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From turbulent to dangerous times: Gender issues on the battlefield

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1. **From turbulent to dangerous times.**
 2. After decades of progress concerning Gender Equality, Women's and LGBTQ+ rights Gender Issues are **under attack**.
 3. **Some landmarks of both progress and attacks on Gender Equality.** Examples, transnational and national.
 4. **Gender and Gender Studies as a field of knowledge and research. Concluding Remarks.**
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1. From turbulent to dangerous times.

- The times we live in have gone **from turbulent to dangerous**, with war in Europe and in many parts of the world.
- Since the **economic crisis of 2008**, governments have saved the banks and financial capital to prevent the immediate collapse that occurred in the 1929 crisis, a hundred years earlier.
- However, the **collapse has been occurring slowly** since then, in this neoliberal capitalism, which has taken on the contours of savage capitalism if we consider the devastating effects on the planet.
- The banks have been saved at the cost of continuing and **deepening cuts and disinvestment in public systems** shortened even more redistribution policies to the most disadvantaged, also affecting the middle classes and resulting in a brutal deepening of inequalities.
- The discontent and economic difficulties of many are taken advantage of by **populist political sectors that spread fear** and stir up ghosts, using regressive speeches, and with **lies attacking gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights**, and engaging with openly **racist and xenophobic speeches**.

Grandmothers For Reproductive Rights



We are feisty, passionate grandmothers and elders on a mission to advance reproductive health, rights & justice.

GET INVOLVED



2. After decades of progress concerning Gender Equality, Women's and LGBTQ+ rights Gender Issues are under attack.

- **OUR GRANDDAUGHTERS SHOULD NOT HAVE TO FIGHT THE BATTLES THEIR GRANDMOTHERS ALREADY WON**

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- In 1979 in Portugal a group of activists and people linked to left wing parties created what we called then National Campaign for Abortion and Contraception (CNAC). I was a member of CNAC's board.
 - From then on and after years of fight, finally in 2007, with a referendum, abortion was permitted by women's demand.
 - Portugal has arrived late to **Sociology, only allowed as graduation course after 1974**, and to the **institutionalisation of Gender Studies**, but in 2012 the first research centre completely dedicated to GS, **CIEG, Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies** was launched in the University of Lisboa.
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3. Some landmarks of both progress and attacks on Gender Equality.

3.1 Attacks on Gender Equality are not new.

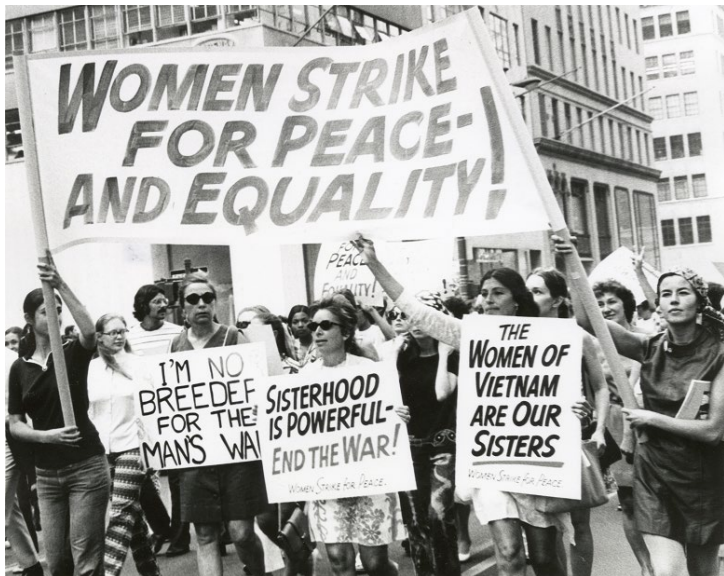
- **Backlash of the 80s** as consequence of the advances made by the feminist movement in the 70s:
 - Contesting feminist victories (ERA, 1972; Roe vs Wade, 1973) conservative women (and men) began to build a **counter narrative based on so-called traditional American values**. (Phyllis Schlafly, antifeminist group Eagle Forum.)
 - **Attacks from religious forces** (e.g., Vatican) against women's reproductive rights, since the 70s.
- Political context: Thatcher's and Reagan era. Conservative wave, deregulation of the financial system, that had its outcome in 2008; (Amâncio, 2003, 2019);



Women's Coalition Strike, New York, 1970, 50 years after the right to vote in USA.



Antifeminists demonstration, 1977



Phyllis Schlafly wearing a "Stop ERA" in front of the White House, Washington, D.C. 1977. Eagle Forum group

3.2. The appearance of Gender in United Nations documents

- UN, International Conference on Population and Development, in Cairo 1994 revealed an alliance between the Vatican, Iran and Saudi Arabia **against reproductive rights and women's sexual self-determination** (Vasconcelos, 2019).

Beijing's Declaration, 1995, approved in IV World Conference on Women

38. "We hereby adopt and commit ourselves as Governments to implement the following Platform for Action, ensuring that a gender perspective is reflected in all our policies and programmes.

UN declarations on GE **were renewed all 5 years, after 1995. The last one was in 2020.**

And the word "gender" created a ground of battle between conservative and progressive forces.

3.3 In the last decade attacks against GE were intensified for different reasons:

1. The deepening of inequalities and the degradation of living conditions of millions, gave fuel to the rise of the extreme right which besides issues related to immigration and security, also targets what they call “gender ideology” as a main societal enemy.
2. Strong alliance of far-right, with religious forces, and conservative parties that lost some past battles (abortion, same-sex marriage) and **that have always been against GE** and have now the opportunity **to return to their old political agenda.**

3.4 How do movements against GE proceed?

1. Constitution of strong international networks, with a rhetoric and arguments that circulate internationally, distorting gender equality agenda and creating **Moral Panic** and fear, namely, using children. They have some plasticity in adopting specific arguments in different countries.
2. Demonstrations on the street help encourage public **pressure over policy makers** who then fear to pass progressive laws that will be then contested (France, Italy).
3. The election of populist and authoritarian leaders have reinforced the trend of attacks, and revision of laws in the countries where they were/are in power. (Órban 2010, Trump 2016, Bolsonaro 2018, Meloni 2022)

3.4 How do movements against GE proceed? (cont.)

- Religious leaders give far-right the “narrative” and they do the “dirty” work; or they construct the narrative by themselves. They are violent (In PT they interrupt violently books launching for children approaching LGBT topics)
- In Brasil a program for training teachers for the **prevention of homophobia and transphobia** – some parents expel homosexual and trans sons and daughters from their homes - was used to create Moral Panic claiming that the intention was **to sexualize children**.
- **Moral panic** instils fear also among **teachers** that do not know how to address those topics and prefer not to talk about them, even if they are mentioned in handbooks.

(Karla Bessa (2023); Sara Garbagnoli (2016); Pedro Vasconcelos (2023))

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3.5 The arguments are well known.

For the Vatican the stronger argument against what they call “gender ideology” is that it goes against the “natural order of things. Sexual norms “are ahistorical and apolitical”.

Catholic transnational discourse deploying as an ‘anthropological’ and scientific point of view on ‘what is human’ (Garbagnoli, 2016), in alliance with other religious strands (orthodox, evangelic) .



- So, there is a **battle over resources** – where state/government money should be applied – and also a cultural war over who has the **power of the narrative**.
- Besides we are dealing with a **change in gender relations**, and some forces do not want change. Questioning existing power relationships concerning gender but not only, concerning **social equality, race, sexual diversity**.
- Two examples show how a strong **feminist movement, and gender studies impacted and changed policies promoting GE (Brasil)** and how they were then contested, and how the development of **feminism and gender studies in Uganda** was also facilitated by UN international resolutions.

Brasil

Karla Bessa, in a text summing up the growth and strength of women's, feminist and gender studies in 80s, and 90s, in Brasil shows how **research made on those years impacted the changes in public policies especially after 2003** (Bessa, 2023).

- **Changes in the relation between state and citizens:** promotion of policies combating violence against women, discrimination and pro civil rights; same sex marriage. All along these last decades and especially after 2000, strong demonstrations (Marchas).
- **Legal conquests do not change practices and are limited** (e.g. abortion is not allowed in Brazil), but send a **signal of change** to conservative groups, that attacked with all its weapons, and finally Bolsonaro was elected in 2018.
- Those attacks were common in Latin America and were supported by an alliance between the catholic church and new evangelic, and they had in common: 1) all happened after the turn of the century 2) appeared in countries where left wing parties were in power 3) developed around the legal and educational reforms.

Uganda

- In Uganda, the early 1980s and 1990s, Women and Gender Studies academic unit was institutionalized at Makerere University and developed several courses being very active in training and research all along these decades.
- **They considered part of the global feminist movement against patriarchal oppression in all its manifestations.**
- But responding to attacks they are very eager to:
 - **”assert our space as African feminists, we also draw inspiration from our feminist ancestors who blazed the trail and made it possible to affirm the rights of African women. As we invoke the memory of those women whose names are hardly ever recorded in any history books, we insist that it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported into Africa from the West. We claim and assert the long and rich tradition of African women’s resistance to patriarchy in Africa.**

Josephine Ahikire, Amon Ashaba Mwiine, Peace Musiimenta (2024, forthcoming)

Europe

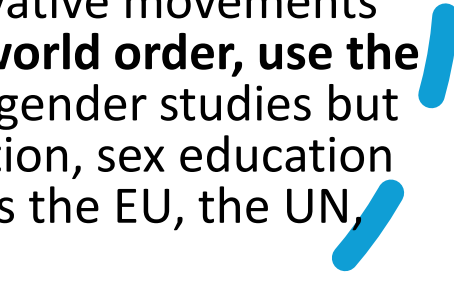
Today **almost all European countries allow abortion on request or on broad social grounds**, and only a very small minority maintain highly restrictive laws prohibiting abortion in almost all circumstances.

Even in catholic countries like Spain and Portugal the trend has been of changing laws pro Gender Equality. But in both countries far-right parties have been growing and challenging those changes; and in Italy the trend is the same.

- **Fourteen** Member States currently **allow same-sex marriage**:
 - The Netherlands (since 2001), Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Sweden (2009), Portugal (2010),
 - Denmark (2012), France (2013) Luxembourg (2015), Ireland (2015), Finland (2017), Malta (2017), Germany (2017), Austria(2019) and Slovenia(2022).
- EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025



In **Eastern Europe**, profound attacks on Gender Equality and Gender Studies

- In Hungary in 2018, the government officially removed Gender Studies Masters and PhD degrees from the list of accredited subjects in the country. In Poland strong demonstrations against the limitation of abortion rights.
 - As Andrea Peto states, “**the emergence of anti-gender movements as a reaction to the 2008 triple crisis – financial, security, migration – dramatically changed** the framework in which gender studies has been operating in Eastern Europe.
 - Anti-gender movements are populist neoconservative movements that, **in response to the crisis of the neoliberal world order, use the concept of ‘gender’** to mobilize not only against gender studies but also against LGBTQIT rights, the Istanbul Convention, sex education in schools and international organizations such as the EU, the UN, and the WHO” (Peto, 2018).
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USA

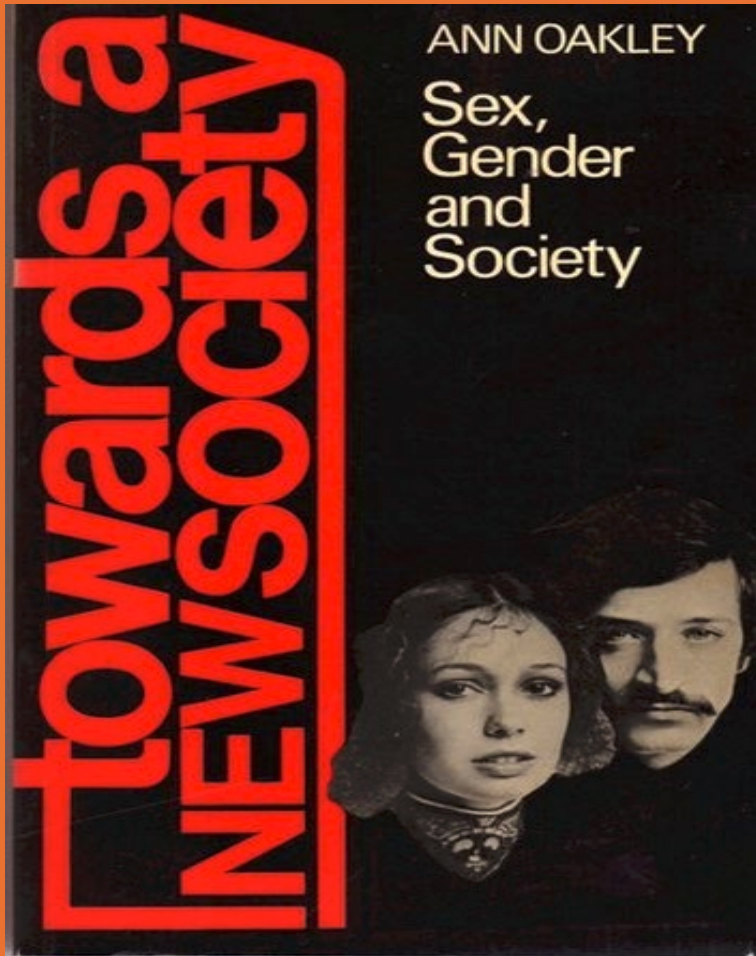
Really important setbacks

- Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade (2022), 14 states now have no clinics providing abortion care at all
 - **Nationally, Anti-Abortion Centers (AACs) outnumber abortion clinics** by an average of 3 to 1
 - **AACs receive state funding in at least 29 states.**
- **41 States have abortion bans**
 - **14** states have a total abortion ban.
 - **27** states have abortion bans based on gestational duration.


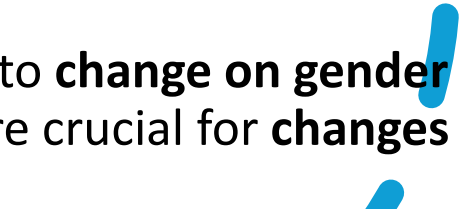
Only 9 States do not restrict abortion based on gestational duration

- **Same sex marriage in all states from 2015 on.**


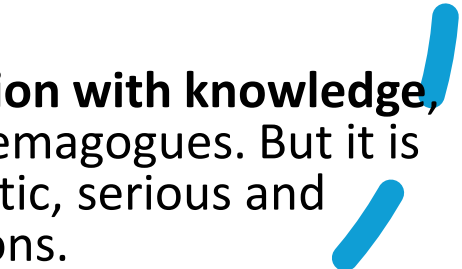
4. Gender and Gender Studies as a field of knowledge and research. Concluding Remarks



- We came a long way since sociologist Ann Oakley (1972) proposed the **concept of gender** distinguishing it from biological sex, showing the role of **culture** on the definition of **what biological bodies can or cannot do**, questioning the “natural order of things” precisely because that natural order is unequal and hierarchical and excludes all those who do not fit into a determined pattern.
- From then on, many **other feminist sociologists** contributed deeply to the **field of research on Gender Studies** proposing theoretical frameworks and developing empirical research. **Sylvia Walby, ESA first president, Claire Wallace, 7th, Sue Scott 14th ESA president, Raewyn Connell** and many others.
- The concept of gender can be today **defined within different theoretical strands**: from structuralist, to post structuralist, to interactionist, or seen as performative, or with a queer approach, refusing the binary order.

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- Beyond diversity research on **gender and sexuality** has given **visibility to realities** that were less known whether we are talking about:
 - the **relation** between **reproductive and productive sphere**, and how it helps explaining the gender pay gap
 - whether we are talking about **masculinities** and how they **shape power relations**;
 - or analysing how **old LGBT citizens were persecuted** and lived in fear in countries where it was (and in some still is) considered a crime
 - or researching on **sexual harassment and bullying**
 - And these types of research also have contributed to **change on gender relations, since** many of those research results were crucial for **changes in policies and on laws in many countries.**
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- Different examples of advances and retrieves around Gender Equality show complex phenomena in which different **structural, cultural, symbolic and emotional dimensions** are at play, as Connell (1987, 2011) has been showing us.
- We need to better understand **what leads some people to adhere to radical positions**, and how can we contribute for the recognition of the problems experienced by minorities to people whose lives hardly intersect with theirs and **how emotions get into the picture** as Raewyn Connell, Arlie Hochschild, Michele Lamont, have been writing.
- And sometimes it could not be so difficult. Michele Lamont referred to a simple survey data showing that **juvenile suicide felt down dramatically in the USA after the approval of same sex marriage**. That might help to show the suffering and the need for recognition and that **“trans rights (...) or self-determination take no one else’s rights away**. They are (...) “a form of freedom that has been achieved through struggle” (Butler, 2024: 251).

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- This is why we need to base our positions on research, **also taking into account different audiences including the general public.**
 - It is true that this type of reasoned argument is not intended **to convince the far right and its supporters** – just as there is no hope of convincing Ventura, Donald Trump or Bolsonaro supporters with rational arguments.
 - This type of argument **is important for the media, for journalists and policy makers**, and for people who genuinely do not know what is being discussed and will have the opportunity to find out more about **gender research**.
 - It is essential **to counter lies and misinformation with knowledge**, as the former are the preferred weapons of demagogues. But it is necessary to denounce these lies in a systematic, serious and educational way, using more data than emotions.
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- **GENDER EQUALITY IS A LONG TERM PROJECT**
- **OUR GRANDDAUGHTERS SHOULD NOT HAVE TO FIGHT THE BATTLES THEIR GRANDMOTHERS ALREADY WON**
- **IN CASE OF NEED, GRAND MOTHERS ARE STILL HERE TO JOIN THE FIGHT**

