights' Commission, which is an absurd. The whole society is rebelling against him. [...] The help centres, which are designed to support victims of sexual assault, are constantly being threatened by the Catholic Church. Not long ago, we saw, in Recife, a 9 year-old girl who was abused and got pregnant, and the Catholic Church tried to interfere in her case.

On Motherhood and Feminism

Iáris Cortês defines feminism as a nervous feeling that radiates all over the body and soul, a feeling that allows women to think authentically, that has the power to make them listen to their own needs and wishes, and enables them to make (inner and outer directed) choices based on their own values instead of those imposed by culture or society. In this sense, she believes that being a feminist has reinforced her maternal identity. She exemplifies:

I remember, on March 8th, when a journalist came to my home and my daughter, who was 15 years old, got really excited about the interview and wanted to stay next to me in the room, listening to what her mother would say. At some point, the journalist asked her if she was also a feminist. She answered him very spontaneously and said she was not a feminist, because someone had to take care of the house, while I was protesting or participating in conferences. This answer profoundly affected me. I didn't realise until that moment that I was throwing that much responsibility onto the shoulders of my only daughter. From that day on, I started to demand a lot more from my two sons. Despite the complaints, they took over several chores. Finally, this experience was very good for both of them, because they are not 'domestic illiterates' anymore.

Nonetheless, Jacqueline and Iáris both agree that motherhood is perceived and experienced differently across social classes. Low income women, in their majority, are those that, when and if becoming mothers, face the hardest obstacles. On one hand, low income families have to survive within a precarious environment characterised by a set of basic demands still to be provided by the State such as housing and sewage installations, access to childcare facilities, better health, transportation, leisure and educational services and others. On the other hand, the fight against violence is even more urgent for these mothers because they have been living under the risk of losing their sons to gangs or drug dealers who have been intensely manipulating these children and teenagers to enter into a life of crime. While discussing motherhood and violence, the interviewees say:

Iáris Cortês: We can say that to live without violence is still a demand to be conquered by Brazilian mothers. Low income children and teenagers lack public education, childcare, sport, culture and leisure infrastructures. They have been seduced by criminal adults to commit

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crimes such as mugging, burglary and drug trafficking. The State does not fulfil the needs of lower class families and mothers end up having difficulties with childcare, since they need to bring some income home. They unfortunately have to leave their children in very precarious conditions.

Conclusion: ‘The agenda goes on! It never ends’

In conclusion, in the interviewees’ opinion the real problem lies in the gaps between policy making and implementation as well as in law making and implementation. This is because Brazil is still characterised by high levels of social inequality while a real commitment to change is still to be seen. As of this date, low income women suffer the double burden posed by deep poverty and widespread patriarchy. Jacqueline Pitanguy argues that:

There are important public policies, which were won by women, but they can disappear at any moment because nothing is guaranteed. But when there are laws, it is much easier to make a claim, to criticise that something is not working, or that such-and-such services are not available somewhere. It is part of the monitoring.

Yet, Brazil still needs to implement several crucial public policies and improve its social infrastructure as the country lacks relevant and effective public policies for women. While women of all social classes suffer from this situation, it is perhaps, those who, in addition to common inequalities, experience extreme hardships who suffer from these deficiencies. Thus, there is a constant need for Brazilian feminist activists to appeal to laws and to use them as parameters within which the needs of women must be fulfilled. This paradoxical reality reminds us that there is still a long journey, in order to transform laws into accessible public programs and, even more importantly, practices.

Jacqueline Pitanguy: The astonishing aspect of the feminist agenda is that from a human right perspective or from a political one, the agenda is indefinite. It is an open agenda. Rights have been won on a daily basis but the achievements are always threatened by circumstances... It took years and years of struggle, monitoring trials and lots of published academic papers. It is an agenda that accompanies us to this day. The agenda goes on; it never ends!

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