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**Negotiating Culture in the Promotion
of Gender Equality and Women's
Empowerment in Latin America**

Cecília Sardenberg

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Negotiating Culture in the Promotion of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Latin America

Cecília M. B. Sardenberg

Summary

Culture interacts with development in multiple ways. However the importance of culture within development should not be seen as translating to crystallising and solidifying its meaning or providing definitive ideas of what works. In this paper, I look at the relevance of culture to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, and examine how some women's movements in Latin America have negotiated and contested meanings around culture and as a result have re-signified gender values, attitudes and behaviours.

The example of *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo* questions the cultural construct of motherhood and the traditional role of the mother caring for the family within the home, and the women's neighbourhood action based in Bahia, Brazil which I look at contests and extends the notion of that domestic space. The importance of deconstructing and fighting against stereotypical images and patriarchal views of women in order to uphold gender rights is clear from the examples I look at on domestic violence, sex worker violence and the Black Women's Movement's struggle against sexist and racist images.

In conclusion I argue that in employing 'transformatory thinking' the women's groups that I look at in this paper have worked together as women to contest and confront accepted cultural meanings and by doing so have begun to re-structure the gender order and promote gender equality.

Keywords: Culture, Latin America, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment

Cecilia Sardenberg is Convenor of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium Latin America Hub. She is a Brazilian feminist who holds a PhD in Anthropology from Boston University, and has over thirty years experience in teaching, research, consultancy, and participation in women's movements in Brazil. She was one of the "founding mothers" of the Federal University of Bahia's Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Studies on Women, and served as its Director from 2004–2010. At present, she serves as National Coordinator to OBSERVE, the Observatory for the Monitoring of the Maria da Penha Law against domestic violence in Brazil.

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Introduction

It is generally assumed that culture interacts with development in many ways - not only in terms of the means, but also of the ends of development. However, as Amartya Sen (2000: 22) well advises, '... the acknowledgement of the importance of culture should not be translated instantly into ready-made theories of what works, what needs to be cultivated and what must be preserved'. He further adds that the matter is not that simple: 'There are complex epistemic issues involved in identifying the ways in which culture may or may not influence development, and also deeply ethical and political issues of the social choice involved in accommodating diverse concerns'.

My purpose in this paper is to dwell on some of these issues, looking at the relevance of culture to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, with an emphasis on Latin America. I contend that insofar as culture pertains to the symbolic world – to that which bestows meaning to all of our actions, to the world in which they are enacted, and to all actors alike – it is a determinant factor in the process of women's empowerment towards gender equality. In the course of this work, I intend to demonstrate how culture has been negotiated by women's movements in that direction, implicated in the re-signification of values, attitudes, and behaviours that have import for the quality of gender relations.

The focus on Latin America in this study rests not only on its rich and complex cultural diversity, but, more importantly, also on the major steps taken towards gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. Indeed, although historically, a patriarchal gender order has shaped much of women's lives in most Latin American countries, within the last three decades, processes of re-democratisation at play in the region have created space for feminist and women's activism to rise, resulting in significant gains for women. In different instances and regional contexts, Latin American women have been quite successful in re-signifying cultural values and ways to fit their needs and interests, and this process has been empowering to them. In addition, different projects and programmes implemented in the region have succeeded in negotiating and re-defining local norms and practices regarding gender roles and relations. This has facilitated change towards building gender equality. As a Brazilian feminist, teaching anthropology and feminist studies, and active in women's movements in Brazil for nearly three decades, I write from the position of someone who has been both part - as well as an engaged observer - of this process. My aim in this paper is to bring to light some of our more important strides in order to describe and analyse how culture has been negotiated in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, and as such, how culture and development have interacted in that direction.

Central to this task is an understanding of culture that, far from viewing it as a bounded system of shared meanings as commonly found in development discourse, regards it instead as 'an active process of meaning making and contestation over definition, including of itself' (Street 1993: 2), which is open to challenges and changes. This understanding includes the recognition of variation in cultural contexts in terms of the possibilities for and degrees of openness to 'meaning making and contestation'. As such, this paper will identify some of the factors that have contributed to greater contestation towards gender equality in the instances here analysed.

I begin with a discussion of what is understood by gender equality and women's empowerment, and how culture has been factored in. Subsequently, I will deal with the current debate on culture, delineating the perspective that underlies this work. I will argue that notions of gender are always social and cultural constructions and, as such, open to challenge and change. Finally, I will offer a view of some of the different feminist and

women's movements in the region, looking, in particular, at their struggles over meaning – that is, at the cultural politics of these movements (Alvarez *et al.* 1998) and how they challenge and negotiate culture in promoting change towards gender equality. In particular, I will focus on the cultural constructs of motherhood; domesticity; marital and sexual rights; and race and ethnicity; as they have been built within a patriarchal paradigm that still remains strong throughout Latin America, pointing at how women have challenged them in ways that have contributed to struggles towards gender equality and women's empowerment in different countries of the region.

1 Gender equality, women's empowerment and culture

Concerns around women's rights are not a novelty in the history of international relations; they were included in the United Nations' (UN) founding charter (Williams 1999). But it was not until the 1970's, in response to the rise of women's demands and feminist critique that more encompassing principles regarding these rights were proposed, becoming important issues in development discourse and practice.¹ For the most part, however, much of this discourse and practice has been characteristically underlined by liberal feminist thinking, as the major framework founding most development programmes has been precisely that of liberal neo-classical economics in combination with 'modernisation theory'. As noted by Connelly *et al.* (2000: 55): 'Although the expression *modernisation theory* may no longer be in vogue, the spirit of the analysis, drawing on neoclassical free-market economics, is alive and well. The economic analysis of development that focuses on an unfettered, free global market now dominates economic policy in much of the North and South'.

The same authors further observe that, in development thinking, the notion of development has been historically identified with theories of 'modernisation' and 'Westernisation', and thus understood as a 'linear process whereby backward, tradition-bound peoples would slough off their historic impediments and embrace modern (that is Western) institutions, technologies, and values' (Connelly *et al.* 2000: 55). In consonance with this perspective, development thinking has been traditionally geared towards devising ways for the poor, 'traditional' economies to go through the transition to modernity in a rapid manner, development aid contributing with financial assistance and technical expertise for these economies to take off. Along with this notion, the idea that economic development would eventually trickle down to society at large ensuing a process of modernisation was dominant – thus the traditional focus of development planning on economic issues.

As a rule, this framework of development left women out. It was only in 1970, with the emergence of the women's liberation movement and more precisely, the publication of *Women's Role in Economic Development*, in which Esther Boserup outlines a liberal feminist critique of development, that this situation was contested. Boserup contended that women's productive roles tended to be largely ignored, questioning as well the notion that development benefits would naturally trickle down to women. Her critique was well received by other women working in development agencies and international agencies, particularly in the United States where women's movements were gaining momentum. Indeed, they were able to press for the passage of the Percy Amendment of 1973, which 'required gender-sensitive social impact studies for all development projects, with the aim of helping to integrate women into the national economies of their countries' (Connelly *et al.* 2000: 56). Note that this perspective also gained adepts in agencies and organisations linked to the UN,

¹ The notion of human rights in an international context first appeared in the *Declaration of Universal Human Rights*, approved by the UN General Assembly in 1948.

such that 1975 was declared to be 'International Women's Year', marking the launch of the 'Decade for Women' with a conference in Mexico City, where a 'World Plan of Action for Women' was formulated and approved.

The major objective of this plan was the integration of 'women in development', an approach that has become known as 'WID'. It was based on a liberal feminist perspective (Kabeer 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995), in that it did not question the traditional development approaches at work, seeking mainly to extend equal opportunities in development for women. This was to be achieved by strategies to overcome social and cultural barriers by means of legal reform and by provisions to guarantee equal access to women in education and training. Thus, for the most part, WID-oriented initiatives '...focused on women's education, training, and access to technology which would make them more productive and improve their access to the market. In practice this often meant handicrafts and small-scale income generating projects' (Wilson 2004: 5). More importantly, the WID approach did not take into account the structures of patriarchal dominance that underlined inequalities between women and men, nor those structures of domination on the basis of class, race, ethnicity and other similar social determinants, which result in inequalities among women.

The WID approach did, however, contribute to the expansion of the field of gender and development, making evident the need for improvements on statistical data on women, besides providing a checklist for examining women's status in society (Connelly *et al.* 2000). One of the major resulting documents in that direction, the 'Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women' (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, set an agenda for national action to end discrimination. This agenda proposed the notion of equality between women and men in its definition of discrimination:

... any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a *basis of equality of men and women*, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (UN 1979: 33, my emphasis).

Despite their relevance, CEDAW, and the WID approach within which it was formulated fell short of addressing the real issues at hand, by ignoring the underlying assumptions of the model of development into which they deemed to integrate women (Kabeer 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995). As delineated by Naila Kabeer (1994: 20):

It was not the mainstream model of modernisation that was under attack, but the fact that women had not benefited from it. It was not the market solution per se that had failed women, but planners and employers – and sometimes women themselves – whose irrational prejudices and misplaced assumptions led to discriminatory outcomes. The problem, therefore, was to ensure that the benefits of modernisation reached women.

It is worth noting that, independently of WID efforts, during the Decade for Women (1975-1985) feminist and women's movements emerged and gained strength in the so-called South. Women organised at the grassroots level around a number of issues, but with the empowerment of women as an ultimate goal, even if this was not spelled out precisely in these terms. Thus it was not surprising that the critique of the WID approach came more strongly from feminists in the South, even if built on new developments in feminist theorising in the North. In particular, this critique emphasised the social construction of gender and also the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in giving rise to inequalities among women, thus focusing on structural determinants and, as such, departing fundamentally from liberal feminist thinking. By 1995, when the 4th World Conference for Women took place in Beijing, a new development discourse for women was being formulated, using the terms of 'Gender

and Development' (GAD) and women's empowerment (Sardenberg 2008). Indeed, the Beijing Platform of Action, approved during the 4th World Conference, not only incorporated this new perspective, but also linked the issues of gender equality to women's empowerment,² as follows: 'Women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace' (UN 1995, paragraph 13).

The Beijing Platform of Action also stands as the first major world conference document that fully adopts the term 'gender', formalising the passage from the 'Women in Development' to the 'Gender and Development' approach – or from WID to GAD (Razavi and Miller 1995). The Platform refers specifically to 'gender equality', holding that similarities and differences between women and men should be recognised and valued, and that women and men should enjoy equal status, recognition and consideration, equal conditions 'to realise their full potential and ambitions', equal 'opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from society's resources and development', equal 'freedoms and quality of life', and equal 'outcomes in all aspects of life' (DAC 1998: 8).

Although the introduction of a gender perspective in development has been the focus of criticism from radical feminists to fundamentalists alike (Baden and Goetz 1997; Machado 1995), it has attracted considerable attention and fostered new development policies. Nearly all international development organisations and agencies today claim to address gender issues, recognising the relevance of the gender perspective to development efforts. Besides, '... it is now generally accepted that gender equity generates development. Women are potential wage labourers, producers and consumers of marketable goods. The integration of women in the market economy leads to higher gross national products' (Vargas-Lundius with Ypeij 2007: 17). Thus, it is no wonder 'gender equality and the empowerment of women' were defined as one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Indeed, this had a widespread effect on the development machinery, as bilateral agencies and other organisations were to follow, elaborating on the adoption of these perspectives. By 2005, for example, 'more than 1,800 projects in the World Bank's lending portfolio mentioned empowerment in their project documentation' (Alsop *et al.* 2006: 1).

However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the efforts of development organisations and agencies in fostering these goals, it remains open to debate what factors contribute to the promotion of gender equality, or conversely, what creates obstacles to this process. While women's empowerment is regarded as a fundamental factor, what is understood by 'empowerment', and thus how it can best be promoted, has not yet achieved consensus (Batliwala 1994; Oxaal and Baden 1997; Mosedale 2005). As noted by Srilatha Batliwala (1994: 1), empowerment '...is one of the most loosely-used terms in the development lexicon, meaning different things to different people – or, more dangerously, all things to all people'.

Nonetheless, as I have argued elsewhere (Sardenberg 2006), in spite of myriad definitions, it is possible to distinguish two basic approaches in conceptualising women's empowerment. The first, which I have identified as the 'liberal empowerment' approach, regards women's empowerment primarily as an instrument for development priorities. Consistent with neo-liberal ideals, the focus in this approach is on individual growth, but with an atomistic perspective, that is, on the notion of the rational action of social actors based on individual interests (Romano 2002). In this perspective, therefore, empowerment is regarded as a process 'that individuals engage in when they obtain both objective and subjective resources

² The first world conference on women was held in 1975 in Mexico City, the second in 1980 in Copenhagen, the third in 1985 in Nairobi, and the fourth in 1995 in Beijing, followed by the Beijing Plus 5 (2000 in New York) and Beijing Plus 10 (2005 in New York).

of power which allow them to use power to achieve outcomes in the actor's self-interest' (Ferguson 2004: 2). In contrast, in the other approach – which I shall here term 'liberating empowerment' – power relations are the central issue. In addition, women's empowerment is regarded both on 'intrinsic grounds' as the process by which women conquer autonomy, self-determination, as well as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy. This is simultaneously instrumental for social transformation as well as an end in and of itself, as it entails women's liberation from the chains of gender oppression. Such an approach is consistent with a focus on women's organising and on collective action, without disregarding the importance of the empowerment of women on an individual level.

Feminists tend to view empowerment from this 'liberating' approach, affirming that it involves '...change in the distribution of power, *both* at the level of interpersonal relations as well as in the institutions of society' (Stromquist 2002: 28, my emphasis). In this regard, Kate Young's (1993) concept of 'transformatory potential' brings an important element to this notion of empowerment, linking the processes of collective action and individual agency. According to Young, it is crucial to transform women's position in a manner that the advance is sustained. This includes women themselves feeling that 'they have been the agents of the transformation', and understanding that 'each step taken in the direction of gaining greater control over their lives, will through up other needs, other contradictions to be resolved in turn' (1993: 157). These are important elements to consider, given that, in Kate Young's view:

The assumption behind transformatory potential is that the process of women working together and solving problems on a trial and error basis, of learning by doing and also of learning to identify allies and forging alliances when needed, will lead to empowerment, both collective and individual. (Young 1993: 157)

I shall return to this point when discussing women's activism in Latin America. I will argue that 'transformatory thinking' by different women's groups has involved contesting and negotiating 'meaning'. Thus it involves re-thinking, confronting, and transforming culture as well. This is precisely what Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998: 7) have termed as 'cultural politics', i.e. '...the process enacted when sets of actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other ...when movements deploy alternative conceptions of women, nature, race, economy, democracy, or citizenship that unsettle dominant cultural meaning, they enact a cultural politics'.

Precisely because of such re-conceptualisation potential, development efforts in this direction have been the focus of much criticism; working towards gender equality and women's empowerment always involves tampering with 'domestic culture'. Indeed, the Indian feminist activist and development practitioner Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay (1995: 13) operating in her own society and culture, and thus as an insider, has been constantly accused of working against her culture, violating Indian traditions, her work receiving the 'worst criticism of all in the Indian context, that it was "Westernised"'.³ It is worth quoting her reply to these critics in greater length:

I am often asked, usually by expatriate development workers, whether by intervening on women's behalf we are upsetting the gender roles and relations characteristic of the culture. In other words, are we fearful of imposing our own culture on the culture in which we are working, by initiating projects which impact on gender relations? Are we not leaving women more vulnerable than before, by asking them to step out of their culturally ascribed roles and relations?

³ But working in a 'Western' environment does not necessarily grant acceptance of work efforts towards gender equality. I myself have been accused of trying to 'destroy the unity of the family' while working with rural women in the hinterlands of Bahia, Brazil (cf. Sardenberg *et al.* 1998; Sardenberg 2000).

The assumptions behind these questions need a close examination. Firstly, it is assumed that the culture of communities we work in as development practitioners are a seamless whole, without any cracks; secondly, that unequal gender relations characterise these cultures, and that there are no challenges to inequality from within the cultures. In fact, it is assumed that to be a woman in such cultures is to be passive, subservient, and servile. The passive and subservient woman, who is also a victim, thus becomes the stereotype of these cultures.

The fear that we may be imposing our own cultural values by insisting on promoting gender equity in our development work is a real one. However, it is real not because we have concerns about cultural imperialism, but because we allow our own culture-based assumptions about women to colour the way we receive alternative visions of gender equality. We assume that women in developing countries are passive and docile, and that our own view of gender roles, norms, and practices is true for everyone. We also fail to recognise the everyday forms of resistance put up by subordinated groups, because these forms of resistance may not correspond to our experience. (Mukhopadhyay 1995: 15)

It cannot be denied that insofar as gender and its different dimensions – including gender hierarchies and thus the disempowerment of women – are social and cultural constructions, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women would in fact stand against culture, against the family. However, it may be asked: ‘Whose culture are people referring to? Who has defined these elements as the crucial elements to be protected?’ (DAC 1998: 15). Thus it becomes fundamental to clarify what one means by culture, as it is fast becoming a ‘buzz’ word in the development literature.

2 Debating culture

Over the last few decades, as much as a result of the post-modern critique and the new emphasis on ‘meaning’, as of the rise of the ‘politics of identity’ in an increasingly globalised world, issues regarding culture have been gaining greater attention in the social sciences and humanities, and more recently, in development discourse as well. For an anthropologist, however, this ‘cultural turn’ is a mixed blessing. If, on the one hand, ‘culture sensitive’ approaches in development are certainly long overdue and most welcome, on the other, the notions of culture employed, though identified as ‘anthropological’ have been the object of considerable critique in anthropological thinking.

There has always been considerable diversity in anthropological conceptualisations of culture. In a work published in the 1950s, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) noted that there were at least 164 different definitions of culture then in use in anthropology. But even if the concept has in time shrunk from being equated to civilization and ‘everything men learn as a member of society’ (Tylor 1871), to Geertz’s (1973) ‘webs of meaning man himself has spun’, until recently, anthropological understandings of culture included some common elements of what Wright (1998: 9) has termed the ‘old idea of culture’.

In this ‘old idea’, the world was seen as made up of cultures, each regarded as the worldview and ethos of a particular group and constituting a ‘bounded entity’ with defining characteristics (or traits). This meant that, in principle, each culture could be isolated, analysed, and compared, particularly as there was a tendency to emphasise ‘order, integration and stability by defining culture as coherent, integrated and self-reproducing’ (Anttonen 2003: 49). This was particularly so given the tendency to downplay internal conflict’ contradiction and external realities, while emphasising shared meanings. According to Anttonen, these earlier perspectives were ‘essentialist’, in that they maintained that

'culture should have a certain, eternal core of homogeneity, genuinity, originality and truth, in other words eternal "cultural essence"'. These perspectives also reified culture, 'supposing that cultural or ethnic groups have certain enduring, everlasting features' (Anttonen 2003: 49).

Yet, to be fair, much of this 'old' thinking needs to be put in a historical context as it was in tune with the traditional focus of anthropology on 'small-scale societies', which became obsolete as anthropologists moved their gaze to power differentials and the complexities of the globalised world. This has in time constituted a shift of paradigm - 'from understanding cultures as holistic, coherent and homogenous to accounting for multiplicity, fragmentation and internal contradictions' (Markowitz 2004: 328). As Ortner (2005: 35) maintains, the 'old' culture concept was '...too undifferentiated, too homogeneous: given various forms of social difference and social inequality, how could everyone in a given society share the same view of the world, and the same orientation towards it?'

The forceful critique of previous conceptions of culture by Talal Asad (1979), proposed that what anthropologists had often endorsed as 'authentic culture' were but 'historically specific dominant ideologies', or discourses produced by some groups within a given society that were made 'authoritative' by the undermining of opposing discourses. He thus proposed to do away with the concept of culture, arguing that anthropologists should instead analyse the production of authoritative discourses. But anthropologists of various theoretical persuasions seem to have found new ways of thinking about culture. Indeed, as Bruce Knauft (2006: 412) notes, more recently, the concept of culture has been 'softened' and more commonly 'expressed as an adjective'. As he puts it:

Questions that so exercised an earlier generation of anthropologists – what was 'a culture', how it could be defined, how coherent or disjunctive it was, how one culture intersected another – seem now anachronistic. But American anthropologists are still quite comfortable with culture as a modifier that denotes the symbolic or subjective dimension of life: 'cultural this', 'cultural that', 'cultural anthropology'. To say that something is 'cultural' still carries theoretical meaning for many, but this meaning is diffuse and not definitive; it depends on the thing that is modified. In the process, 'culture' has become loosely evocative and theoretically fuzzy even as it is deeply sedimented in anthropological sensibility. (Knauft 2006: 412)

Just as anthropologists began talking about culture with considerable ambiguity, it emerged as an important ideological tool for the construction of identity and political mobilisation, particularly with the growth of globalisation and the collapse of colonial empires. In this context, culture has become an asset and a right, a banner 'for claiming collective rights to self-determination' (Cunha 2005: 2), a major instrument in the politics of identity: 'People everywhere, as they contend with global flows, express desires for dignity and claim human rights, are therefore invoking, manipulating and solidifying their culture to accord with contemporary discursive demands' (Markowitz 2004: 329).

Undoubtedly, the emergence of culture as the politics of identity throughout the world has fostered both the growth of cultural studies as well as the emergence of the expression of culture in development discourse. In the introduction to UNESCO's *Our Creative Diversity*,⁴

⁴ In recognition of the relationship between culture and development and thus of the need for new policies for cultural development, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), jointly with the UN, established the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD). Its major task was to prepare a world report on contemporary cultural issues, centering, in particular, on how culture and development impact on each other and how cultural development can influence individual and collective well-being. *Our Creative Diversity* (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997), the product of this effort, was presented to the UNESCO General Conference and the UN General Assembly in 1995. Of special note is the chapter on 'Gender and Culture' (chapter 5), where the complexities (and ambiguities) of the debate on gender, development and culture were acknowledged as follows: 'Globalisation has proved to be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, women are without doubt increasingly recognised as major players in development. On

for example, the commission responsible asserted that the Report 'is about providing present and future generations of humanity with the tools to meet this challenge, to broaden their knowledge, to discover the world in its imposing diversity, and to allow all individuals to lead a life that is decent, dignified and wise, *without losing their identity and sense of community, and without betraying their heritage*' (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 8, my emphasis).

Note that in this document, two understandings of culture are put forth. First, it is argued that culture is not simply one domain of life but is 'constructive, constitutive and creative' of all the others, and second, that in the world there are discrete cultures or peoples. It is further argued that development efforts have often failed for not recognising that culture permeates all aspects of life when dealing with cultures. Moreover, it maintains that this failed development has given rise to the emergence of violent identity movements, which should not be condoned:

...the need for people to live and work together peacefully should result in respect for all cultures, or at least for those cultures that value tolerance and respect for others. There are some cultures that may not be worthy of respect because they themselves have been shown to be intolerant, exclusive, exploitative, cruel and repressive. ...such repulsive practices ...should be condemned, not tolerated. (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 54)

Thus, as Wright (1998: 11) notes, 'UNESCO's vision of a code of global ethics to order a plural world rests on a contradiction between respecting all cultural values, and making value judgments about acceptable and unacceptable diversity'. Yet, it must be admitted that UNESCO's report does make tacit acknowledgement that cultures are not necessarily homogenous entities.

This is more in keeping with contemporary notions of culture, as a 'contested process of meaning-making' (Wright 1998), although it is now questioned if, in fact, we can still speak of 'some cultures this, some cultures that', given that within a given group cultural values and attitudes can vary considerably, making it difficult to think of a common culture. Moreover, culture is now seen as much more dynamic than previously thought, it is: '...everywhere, under continuous creation – fluid, interconnected, diffusing, interpenetrating, homogenising, diverging, hegemonising, resisting, reformulating, creolising, open rather than closed, partial rather than total, crossing its own boundaries, persisting where we don't expect it to, and changing where we do' (Sanjek 1991: 622).

I subscribe to this contemporary understanding of culture – of constant fluidity and contested meanings. While I tend to side with Geertz (2000), Sahlins (1999), Ortner (1999) and others, in defence of the preservation of culture as a key concept in anthropology, I also do share Ortner's (2005: 35) perspectives when she argues that: 'Looked at on the side of power, one can recognise a cultural formation as a relatively coherent body of symbols and meaning, ethos and worldviews, and at the same time understand those meanings as ideological, and/or as part of the forces and processes of domination'. As such, we can speak in terms of 'dominant culture', as proposed by Raymond Williams (1977) – a particularly important tool in the analysis of cultural formations in class society, as well as those characterised by other hierarchical social determinants such as gender, race, ethnicity and caste. Indeed it is fair to say that in most contemporary societies, patriarchal ideology still remains as a major constitutive element of the dominant culture: '...we are all caught in the web of the culture and values of patriarchal society. Our identity as women and men has been constituted

the other, notions of cultural specificity have come to the fore in novel ways related to gender relations and the appropriate conduct of women, often singled out as bearers and signifiers of their culture. Both culture and gender have been politicised in new ways, affecting women's rights as well as our understanding of the place of culture in development. We must avoid the dual pitfalls of both Western bias and cultural relativism' (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 9).

within such society' (Cunnison 1992: 87). And this is certainly not a minor matter. To the contrary, as Held rightly points out:

The power to shape consciousness is an overwhelming one, ruling out alternative conceptions and perceptions, crushing aspirations unacceptable to it, and leaving us devoid of the words with which to express even our scepticism, and certainly our anguish and our oppositions. What could be more total than the power to control the very terms with which we think, the language through which we try to grasp reality, the images with which we see or block out features of our surroundings and of ourselves and the awareness we need to try to guide the trajectories of our lives? The culture of a society has such a power. (Held 1993: 91)

Fortunately the emergence of new meanings and ideas that challenge the dominant ones is always a possibility, as Raymond Williams (1977) rightly asserted. In this regard it is important to consider as well William Roseberry's (1989) observations, bringing a Marxian perspective, inspired by Raymond Williams, to the debate. Roseberry argues that meanings produced by the dominant culture do not always connect to the experience of ordinary people. In fact, some meanings 'may directly conflict with lived experience'. It is precisely these disjunctions that, 'in less ordinary circumstances', may give rise to the 'production of new and alternative meanings, new forms of discourse, new selections from tradition or conflicts and struggles over the meaning of particular elements within tradition' (Roseberry 1989: 47).

Here then we come to the idea of the cultural politics of social movements proposed by Alvarez *et al.* (1998), referred to in the previous section. For Escobar (1992: 69) social movements must be seen 'equally and inseparably as struggles over meanings as well as material conditions', thus the need to always take into account the 'cultural stakes of collective action' (1992: 72). Alvarez *et al.* (1998: 7) further note that in looking at culture we must consider its political aspect for, 'meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power'. Thus we need to consider 'the shaping of social meanings in specific historical situations and in the context of relations of power' (Roseberry 1989: 53). We need an understanding of culture 'as historical product and historical force, shaped and shaping, socially constituted and socially constitutive' (Roseberry 1989: 53).

In the following section, therefore, I will turn to a discussion of how feminist and women's activism in Latin America have waged a war against meaning just as they have against institutions. This of course is not unwarranted if we consider that, 'for the revolutionary feminist, transformations of society that are occurring and will continue, culture is relatively more important than for other revolutions' (Held 1993: 91).

3 Contesting culture: feminist and women's activism in Latin America

In a much celebrated article on 'Feminists in Latin America', Sternbach *et al.* (1992: 208) cautioned that: 'It is, of course, difficult if not dangerous, to generalise across countries in a region as diverse as Latin America when discussing any sociopolitical phenomenon'. We could add that it is certainly much more dangerous to do so in relation to culture, especially in light of the discussion in the previous section. Indeed, there are more than twenty countries

in what is considered 'Latin America',⁵ and at least as many languages spoken in the region; besides, as Lavrin (1998: 520) observes, 'continental Latin America comprises a variety of ethnicities and races, social classes, economic problems, and cultural traditions...'

Despite such ample diversity, however, countries in the region do 'share the tragedy of Spanish, Portuguese or French conquest and colonisation succeeded by the new imperialism of economic globalisation, often advanced by dictatorship' (Code 2003: 289). They also share the tragedy of deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies, all equally oppressive of women; it is no wonder the concept of 'machismo', the 'signifier of male-dominated gender relations', originated in this part of the world (Lavrin 1998: 522). Indeed, Verena Stolke (2006: 18, my translation) has argued that the Iberian model of colonisation in the Americas was the 'result of a dynamic interaction between the metropolitan administrative principles and spiritual-religious and social values regarding honour and social hierarchy, sustained by gender ideals relative to marriage and sexual morality'. She further observes that the moral code of the Catholic Church openly associated 'virginity and female chastity, family honour and social status with the religious doctrine of *limpieza de sangre* [blood cleaning]', in a doctrine that structured, 'politically, morally, and symbolic the social and hierarchical identities and their modes of reproduction'. This meant that patriarchal gender domination was deeply ingrained in the very constitution of Latin American societies.

Throughout the twentieth century, a chain of successive dictatorships also marked the history of many countries in the region, including Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, known as the strongholds of the 'Southern Cone'. However, notwithstanding this 'history of oppression' – or perhaps, precisely because of it - Latin America as a whole has a long history of 'resistance and dissent' and an equally 'vibrant history of political, revolutionary and social movements' (Code 2003: 289). Furthermore, women's activism and organising has been a very important and enduring part of this history. Within the last three decades, in particular, women's movements have gained greater visibility. Moreover, 'Latin American feminist movements or feminisms have grown steadily and undergone profound transformations, emerging today at the very centre of international feminist debates' (Sternbach *et al.* 1992: 208).

Women's activism in Latin America has found expression throughout the history of the different countries, in different arena of struggle. In this paper, however, I am particularly interested in those that emerged in the last three decades, and only in women's movements centred on gender-based interests (Molyneux 1985; Molyneux 1998). More specifically, I want to look at the 'cultural politics' of contemporary women's movements, and how their 'transformatory potential' has been enacted in struggles for meaning, pursuing greater gender equality and the empowerment of women. In what follows, therefore, I will focus on some of the major highlights of the campaigns carried out by *las madres de Plaza de Mayo* (mothers of May Square) in Argentina; the women of AMPLA (the Neighbourhood Association of Plataforma Residents), in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil; feminists throughout the continent in confronting and criminalising domestic violence against women; prostitutes in Costa Rica fighting institutional violence; Black Women in Brazil fighting racism and sexism; and indigenous women's movements in the region seeking *paridad* ('parity') instead of 'gender equality'.

In singling out these specific expressions of women's activism, I take into account Maxine Molyneux's (1998: 231-2) considerations on 'female collective action' and 'women's interests', and, more specifically, on women's 'gender interests', i.e., 'those arising from the social relations and positioning of the sexes and therefore pertained, but in specific ways, to both men and women'. Molyneux has further categorised women's interests as 'practical' and 'strategic', the former 'based on the satisfaction of needs arising from women's placement

⁵ They are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Cuba, Haiti, Honduras, México, Panamá, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Trinidad, Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the smaller, Spanish-speaking islands.

within the sexual division of labour', and the latter 'involving claims to transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and to secure a more lasting re-positioning of women within the gender order and within society at large' (1998: 232). This does not mean that struggles for the satisfaction of 'practical needs' cannot lead to 'political transformation' (1998: 235). On the contrary, as shall be seen, the first two case studies discussed below, namely, those of the *madres de Plaza de Mayo* and of women's neighbourhood activism in Bahia, Brazil, deal precisely with the 'transformative' potential of such movements.

3.1 *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*: changing the meaning of motherhood

One of the major strongholds of gender ideology in Western societies has rested on the notion of motherhood, which itself is ingrained, in turn, in the traditional model of the family and women's domesticity (Bassin *et al.* 1994; Hays 1996). In Latin America, in particular, as Cynthia Bejarano reminds us, 'mothers' responsibilities and assigned roles are strictly placed within the confines of the home and the workplace', and they are historically 'forbidden by gendered norms and standards of citizenship to use their status as mothers for anything other than the proper rearing of their children' (Bejarano 2002: 126). However, to fight for their children, mothers all over Latin America have redefined their roles, acting together to transform the notion of passive motherhood into 'motherist activism'.

One of the better known mothers' movements in Latin America is Argentina's *Madres de La Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Mayo Square) who claim thirty years of activism.⁶ The group was formed back in 1977 by mothers (as well as wives, daughters and other women relatives) of the *desaparecidos* - those who were taken by the Argentinean police without warrants and disappeared during the years of the military dictatorship (1976-1983). This was part of the military *junta's* 'Process of National Reorganisation', in which all political institutions were suspended and 'anti-subversive operations' were carried out in order to capture, interrogate, torture, and kill, members of supposedly leftist organisations as well as their family, friends, and sympathisers. Similar procedures were enacted by the military *juntas* in Brazil and Chile as well. In Argentina alone, these actions resulted in the disappearance of over 30,000 people, and the kidnapping of close to 500 young children and babies of mothers who were abducted, some still pregnant and kept alive until the birth of the babies.

Already in 1977, mothers and grandmothers and other female relatives of the *desaparecidos* began to organise to demand justice for their children, marching around Plaza de Mayo, which houses the seat of government in Buenos Aires, wearing white scarves symbolising their children's nappies and their condition as mothers (Guzman-Bouvard 1994). According to Lavrin (1998: 525), this gained them greater respect: 'The denunciation of torture and murder by plain women theretofore apolitical had a deep ethical content and gained respect precisely because the archetype of selfless motherhood was above political commitments and had deep cultural roots'.

Prior to the disappearance of their children, these women had been traditional housewives and mothers, tending to the well-being of their families from the safety of their homes, the private sphere. In crossing the threshold of their homes to stage their protest and seek justice, the mothers politicised the private, revolutionising motherhood as well as stretching maternal duties and concerns from the private into the public – even international – arenas (Guzman-Bouvard 1994). To them, to be a mother became more than caring for and educating their children: it also meant defending their rights, particularly as they were left voiceless by the *junta*. They had to carry on their children's work and preserve their memory

⁶ There are several books and articles written on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. See, for example: Arditti (1999); Guzman-Bouvard (1994); Mellibovsky (1997); Navarro (1989).

in their absence (Guzman-Bouvard 1994). This involved putting themselves often at risk, indeed, one of the mothers of the *desaparecidos*, Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti, the main instigator of the movement, was arrested and also 'disappeared' (Mellibovsky 1997).

The *madres* first met while searching for their missing children. This frequently led them to the Ministry of Interior, where they waited for hours comparing stories of abduction and information of the possible whereabouts of the disappeared. In order to formulate joint strategies to find them, the *madres* began to arrange meetings in churches and in their homes, arriving usually one by one to avoid the attention and control of the police and prohibitions against public meetings. But, by the end of April 1977, the *madres* believed it was time to come out publicly and draw greater attention to their cause. They decided to hold a protest, but to avoid being charged with holding an illegal demonstration the women began to march, walking slowly around the centre of the square. Although this first protest was attended by only 14 women, they began to invite other *madres* to join them, and planned a weekly march, on Thursday afternoons, when the plaza was usually more crowded so as to attract greater attention. Eventually, hundreds of women were to become part of the movement. Fearing their popularity, the Argentinean *junta* began to refer to them as *las Locas de Plaza de Mayo*, the 'crazy ones' of Plaza de Mayo, ridiculing the fact that they 'went around in circles'. To this Hebe Bonafini, one of the leaders has retorted: 'We do not go round in circles, we march' (cited in Dujovne Ortiz 1995).

Yet, to be a part of this movement the women had to face constant threats and actual violence, and were forced to resort to different tactics to protect themselves, such as always changing the dates of the marches, or starting their protest in the midst of religious processions to intermingle with the participants and tell them about their cause. But they also resorted to more bold protests such as sit-ins at police stations when one of the members of their group was arrested. As reported by Guzman-Bouvard (1994): 'When the police arrested one of their members during a march, 60 mothers stampeded into the police station, shouting, "If you take one, you have to take us all"'.

Even after the fall of the *junta*, the women continued to confront the authorities in their quest for justice and their right to self-definition. When the authorities asserted that there were only 11,000 *desaparecidos*, one of the *madres* replied:

We know that there were thirty thousand of them and we know all their names... Every mother knows who arrested her child. What we want is a list of the murderers and executioners and life imprisonment for those who are still free. The government is hiding the truth from us. We don't really want to know whether they died under torture or were drowned with a stone tied to their feet. Our children now live within us. It is they who have brought us into the world; they have become our fathers and mothers. If we want to know what happened to our children, it is only to punish their killers (cited in Dujovne Ortiz 1995).

As implied in this testimony, participation in this movement also had a profound effect on the women in question: it was an 'empowering' experience to them. Here is what some of the *madres* had to say, as published on the Women in World History (WWH) website (no date):

One of the things that I simply will not do now is shut up. The women of my generation in Latin America have been taught that the man is always in charge and the woman is silent even in the face of injustice... Now I know that we have to speak out about the injustices publicly. If not, we are accomplices. I am going to denounce them publicly without fear. This is what I learned. (María del Rosario de Cerruti)

30 years of struggle! Of course we are older now, we started out when we were younger. When they took our children away, it was painful, we suffered. But we had a

strength that I can't put into words. It was also a difficult lesson, because we mothers had to learn to defend our children, (Juana Pargament, 92 years old)

We realise that to demand the fulfilment of human rights is a revolutionary act, that to question the government about bringing our children back alive was a revolutionary act. We are fighting for liberation, to live in freedom, and that is a revolutionary act... To transform a system is always revolutionary. (*Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*)

It is worth noting that in protesting and fighting for their children, the *madres* also situated their protest in regards to the oppression of Latin American women as mothers as a whole. Whereas, traditionally, motherhood in Latin America has been confined to the private sphere and voiceless, the *madres* proposed instead a public motherhood expressing voice even when they silently walked around the square. As observed by Gilda Rodriguez (WWH no date), in redefining motherhood as public, the *madres* carved a third position for public women, standing between prostitutes and madwomen: 'Their identity was based on their motherhood, but they could no longer restrict it to the private, lacking children for whom to stay home. The *Madres* were in fact called *locas* (madwomen) by many, who considered that their public grieving was inappropriate. But despite this, no one could deny them their rightful status as mothers'. To this, Taylor (WWH no date) adds, noting that the 'image of the Mater Dolorosa gave them legitimacy and visibility in a culture known for putting mothers on a pedestal'. They made the 'personal political by both crying for their lost children in public and by converting a private/personal role (being *madres*) into a public/political weapon (being *The Madres*)'.

Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo created a role model not only for Latin America (in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, for instance), but also for women in other regions of the world. Referring to this process in Mexico and El Salvador, modelled after the Plaza de Mayo mothers, Cynthia Bejarano (2002: 10) stressed that: 'The *madres* (mothers) in each country acted collectively to transfer empowerment from the private sphere of citizenship reserved for mothers and housewives to the public sphere of motherist activism'. Following this notion of 'motherist activism', in 1996, the *madres de la Plaza de Mayo* organised an 'International Gathering of Struggling Mothers'. Mothers from Israel and Palestine; Serbia and Croatia; Brazilian mothers of the disappeared; mothers from Kiev who opposed the conscription of their sons; and mothers whose children suffered from cancer because of the accident at Chernobyl participated at this gathering, to name just a few. They were creating a united nations of beleaguered women. They had always had an international presence, thanks to their support groups in western Europe, and with these conferences they reached out to women around the world (Guzman Bouvard 2002).⁷

In February 2006, *las madres de la Plaza de Mayo* announced that 'after 25 years of demanding justice for their sons and daughters who disappeared during Argentina's dictatorship (1976-83)' (Gaudin 2006), they were suspending their annual twenty-four hour march in front of the presidential palace. But of course, they did not interrupt their quest for justice.

These 'mothers' movements have had significant influence and have been instrumental in empowering the women participating in them, '...the issue of motherhood as a political tool remains an issue of whether the value ascribed to motherhood is an asset transferable from the socialisation to the politicisation of genders' (Lavrin 1998: 525). However, it must be stressed that, after *las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, the meaning of 'motherhood', at least in

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Mother's movements – or 'movements of women to combat violence and human rights abuses against their families' (Lind and Farnelo 1996: 14) – are by now fairly common in Latin America. During the 1970s and 1980s, they were usually targeted against the dictatorial regimes and involved mostly middle-class women; more recently, they have involved primarily women from poor neighbourhoods and have centred on problems arising out of urban violence and poverty.

Latin America, has never again fitted into its previous narrow meaning of the abnegated mother limited to the so-called domestic space. *Las madres* have changed that, expanding the 'domestic' into the 'political' sphere as well (Taylor 1997).

A similar extension of the meaning of motherhood has been accomplished by women in Argentina but, this time, for economic reasons. In particular, expanding motherhood to mean 'being also responsible for livelihood of the family' during the 2001-2003 critical economic crisis in Argentina. Indeed, though not always publicised in the press, during this critical period Argentinean housewives and mothers joined the *piqueteros* (picketers) to protest in the name of their families. 'Women blocked roads to demand jobs and state subsidies, joined neighbourhood assemblies, occupied factories, and banged on pots and pans as part of widespread street protests' (Borland and Sutton 2007: 701). Through their involvement in these movements, which in the more critical periods happened on a daily basis, women transformed themselves and their roles in society:

Activism became a new quotidian that shaped the lives of women involved in movements and transformed women's experiences and perspectives about politics, gender relations, and themselves more generally. The crisis signifies a moment of both rupture and continuity, as many women drew on previous social frameworks (e.g., motherhood, activist experiences) while creating new ones, including new visions of women's roles in society. (Borland and Sutton 2007: 702)

Economic constraints also contributed to women's redefinitions of the role of motherhood in Nicaragua. Julie Cupples (2001) has observed that legislative changes regarding the family in Nicaragua; economic constraints; and women's activism have opened spaces for competing discourses about motherhood. She observes that during the period of the Somoza dictatorship, the idea of motherhood was politicised, as it was in other Latin American countries, however in Nicaragua it was 'expanded to include the notion of combative motherhood', as more than 30 per cent of the combatants in the struggles against that regime were women (Cupples 2001: 24). Cupples further notes that the expansion of the notion of motherhood has continued since then. In particular, the process of structural adjustment imposed severe difficulties on low-income families, forcing more and more women, particularly mothers, to go to work or secure other means of income generation outside of their homes. However, as Cupples (2001: 25) observes, 'low-income women in Nicaragua are able to defend their rights to work, study or be politically active in a way which is perceived to enhance their mothering rather than coming into conflict with the rights of children'.

The examples above outline how through specific struggles and everyday practices, Latin American women have redefined the notion of motherhood, re-signifying it by expanding the roles of mothers from the domestic/private into the public/political arenas. In the next section we will see that, by entering these new arenas defending their practical gender-based interests, Latin American women have also re-defined the public/political as well.

3.2 Women's neighbourly activism in Bahia, Brazil

Studies on women's activism in Latin America reveal that women have mobilised and acted on a number of practical gender-based interests. In the late 1980s, a period of economic crisis as well as of democratic transition in many countries in the region, women collectively organised in neighbourhood-based associations for community development. In most large cities in the region, in fact, it became increasingly common to witness groups of people in various neighbourhoods staging public demonstrations demanding solutions to problems affecting their places of residence. Of course, the specific demands and the actions taken to demand them varied locally. In nearly all instances, however, they involved residents of poor

neighbourhoods, many of who emerged precisely as a result of collective action, through the collective 'invasion' of available land (Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Eckstein 1989; Jelin 1990). In Brazil, women have been in the forefront of these movements, thus extending the notion of the domestic from the privacy of their homes to the public spaces of their neighbourhoods and communities. In this section, I look into women's participation in such movements in Salvador, Bahia, where I have been carrying out field research since the late 1980s (Sardenberg 1997).

While contemporary community-based social movements in Latin America have been the object of heated debates, there is little dispute as to the structural factors underlying the widespread occurrence of neighbourhood movements. Scholars and activists alike agree that they are underscored by the deeply-set exclusion mechanisms that have characterised the process of economic development in the region, giving rise to the 'enormous growth of the poor neighbourhoods (*barriadas, favelas, colonias, callampas, poblaciones...* according to the country), both in the empty spaces of the large cities as well as in their peripheries' (Evers *et al.* 1982: 117, my emphasis and translation).

Neighbourhood-based movements in Brazil and the formation of local residents' associations are not necessarily recent developments. They date back at least to the 1940s. The social movements that characterised the post-war years involved residents of poor areas who organised around neighbourhood needs and presented their demands to municipal authorities. However, many of these associations came under the patronage and control of local politicians, not unlike other populist demands (Kowarick and Bonduki 1988).

With the coup of 1964 and the subsequent installation of the military dictatorship, populist practices suffered a severe blow and, more importantly, neighbourhood movements, and most other expressions of social unrest and popular demand, were severely repressed. Under the military, the economy experienced a much publicised boom - the so-called Brazilian miracle. It is no longer a secret, however, that sustaining it involved a drastic reduction in workers' wages, as well as repressive measures that cut off their bargaining power, and the formal channels for exercising it. It was not until the late 1970s, when the miracle came to an end and the regime began to lose its legitimacy even among some of its most staunch supporters, that popular mobilisation was to rise again.

Since then, neighbourhood movements not only have multiplied but also expanded considerably through coalitions that operate locally as well as on the national level. Furthermore, unlike the past, contemporary neighbourhood movements wage a battle for essential services, as well as the ideological struggle for autonomy. In the process they shun the paternalistic, authoritarian, and patronage practices that had traditionally characterised relations between popular organisations, political parties and the state. Without a doubt, this results from what is probably the most outstanding feature of these movements today: the overwhelming presence of women in their ranks. Indeed, women not only make up the great majority of participants but are also in positions of leadership in the numerous residents' associations and coalitions that have sprung up in this process (Corcoran-Nantes 1990; Garcia 2006).

This has been particularly true in the case of neighbourhood movements in Salvador, capital city of the state of Bahia in the Brazilian northeast. In many instances, women's involvement in these movements has fostered female empowerment and the emergence of a feminist consciousness. Indeed, my own involvement with a group of women active in Plataforma, a traditional working-class neighbourhood in the poor suburbs (*subúrbio*) of Salvador, has given me the opportunity to observe how their activism grew from being based on practical gender needs to conscious strategic gender interests, a process which involved not only their crossing the boundaries from the private to the public sphere, but also a redefinition of the political.

Originally, these women became involved in these struggles due to economic need and as homemakers and mothers entrusted with the welfare of their families. Far from representing a peculiar or isolated phenomenon, the emergence of a women's movement in Plataforma has unfolded as one part of their activism for access to infrastructural services for their neighbourhoods. Like other popular women's movements in contemporary Latin America, they began during the period of the military regime, in the mid-1970s, through *Clubes de Mães* ('mothers' clubs). Early on these movements had the support, assistance and sometimes 'interference' of organisations linked to the so-called 'revolutionary left', as well as of the more progressive sectors of the Catholic Church.

In Bahia, these organisations and the Church had long joined efforts in what was then known as *trabalho conjunto* (combined work). In line with the prevailing notions of the 'historical mission' of the industrial working class, the focus of interest centred primarily on organising industrial workers. Thus, while the attentions of the left centred on the workers, the Church through its social action programme (*ação social*) organised the women in *Clubes de Mães* ('mothers' clubs) throughout the *subúrbio*. As the name clearly indicates, these informal groups were originally geared to mothers and homemakers who met weekly to learn different skills, education regarding health and hygiene and the like and, in particular, to socialise (Sader 1988). In Plataforma, they also became a springboard for the mobilisation of women for community action. For example, the assistance of the local parish and other Church agencies' social action programme, enabled women from the *Clubes de Mães* to become involved in the development of a community school, catering to preschoolers and run on a cooperative basis.

This experiment in closer parental involvement in school affairs spurred a group of mothers, who had older children attending a local public school, into denouncing its deplorable conditions. The building was in such a state of disrepair that the teachers, fearing that one of the walls might fall down, were holding classes on the patio. Concerned for the safety of their children, these mothers began to mobilise others to fight for the necessary repairs at the school. This eventually led to the creation of the *Associação de Mulheres de Plataforma* (AMP - Plataforma Women's Association). As some of the women recall:

We got together because we felt the need, because we saw our children with awful conditions for studying, the school falling apart and the children on the patio, wasting the school year. We started to pass around petitions to take to the Board of Education. (Member of AMPLA's Board of Directors, cited in CEAS 1981: 75, my translation)

Encouraged by the success of solving the problem of the school - the building was promptly repaired - the women decided they could work towards finding solutions for many of the other problems affecting their neighbourhood:

We mobilised other mothers and teachers and went to the *Secretaria* [Board of Education] to ask for a solution. We got it and thus discovered a way [to channel] other struggles. (Member of AMPLA's Board of Directors)

Indeed, the women successfully organised to fight for the construction of a community day care centre and for a health centre in the neighbourhood. When questioned why women instead of men took the initiative to organise and fight for improving living conditions in the neighbourhood, members of the former AMP had this to say:

Women are more tuned in to the problems of the neighbourhood. It is because we live these problems more closely. Most men leave early for work and only come back at night. They don't see what is happening and they don't have too much time to do all the work that is necessary like pass petitions around, go to the Bureau and all these

things. Women, that is not all of the women because those that work away from home also don't have the time, but most of the women are usually around most of the day and see what goes on. (Member of AMPLA's Board of Directors)

I think that women are more tuned to their communities than men. It is not that men don't see the problems, there is no way you can live here and not see all the problems we face. They see the needs but they don't have the initiative to do something about it and many don't have the time, I guess. There are men working with us but when you look around and see who is really doing the work, you see women. It is probably because the problems affect the women more than men. Look, if a street is not paved when it rains it is a disaster. But guess who has to clean up afterwards; it is always the women. (member of AMPLA's Board of Directors)

Despite these opinions, shortly after AMP had been created, the women decided to change its name to *Associação de Moradores de Plataforma* (AMPLA - Residents' Association of Plataforma) in order to mobilise the men. In explaining this move the women claimed that the problems faced by the residents were too numerous and diverse; therefore, it became necessary to widen their resources. But they also admitted that they felt insecure in dealing with and confronting public organisations and authorities. They believed that the men not only had more experience but would also show greater authority and be more adept in these matters; it was only fair and just that they too embraced their struggles.

Of course, the women's fears were not unfounded. Women have always been identified with the home, and the passage from the private world of the family into the world of public affairs is not easily accomplished. Surely, it may be argued that in some social segments women's domains are not strictly confined to the realms of the home. As Alda Britto da Motta (1993: 417-18, my translation) reminds us, as 'organisers and providers of domestic consumption, they necessarily enter in contact with those that offer goods and services and with the state as provider of collective services'. Women move in the intermediary sphere between private and public - or in the social sphere according to Britto da Motta (1993) and Lobo (1987) - such as the space of the *bairro*. This provides the means for women to cross over the border into the public world.⁸ However, as Elizabeth Jelin further maintains, their public appearance tends to be transitory:

Given the organisation of the family and the sexual division of labour, which impede women's public participation because of their domestic responsibilities and the ideological burden of femininity, it would seem that women participate more frequently in protest movements which arise at particular critical moments than in more long lasting, formal and institutionalised organisations, which involve greater responsibilities and commitment of time and energy (as well as opposition from their male partners). (Jelin 1990: 8)

Even when such constraints can be overcome, women are likely to encounter open opposition to their presence in the public world, posing difficulties in legitimising it. The case of the Plataforma women exemplifies this situation. Their association met with opposition in the process of creation of the *Federação das Associações de Bairros de Salvador* (FABS - Salvador Federation of Neighbourhood Associations). At the time, most of the other neighbourhood associations were headed by men while Plataforma's was clearly a women's association. In the words of a community leader:

AMPLA was forged as a women's organisation, it only became a 'residents' association two years later... There was a large presence of women and we believed that women

⁸ Maxine Molyneux (1985) points out, for instance, that combative motherhood is neither a novelty in human history nor a privilege of women of the working classes.

should not have to struggle for the neighbourhood alone, men also had an obligation. So we decided to *ampliar* (expand), like '*ampla*'. But our association always had a majority of women.... I followed closely what happened in other neighbourhoods, both in reactivating their associations and in creating new ones...The process during the 1970s was in the hands of men. Our association had an influence on FABS, it took part in the process of creating it - and this, in turn, had an influence in changing our association to 'residents' association'; FABS was a coalition of residents' associations, not of women's associations.

With the creation of AMPLA, men joined it and were elected to the first board of directors. However, as many who witnessed the process have confided, this first board of directors ran AMPLA both with authoritarianism and indolence. Once in power, men quickly established a sexual division of labour. They gave the orders and distributed the tasks; but they were never available for meetings with governmental officials or for public collective actions. Indeed, with the noted exception of those instances which involved meeting with an important politician and/or when the presence of the media was ensured beforehand, men kept away; above and distant from the daily workings and most of the work of the association. Women, though not employed in the directive posts and subordinated to the men, continued to mobilise and organise without having any major part in the important and critical decisions. It not only fell to them to do the busy work of organising and leading the rallies and demonstrations, but also to deal with and secure their footing through the bureaucratic labyrinth of governmental agencies and their invariably uncooperative functionaries.

However, working under men became a valuable experience for the women involved and for AMPLA as a whole. On the one hand, they not only became increasingly aware of their own strengths and capabilities, gradually losing their fear of facing and dealing with the public world, but, more importantly perhaps, they began to question the hierarchy between the sexes in the public as well as the private world. As Britto da Motta (1993) observed, in familiarising with the political women also politicise the private world of the family. On the other hand, the experience with authoritarianism in the association made those involved aware of the risks that were incurred in building an organisation that propounded to be communitarian and democratic on the basis of a hierarchical structure. This experience brought to light the importance of collective deliberation and of shared responsibility. It has since led the members of the association to try new forms of organisation that could forge non-hierarchical access to power.

Participation in the struggles of their community exposed the women to the nitty-gritty of the politicking involved at state level, as well as to the constant attempts by opportunistic politicians to manipulate them for their own benefit. All of this has reinforced the women's negative attitude towards politics. When they refer to their work, to their struggles, the women stress the notion of 'community politics'. In this way, they try to distinguish what they do from politics in general, from which many distance themselves. Here they find counterparts in other groups of women involved in neighbourhood-based struggles (Caldeira 1998). As Elizabeth Jelin suggests, they

...clearly distinguish what they do and what they categorise as 'political', that is, between the immediate interests of the neighbourhood 'of the people' and something distant and strange that takes place in another sphere 'between them out there'. The struggle for power involves a struggle for personal interests and is 'theirs'; 'ours' involves struggling for collective interests, for needs. (Jelin 1990: 191)

To the women of AMPLA, *community politics* involves working for their own community, as well as joining other struggles which, though not necessarily neighbourhood-based, are perceived as being in their interest. That is to say, they embrace those struggles that seek

the improvement of the living conditions of the population as a whole. This is what is understood by the women as 'general struggles' (*lutas gerais*).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, these struggles in Brazil centred primarily on the fight to end the military rule and return to democracy. They mobilised large sectors of the population culminating in immense and festive rallies and demonstrations all over the country, demanding the immediate re-establishment of direct elections for the presidency - (the *diretas* demonstrations). This was the context in which many social movements flourished in Brazil. At this time, collective action multiplied, and a new notion of *cidadania* (citizenhood) and citizens' rights emerged (Cardoso 1983; Evers 1984). This was also the moment at which different coalitions formed in Salvador as part of what has become known as *Movimento Popular* (popular movement) (Espineira Gonzalez 1991). AMPLA played an important part in the creation of several of them.⁹

Involvement in these struggles and coalitions has had an obvious effect on the way the women now conceptualise the needs of the neighbourhood. Corresponding with the new notion of citizenship (*cidadania*) that was forged in the process of re-democratisation, the women have redefined their demands: neighbourhood needs have become rights (*direitos*) which Plataforma residents, as citizens, now demand.

The major thrust towards a greater emphasis on women's issues in the *subúrbio* culminated in 1987, with the mobilisations that coincided with the writing of a new constitution for the country. At this time, women's groups all over Brazil staged demonstrations to demand the inclusion of women's rights in the constitution (Alvarez 1990; Sardenberg and Costa 1994). In Salvador, as in other major cities, a women's forum was created and the different groups and organisations that joined it - among them AMPLA - participated in debates, petitions, and rallies. This process continued throughout the writing of the new state and municipal constitutions, allowing for greater articulation and cooperation among women's groups - feminist and non-feminist alike - in the city. Through this articulation - such as the one existing since then between AMPLA and NEIM (Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Studies on Women) - forums have been created centring on women's issues in the *subúrbio*. Without a doubt, these efforts (my own included), if not necessarily contributing directly to the forging of a collective identity of the women of the *subúrbio* as 'fighters', have certainly had a considerable influence in shaping their discourse.

A few years later, on International Women's Day, as I approached the auditorium of the former *Círculo Operário* on São Braz Square in the suburb of Plataforma, Salvador, where women were gathered for the annual *Encontro da Mulher Suburbana* (Suburban Women's Meeting), I could hear them singing the well known tune, *Mulher Rendeira* ('Lace-making Woman'). This is an old Brazilian country tune portraying the life of a submissive woman who stays at home, making lace. But as I walked in and listened more closely, I realised that a new twist had been added to the song. Instead of the old lyrics of passivity and submission, the new version invoked women to get out of the house and join in the struggles for justice and freedom:

Hello lace-making woman, hello woman of lace
If women stay at home, they'll never conquer freedom
My mother had three daughters, all of them named Maria
The three would stay at home, only my father could go out

Hello lace-making woman, hello woman of lace
If women stay at home, they'll never conquer freedom

⁹ For example, *Movimento dos Desabrigados de Salvador* (Homeless Movement of Salvador), *Associação de Cooperação Comunitária das Áreas Problemas de Salvador* (Association of Communitarian Cooperation for the Problem Areas of Salvador), *Comitê Contra a Fome de Salvador* (Committee Against Hunger of Salvador) and, in particular, FABS.

Women from the subúrbio, earned the fame of being brave
Even those who are illiterate, in their work are very competent
For justice and for freedom, they'll fight even the president¹⁰

Later on in the day, after meeting in small groups to discuss the problems faced by the women of the subúrbio and how they should solve them, the women gathered once again in the auditorium. One of the members of the women's commission responsible for the organisation of the *Encontro* reinforced the lyrics sung that morning. Countering the view that women from local communities only mobilise for economic needs and have no defined strategic gender interests (Molyneux 1985), she reminded those present that women's 'specific struggles' (*lutas específicas*) were just as important as the so-called 'general struggles' (*lutas gerais*). She concluded with these words:

I am very happy to see that all of you, *companheiras* [comrades], came to our *Encontro* to demand your rights despite the rain. We want equality because women are discriminated against and we don't accept this. We women are fighters so we deserve equality because we work just as hard as the men if not more. But our work, our efforts are not recognised!

The speeches that followed reaffirmed this concern: 'we have to fight for our rights', said one. 'We have been discriminated against long enough', added another. 'We don't want to be queens of the oven and stove (*rainhas do forno e fogão*). We want to deliberate about the life of this country', exclaimed a third. Thus, by the end of the day, the women were ready to make their demands public. They marched out of the auditorium taking over the neighbourhood streets, carrying protest signs and banners. The women openly demanded equality and respect.

The case of the women of AMPLA shows us then that Latin American women not only have redefined politics by creating a new space for women's activism at the neighbourhood level, but also by doing so they have redefined their struggles from the 'practical needs' frame to a 'strategic interests' one.¹¹ Involvement in the neighbourhood struggles had an empowering effect on the participating women, leading them to question unequal power relations between men and women. We may argue, in fact, that the women of AMPLA, in transforming and redefining the political, transformed and redefined their own movement from a 'neighbourhood women's movement' into 'popular feminism', that is, a feminism of women of the working classes.

3.3 Feminism and the redefinition of domestic violence

Feminist movements focus on women's strategic gender interests, that is, they challenge the structure of gender inequality and seek to enhance women's rights (Molyneux 1998: 235), though the specific issues and rights in question vary historically as well as locally. In Latin America, contemporary feminist struggles have centred primarily on issues pertaining to 'body politics'; the criminalisation of domestic violence and the legalisation of abortion on

¹⁰ In Portuguese, the new version reads as follows:
Olê mulher rendeira, olê mulher renda,
Se a mulher ficar em casa, nunca vai se libertar
Minha mãe teve três filhas, pelo nome de Maria
Todas as três ficavam em casa, só meu pai é quem saja
Olê mulher rendeira, olê mulher renda,
Se a mulher ficar em casa, nunca vai se libertar
As mulheres do Subúrbio criaram fama de valentes,
Mesmo as semi-analfabetas, no trabalho é competente,
Por justiça e liberdade, briga até com o presidente

¹¹ For discussions of gender and other urban social movements in Latin America, see: Lind and Farnelo (1996) and Escobar and Alvarez (1992), among others.

demand being the major ones. However, given the strong hold the Catholic Church still has in the region, the fight for the right to legal and safe abortions has not received the same support from non-feminist women as the struggle against domestic violence has. Indeed, because it has no boundaries - it affects women of all classes, races, ethnicities and ages alike - domestic violence is perhaps the only issue that has brought together the different segments of the women's and feminist movements in a common struggle. Domestic violence is, in fact, quite pervasive and still highly tolerated throughout Latin America. As reported by Dollarhide and Bouabid:

In Paraguay, a woman is killed every ten days. In Peru, six out of ten women are victims of domestic violence, according to the *Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristán*. The 'Latin American Statistics on Domestic Violence', compiled in 1998 by the Organization of American States, also showed that domestic violence is the main cause of injuries suffered by women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the region. Between 30 and 40 per cent of women have suffered some type of family violence. One out of every five women misses work due to domestic violence and more than half of men who beat their wives also beat their children. (Dollarhide and Bouabid 2004: 2)

It is commonly thought that domestic violence is linked to economic deprivation and alcohol consumption, but these elements could not trigger violence against women without the implicit support of patriarchal cultural values. In Latin America, these values are part of the mediterranean cultural heritage of the region in which violence against women persists. In Brazil, for instance, during colonial times social life was organised on the basis of a patriarchal order that granted total power to the father/husband over all other members of the family. Women were considered to be the property of the men of the house, and it was not uncommon for them to die at the hands of their male relatives in the name of the 'legitimate defence of the honour'. In the late 1970s, men were still literally 'getting away with murder', claiming defence of honour. In 1979, for example, Doca Street was acquitted of the crime of murdering his girlfriend, Angela Diniz, during a notorious trial in which his lawyers built their case on the 'legitimate defence of honour' argument. He was brought to trial again in 1981 and found guilty, serving fifteen years in jail. It was only in 1991 that the Brazilian Supreme Court outlawed the use of the honour argument (Ardaillon and Debert 1987). The notion that a woman rightly belongs to her husband and that he has the right to punish her as he seems fit is still extant in Brazil (as in most of Latin America), particularly in the hinterlands. And the saying 'in a fight between husband and wife no one should insert their spoon', meaning that no one should meddle in it because it is a private matter continues to resonate with many. As a man was overheard justifying beating his wife to a sheriff: 'But sheriff, it was *my* woman, and I was in *my* house!'

Many different factors contribute to domestic violence. However, as Spindel *et al.* (2000: 12) observe, gender-based violence 'is perpetuated through social and cultural norms and traditions, reinforcing male dominated power structures'. Indeed, from early infancy women are taught 'that they are inferior to men and often to blame for the violence inflicted upon them. As wives or partners, they must hold the family together, at any cost. Women and men both learn to turn a blind eye to, or accept, gender-based violence'. Under these circumstances domestic violence becomes 'naturalised' and invisible.

Throughout Latin America, the struggle for the eradication of domestic violence has been a 'cultural struggle'. Latin American feminists have worked steadily and consistently not only for official denunciation of domestic violence in legislation and public policy, but also to eradicate patriarchal values pertaining to gender relations. The first major breakthrough towards that end came in 1994, with the adoption, by the Organization of American States (OAS), of the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence

Against Women, better known as 'Convention of Belém do Pará'.¹² Prior to that Puerto Rico was the first country in Latin America to adopt '...specific legislation to prevent and crack down on domestic violence against women, in 1989. The next countries to follow suit were Chile and Argentina in 1994, and Bolivia, Ecuador and Panama in 1995. Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru enacted similar laws in 1996, and the Dominican Republic modified its penal code to include legislation against domestic violence in 1997' (Lama 2000).

In Brazil, a first step in this process was the creation of special police stations for assaulted women (*Delegacias Especiais de Atendimento às Mulheres*, or DEAMs), ideally staffed by police women. The first such station was established in 1985 in São Paulo (today there are over 300 in the country). Other states also created reference centres and shelters for assaulted women, and a network of services (including coroners' offices, hospitals, etc.) was established to assist female victims of violence. However, major legislation to combat domestic violence was developed only recently. Law number 11.340, passed on 7 August 2006, and called *Lei Maria da Penha* (in honour of a woman shot and crippled for life by her ex-companion twenty years ago), not only triples the prison sentence for committing such violent acts (from one to three years now), but it also allows for preventative arrests. It also includes a number of measures to protect women. According to the words of Minister Nilceia Freire, of the Special Secretariat of Public Policies for Women of the Presidency of the Republic:

It's law! It's for real! On 7 August 2006 the President of the Republic sanctioned Law 11.340/06, known as the Maria da Penha Law. This publication now made available to you is aimed at disseminating the text of the law so that every Brazilian woman and man can, in exercising their citizen rights, watch over its full enforcement. It took many years of struggle for this legal instrument to be provided to women and for the Brazilian State to begin to see domestic and family violence against woman.

Those who love do not kill, Let's not keep out of lovers' quarrels, A real man does not beat a woman, All women have the right to a life free of violence, Your life starts when violence ends, Where there is violence everybody loses. Many slogans were used in the campaigns that have brought to the public arena what people insisted should be solved within the four walls of the home. How many women have borne the guilt of being victims of violence for years on end? How many silences have they been submitted to? How much violence has been justified in the courts by the 'defence of male honour'?

There are many changes brought about by the Maria da Penha Law, both in classification of crimes of violence against woman and in legal and police procedures. It classifies domestic violence as one of the forms of human rights' violation. It alters the penal code and makes it possible to arrest aggressors in the act, or to have them arrested preventatively if they threaten the woman's physical integrity. It also provides for new measures of protection for women whose lives are under threat, such as removal of the aggressor from the home and prohibiting him from physically approaching the victim and her children. (Freire 2006: 6, my italics)

Note the use of different slogans over the last two decades in campaigns that sought to publicise and denaturalise domestic violence. They have been important tools in the cultural politics of feminist movements not only in Brazil but in other countries of Latin America as well.

¹² Belém is the capital Pará state in the northern region of Brazil where the OAS met to draw up the convention.

It is important to stress, however, that legislation that criminalises domestic violence has not been easily accepted. In Brazil, for instance, several judges have claimed that the Maria da Penha Law is unconstitutional because it discriminates against men. And in Rio Grande do Sul, in the southernmost part of Brazil, the family judge Edilson R. Rodrigues rejected all incoming petitions under the law in the areas under his jurisdiction, stating that: 'Human disgrace started in Eden: because of women, as we all know, but also because of man's naiveté, stupidity and emotional fragility... The world is male! The idea we have of god is male! Jesus was a man'. He further argued that state control over violence against women will 'turn man dumb', and that 'the modern woman – so-called independent, needing no father for her children except for the sperms – is only modern because she is a frustrated woman as a female being' (Diana 2007). The Brazilian Special Secretariat of Public Policies for Women took the case to the supreme court where a disciplinary measure against Judge Rodrigues declared that 'the magistrating exercise is not a green light for the expression of prejudice and verbal distemperance'. Nonetheless, in an interview following the supreme court's ruling, Judge Rodrigues reaffirmed his prejudice and profound 'machismo':

I believe that women should go back to that submission of former times, but men not allowing it to be as it was in the past. She should be that woman that gives of herself entirely to the man she loves, the one she chose for herself. But this man should not commit the same mistakes he did in the past. So that things will not end up as they are now, if that woman of the past comes to take her man's boots, he should say: 'No, my love, I will not allow you to do this, I will not allow this humiliation because I love you'.

If man had symbolically acted in this manner way back, women today would not be wanting to be so independent. We recognise this mistake and so what? Here comes Maria da Penha Law and is doing just the opposite. I recognise that man is guilty for not valuing enough that sweet and faithful woman, that gave herself entirely to him. He is suffering now, and so what? Is she going to commit the same mistakes men made in the past? (*Consultor Jurídico* 2007:10)

It seems clear, then, that engaging with culture, indeed, fighting patriarchal culture is a must for feminists in Latin America in the struggle to eradicate domestic violence. In this respect, it is worth recounting in full here Yakin Ertürk's statement in relation to feminist strategies in Mexico:

Contrary to what some may claim or fear, such an engagement with culture does not erode or deform local culture but rather challenges its discriminatory and oppressive aspects. This of course may provoke resistance from those who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. Negotiating culture with human rights concerns inherently questions, delegitimises, destabilises, ruptures and, in the long run, destroys oppressive hierarchies. It also contributes to harnessing the positive elements of local culture to advance human rights and gender equality, a process that also revalidates the culture itself. In many places, women's rights activists have successfully mobilised artistic and symbolic expressions of culture. For example, in the north of Mexico, which has seen extreme levels of violence against women, local women's movements have used the language of human rights discourses incorporated with symbolic actions that have countered the culture of impunity and violence against women. The cultural sphere thereby became increasingly important for integrating emotive with cognitive understandings about the atrocities taking place, as well as for working through the deeper social and psychic trauma resulting from the violence, especially for the bereaved families of the disappeared and murdered women. (Ertürk 2007: 20)

Puntos de Encuentro, a feminist NGO in Nicaragua, has also made extensive use of popular culture through a series of media releases to publicise issues pertaining to gender equality and women's empowerment, including the criminalisation of domestic violence. In particular,

through the programme, *Somos Diferentes, Somos Iguales* (We're Different, We're Equal), it has promoted television soap operas that touch upon some taboo topics. As explained by Lynch (2006):

In Nicaragua, where a conservative government and a Catholic hierarchy, both deeply hostile to reproductive rights, recently joined forces to attempt to deny a therapeutic abortion to a 9-year-old girl who has been raped in Costa Rica ... Puntos was producing a wildly successful, nationally distributed TV social soap called *Sexto Sentido* ("Sixth Sense"). In its first season, *Sexto Sentido* broke all the rules of conventional development communication (Bradshaw *et al.* 2006), taking on the controversial topics of abortion, homosexuality, emergency contraception, rape, domestic violence, racism, homophobia, disability rights, substance abuse, single motherhood by choice, and youth sexuality – all the while presenting positive images of young people fully engaged as competent, capable decision-makers in every aspect of their lives. (cited in Lacayo 2006: 32)

3.4 Using humour to denounce and combat everyday violence: prostitutes in Costa Rica

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy examples in which women in Latin America are negotiating and contesting culture to combat violence comes from prostitutes in Costa Rica. According to Canadian anthropologist Patricia J. Downe (1999), who studied a group of 55 female prostitutes in San Jose for nearly 18 months in the mid-1990s, these women often use humour as a means of resisting violence and denouncing how they are discriminated by the state. Because their health needs are usually neglected, their protest and humour often ridicule the national health programmes and authorities. By medicalising and mocking the violence and discrimination they face in their lives, they also challenge Costa Rica's image 'as a haven of health and happiness'.

In one instance of protest witnessed by Downe, the women sex workers and their supporters had gathered in front of the National Assembly to stage a protest against the implementation of a new health policy that requires prostitutes to carry medical identification cards. The sex workers viewed this policy as a possible invasion of privacy by the state in their lives, opening the way for greater police harassment, social stigmatisation, and medical apathy. In their protest they carried signs, shouted, jeered, and, more importantly, made use of raucous behaviour to call attention to their demands:

When a politician finally emerged from the Assembly to address the crowd, he was approached by Lisanna, a street prostitute and participant in my research. She inflated a balloon to look like a penis and held it between her legs. As the man began to speak she interrupted him to ask, 'What is going to last longer, my power or your penis?' Letting the inflated phallus go and watching it dart in the air to descend suddenly, she added, 'Mr Politician, my brain does not deflate in two seconds like men's macho. You must listen to what we women have to say. We are beaten and hurt and you must start caring about that'. With her hands over her crotch, she then began teetering stiffly around him, and with great drama shouted, 'Focus on something other than your erection!' The crowd laughed loudly as the politician, visibly embarrassed by this performance, walked away and Lisanna was escorted from the building by police. (Downe 1999: 63)

Downe explains that even if Lisanna did not directly address the new health policy in her performance, she did 'challenge the power relationship that exists between a male politician and a female street prostitute, a relationship that is central to the policy in question' (1999:

63). Furthermore, Lisanna denounced the way those in political office ignore violence against women, especially sex workers, using humour to make her point.

According to Downe, biomedical discourse carries political weight in Costa Rica and the sex workers she worked with not only were aware of this, but also made use of it to highlight the violence they experience as prostitutes. As one of the women explained to Downe: 'We are speaking the language that is accurate, ... so that they are sure to listen to us now and to see the violence' (1999: 67). Indeed, though the women's access to a good medical service is restricted, they are not unfamiliar with medical discourse, and have appropriate biomedical terms to speak of violence, characterising it as 'contagious':

Violence, as the women describe it, is contagious. They understand it to be caused by microscopic germs and spread through physical and especially sexual contact. Violence, then, is seen to replicate itself, much as a virus or bacteria replicates itself in different hosts and vectors. It is central to the complex of contagion in that it is *said to weaken the immune system*, making the abused and infected individual more susceptible to other infections, especially HIV/AIDS. (Downe 1996: 67)

In addition to medicalising violence, the women studied by Downe also mocked it, making political use of humour to publicise violence. 'Both medical and raillorous discourses in Costa Rica (as elsewhere) have objectified women and yet women have used them both to resist this objectification and to challenge the violent conditions in which they live' (Downe 1999: 67).

In her study, Downe witnessed a performance by the women on International AIDs Day to protest violence against sex workers, in which they dressed overtly in stereotypical prostitutes clothing, and made use of transitional humour; that is, began with self-deprecating mockery, and once having gained attention and acceptance by the public, they aggressively challenged the discriminatory attitudes usually directed at sex workers. Let me reproduce here in length her description of the performance:

As hundreds had gathered to watch the various acts and listen to the speakers, Graciela, dressed garishly in what she called '*puta* clothes', approached several strangers in the crowd and began mocking prostitutes' supposed stupidity and ignorance about disease. 'What do *putas* use for protection? A doorway!' There was immediate laughter and people began to focus their attention on her, moving closer to where she stood. 'What do you call *Putas* who try to take care of the birth control themselves? Infected mothers!' The crowd around her grew. 'What is the difference between a *puta* and a gutter dog? Nothing!' She continued telling these jokes and the appreciative audience laughed and applauded. She then turned the humour directly onto herself and, relying on metaphors of body and nation, claimed to be a '*puta* parasite' that causes unsightly 'warts' on the unblemished face of Costa Rica. She frantically ran around in tight circles calling for the 'important doctors' and 'holy priests' to excise the parasites and restore the nation's health. Playing on the celebrated image of Costa Rica's health, she won hearty applause and a few onlookers even threw money her way.

Graciela's raillery reaffirmed what many believed about street sex workers and this familiarity made them appreciate her performance. As she curtseyed to each bout of applause she thanked them for being 'good' Costa Ricans and, portraying a 'bad' Costa Rican, she apologised for everything that she saw to be her fault, 'You are wonderful Costa Ricans and I am so sorry that I have brought this AIDS disease to you. You generous Costa Ricans, I am sorry that it is hot today. No wait! Is it raining? Then I apologise for the rain. It is all my fault.' As she continued, she sustained the interest and attention of the large crowd but her tone gradually changed. 'You

generous Costa Ricans, I am sorry that you cannot see the bruises on my arms that the husbands here have given me'. Singling a woman out of the crowd, she aggressively asked, 'Hey *señora*, do you know where your husband is? If yes, then you must be a widow.' The woman looked relieved when Graciela moved on to confront another onlooker, 'What is the difference between a violent man and a gutter dog? The dog has the decency to lick himself!' She concluded with one last joke: 'What do *putas* use for protection? GUNS!' And with that, she pretended to shoot the bystanders who were no longer laughing but still listening. (Downe 1999: 72-3)

The use of this form of humour, described by Downe as 'transitional humour', is a common strategy of feminist performing groups in Latin America (and probably elsewhere), such as the *Loucas da Pedra Lilás* ('Crazy Women of the Lilac Rock'), a Brazilian group from Recife, Pernambuco. As Downe (1999: 63) also notes, 'although it has been overlooked by many social scientists as a worthy subject of study, there is a growing literature that shows humour to be a very powerful form of communication regarding oppression, and resistance'. Indeed, humour is a powerful cultural tool as it simultaneously reveals 'social ambiguities and cultural contradictions, conditions and contexts that may go unnoticed in everyday activity', and it has subversive potential since it can 'weaken the dominant ideology by meticulously representing its absurdities and, in so doing, exposing them to ridicule' (Gillooly cited in Downe 1999: 68).

3.5 Afro-Brazilian women: fighting against sexist and racist images

Although combating patriarchal violence can and often does bring together women of different 'walks and talks', feminist and other women's struggles in Latin America are quite diversified, given the plethora of experiences that the intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity and other social markers give rise to in different regional contexts. Indeed, the dynamics of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw 2002) has engendered a 'multiplicity of feminist identities' (Castells 1999: 235) in the region, even when they are not always self-identified as feminists.

In Brazil, the best organised and most widespread of these 'identity feminisms' today is by far the Black Women's Movement (*movimento de mulheres negras*). Black feminists have been a part of the so-called second wave of feminism in Brazil from its emergence in the mid-1970s; however, it was only in 1987, during the Brazilian National Feminist Encounter in the city of Garanhuns, Pernambuco, that black women publicly claimed a specific space for their fight against sexism and racism (Ribeiro 1995; Bairros 1995). Since then, several national and regional encounters of black women have taken place, and a number of Black Feminist NGOs have been created in Brazil, leading to the formation of the Forum of Black Women's Organisations.¹³

An important part of their agenda is challenging the representations of black women, particularly of the *mulata* as the exotic and sensuous woman, good only for sex. This image projected not only by tourism advertising, but also by Brazilian literature (e.g. women in Jorge Amado's novels) and cinema, and touring samba companies (such as Sargentelli's) and the exportation of the live images of semi-nude women dancing the samba schools performances during Brazilian carnival add to this depiction.¹⁴ To contrast and combat these derogatory images, the Bahia-based Afro-Brazilian cultural association known as *Iê Ayê* holds an annual Black Beauty Pageant, in which young women who best represent their African heritage in their attire and dancing abilities compete (Giacomini 1994). Indeed, one of

¹³ See for example, Duke (2003). For a discussion of black women's activism in Colombia, see Asher (2007) and Grueso and Arroyo (2002).

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Sargentelli used to have a 'School for Mulattas' in Rio de Janeiro, to train black women as dancers for his company (see Giacomini 1992). For a discussion of race and gender in sex tourism in Brazil, see Piscitelli (1996).

the major objectives of black women's organisations is the construction of racial identity. As stated by *Geledés* on their web site:¹⁵

Geledé is originally a kind of female secret society of a religious nature existing in traditional yorubás societies, it expresses the female power over the land fertility, procreation and the community's well-being. The Geledé cult aims at easing and revering the ancestral mothers to assure the world's balance. The main symbols of the Geledé cult are the ritual masks which symbolise the female ancestors' spirits and the different aspects of their power over the earth. The female *orixás*¹⁶ worshipped in the Brazilian *candomblés*¹⁷ represent socialised aspects of this power, according to the black African vision of the world in which men and women are equivalent to one another and control certain forces of nature. However, the maintenance of life on earth, a noticeably female asset in this tradition, is particularly revered.

Inspired by this tradition and the perspective to update it in the light of contemporary black women's needs, Geledés – Instituto da Mulher Negra was created on 30 April 1988, a black women's political organisation whose institutional mission is to fight racism and sexism, value and promote black women in particular, and the black community in general. Today, with several model experiences, Geledés is an example to other NGOs in Brazil and Latin America. We have instigated a strategic process of increasing the visibility of the racial problem in Brazil; taking part in all world conferences called by the UN in the last decade; and being able, through this participation, to make governments and civil society more sensitive to the discussion of the growing exclusion process which the poor and discriminated against population in the world face. Over the past 13 years, Geledés has been fostering the political debate about the need to adopt public policies of inclusion so that the principle of equality and opportunity for all can come true. We have consolidated the debate about black women's issues as a fundamental aspect of the gender question in Brazilian society.

Geledés board of directors is exclusively composed of black women, however, in its several work teams, the organisation counts on the collaboration of men and women, black and white, sympathetic to its proposal of political action.

However, black women's organisations, particularly those recognised as feminist, have not always received the support of their male dominated counterparts. On the contrary, black feminists in Brazil have often been accused of dividing the black movement, in the same way that other 'feminist identity' movements, for example, indigenous women's movements, union women and the like, have been accused elsewhere. This has meant that black women have also found themselves in the situation of waging a struggle – often a cultural struggle as well as a war over meaning – with their male comrades, highlighting how sexism shapes the experience of racism differently for men and women. In an exchange with Joel Rufino, for example, a leading figure in the black movement in Brazil, black feminist Sueli Carneiro (1995), one of the Directors of Geledés, showed how in equating white women to 'cadillacs' and black women to 'VW beetles', Rufino's unfortunate comparison was not only sexist but also racist, reaffirming those images that black women, along with white women in Brazil, struggle to deconstruct.

¹⁵ http://www.geledes.org.br/idiomas/in_english.htm#voltar

¹⁶ The term 'orixás' refers to the deities revered in Afro-Brazilian religions.

¹⁷ The term 'candomblé' stands for the Afro-Brazilian religious cults in Bahia.

3.6 Claiming culture in asserting women's rights within indigenous movements

It is interesting to note that whereas black and indigenous women in Latin America confront similar dilemmas in combating both sexism and racism, they make use of quite distinct strategies to do so. Black women tend to define their own space as distinct from both black men and white women, even if finding commonality with them in specific struggles (Bairros 1995; Safa 2005). In contrast, indigenous women find little commonality with other women's movements, particularly with feminists (Lavrin 1998). They side more closely with their male comrades, asserting women's rights within their indigenous movements by making a claim in their traditional cultures. That is to say, they argue that inequality between women and men in their communities came as a result of colonialism (Richards 2005; Marcos 2005). Moreover, they assert the need to 'revisit the dominant discourse (often feminist) that portrays the indigenous women as passive, submissive, subject and bound to inevitable patriarchal oppressions springing from their cultural background' to deconstruct it (Marcos 2005).

Indeed, in discussing women's participation in *Zapatismo*, in Mexico, the largest indigenous movement in Latin America, Silvia Marcos (2005) has stated that women shared leadership posts with men; they were *comandantas* (commanders), seeing in this a form of feminism. Her argument about women *zapatistas*, herself one of them, is reproduced below:

How can I claim it is feminism that I am speaking of when speaking of the indigenous women's movement? In 1994, when *Zapatismo* in southern Chiapas became visible ..., one striking characteristic was evident. Approximately 30 per cent of them were women. The women were not only in the 'support communities' in the traditional women's roles. The women were insurgents (*soldado* in the words of some of them...). They were in the Central Commanding Committee (*Comite Central Revolucionario Indigena*, CCRI). They were *comandantas*, like the very visible Ramona. They were also, not only insurgents but commanding the military forces (*capitanas*), like Ana María in charge of militarily taking over San Cristobal de las Casas.

Besides this presence, the first bulletin ever published included the Revolutionary Women's Law...The first 'revolution' (*alzamiento*), says Sub-Comandante Marcos, took place in March 1993 within the still clandestine Zapatista forces...The men within the guerrilla had to accept the specific gendered demands of their women. They were their wives, sisters, companion fighters, mothers, and commanding women within the guerrilla movement. In the words of Ramona '*Muchas resistencias tuvimos que vencer para venir. Les da miedo nuestra rebeldia. Por eso en el EZLN nos organizamos para aprobar la ley revolucionaria de mujeres*'. 'We had to overcome many resistances to our participation, this is why we, the women, got organised to approve the Revolutionary Women's Law'.

The Indigenous Women's Law (*Ley revolucionaria de mujeres*), accepted by consensus at that meeting, stipulated clearly the rights of women to the same education, same salary for the same job, opportunities to participate and lead political assemblies and the right to inherit and own the land. It advocated punishment for any sort of violence against women, the right to choose if, when, and how many children to have, and to choose their partners and not to be forced to marry...(Marcos 2005: 5)

Despite women's activism working side by side with men in *Zapatismo*, Silvia Marcos (2005) states that indigenous women in Mexico do not claim gender equality; they speak instead of *paridad* (parity) with men:

Inheritors of a philosophical ancestry where women and men are conceived as an inseparable pair, indigenous women often claim *la paridad*. '*Queremos caminar parejo hombres y mujeres*',¹⁸ said an old wise woman... In their own search for the expression that suits their cosmological background they settled on *la paridad*: parity. '*Queremos caminar a la par que ellos*' or '*aprendiendo a caminar juntos*'. Learning to walk together. (Marcos 2005: 6)

Silvia Marcos (2005) claims that nowhere in Mesoamerican cosmology, insofar as Mexico is concerned, is there a concept of 'equality'. More importantly, she notes that in this cosmovision, the 'whole cosmos is conceived of elements that balance against each other - through their differences - and thus create an equilibrium'. This is not a static equilibrium, as the concept of 'equality' implies, but a permanently shifting balance. In this vision, the dominant concept is that of duality, thus the notion of gender equality is not accepted as easily.¹⁹ Similar considerations are offered by Patricia Richards (2005) in discussing indigenous women in Chile, as well as Maruja Barrig (2001) in Peru. In Chile, according to Richards (2005: 201):

Mapuche women bring into play and negotiate two contested concepts, gender and human rights, as they grapple with their multiple and shifting identifications. Whereas feminist movements in some nations have advanced women's rights by challenging gender norms and relations, many Mapuche women find the concept of *gender* objectionable; this term implies for them an adherence to Western ideas that are imposed on them. The language of rights better represents their multiple concerns, particularly when they contextualise it within the Mapuche worldview...

Mapuche women strongly identify with their people's struggle against the state. Framing their claims in terms of Mapuche women's rights, as opposed to gender, allows them to assert their difference from non-Mapuche Chilean women and simultaneously fits within a framework with which Mapuche men also identify. Mapuche women's negotiation of these concepts demonstrates the complexities involved when universalised and globalising discourses clash with particular and localised worldviews.

Writing about feminisms in Latin America, Asunción Lavrin (1998) brings attention to the fact that women in some indigenous nationalist movements tend to separate themselves completely from feminism, which they often view as too 'foreign to their cultural heritage'. In Bolivia, in fact, this standing provoked a clash between feminists and indigenous nationalists. As narrated by Lavrin (1998: 528):

Recently, Vivian Arteaga Montenero, a veteran Bolivian feminist, and Maria Eugenia Choque Quispe, an Aymara of the work-group on Andean Oral History, came into conflict over the issue of the validity of feminism for all women. Choque Quispe assumed an antagonistic position against 'Western' feminism with clear racial connotations. She denounced non-indigenous women as exercising a form of domination seeking to change the nature of indigenous society, to which feminism was an alien and unnecessary ideology. 'The contradictions implicit in feminism do not reach the Indian woman of the ayllu because ayllu and feminism are antagonistic systems'. Hers could be the voice of many non-Western or non-white women elsewhere. Arteaga Montenero argued the relevance of gender over any other factor and denounced the nationalism of indigenous ideologies as hiding the existence of gender domination among Aymara and Quechua men.

¹⁸ 'We want men and women to walk side by side.'

¹⁹ See also Silvia Marcos' (2006) book on gender in Mesoamerican religions.

In any event, it seems clear that for Latin American indigenous women, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women should not be equated with a 'gender and development' agenda insensitive to local level ideologies.

4 Some final considerations

In this paper I have argued that culture interacts with development, focusing, in particular, on how culture has been negotiated by women's movements in Latin America in the promotion of gender justice and women's empowerment. This argument has been based on a dynamic notion of culture that views it not as a crystallised entity, but rather as an 'active process of meaning making and contestations over definitions' (Street 1993: 2). As such, I have attempted to show here, by means of several examples from the available literature that culture, thus defined, has been a central element of feminist and women's movements in Latin America, even if, as in the case of indigenous movements, traditional culture is not necessarily challenged. To the contrary, it is invoked to sustain women's claims. In any event culture is certainly negotiable – indeed, it is often negotiated by women and women's movements in Latin America, it is not a structure immune to agency and intervention.

As I have observed elsewhere (Sardenberg 2006: 3):

within the last twenty-five years, different countries in Latin America have experienced political changes in the direction of re-democratisation, in which feminist and women's movements, along with other social movements in the region, have played an important part. In this process, women have claimed new spaces of action in the public sphere, struggling as well for new patterns of gender relations in the private domain.

In this paper I have shown that women's activism has also involved a struggle for meaning – a 'cultural politics' - in which women's roles and spheres of action were re-defined. In Argentina, during the years of the military dictatorship, the mothers of the "disappeared" – those taken by force by the police and "disappeared with" – changed the meaning of motherhood by staging periodical peaceful demonstrations, circling the square in front of the presidential palace with scarves on their heads. They were called *Locas de Plaza Mayo*, but their activism moved women and motherhood throughout Latin America, from the private comfort of the home, to the public battle on the streets, establishing 'motherist activism' (Bejarano 2002). In defying the military rules, redefining motherhood, the *Madres de Plaza Mayo* also redefined themselves, experiencing a process of empowerment.

As we have seen in this work, women in Brazil, particularly in Bahia, have also acted in the name of the family, but in this case, to engage in neighbourhood based movements for collective goods. In so doing, they have extended the notion of the domestic - from their homes to the public spaces of their neighbourhoods and communities. Furthermore, to distinguish their activism from other forms of doing politics which they find repulsive, women active in neighbourhood movements in Bahia speak of their struggles as doing 'community politics', thus also negotiating culture in redefining the domestic and community spaces as well as that of politics. Engaged in this process, the women have also experienced personal empowerment, and have moved closer to feminist politics, contributing, in time, to the emergence of popular feminist movements (Sardenberg and Costa 2010).

It would perhaps go without saying that, given the culture of 'machismo', still strong throughout Latin America, feminist and women's movements have been forced to negotiate culture on a number different of issues pertaining to gender justice. Making domestic violence against women visible and defining it as a serious social problem in need of society-wide solutions, have been major struggles in that direction. It took more than 30 years for

feminists in Brazil to see the passage of the Maria da Penha Law, a comprehensive legislation package to criminalise and curtail domestic violence against women, and still much to come before they win over the patriarchal reluctance of judges – women and men alike – in applying the law comprehensively.

In Costa Rica, prostitutes fight institutional violence against them by negotiating culture, stretching and bending it in a humorous manner. By their token, Afro-Brazilian women must fight both against racism and sexism, institutional and otherwise, a struggle in which deconstructing the images of black women that either over-sexualises them, as objects of desire, or places them in the kitchen labouring as cooks and maids, has played an important part. Note, however, that in the case of indigenous women, a different strategy has been put to work: the women side with their male comrades, while re-defining the meaning of equilibrium between the sexes, central to their traditional cultures, to guarantee parity between women and men, claiming as such their right to be *comandantas* as well.

I hope to have shown in this paper that in all of these different instances of women's activism, 'cultural politics' has been a major element of their struggles. This, of course, is nothing necessarily new: as Joan Scott (1988) and others have long observed, the symbolic and normative dimensions of gender play a crucial role in the structuring of the gender order. But it is always important to remind ourselves of the need to engage with culture, and thus, to understand its flexible points as well as the more sensitive ones in promoting gender equality.

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