

**Opening Speech of the 2nd International Conference
of the Interdisciplinary Centre of Gender Studies**

***Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies:
Reflexivity, Resistance and Action***

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Professor Helena Pereira, President of FCT, Foundation for Science and Technology,
Mr. Carlos Duarte, Vice-president of CIG, Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality,
Professor Alice Trindade, Vice-President of ISCSP, representing the President,

Dear keynote speakers and foreign visitors Sue Scott, Marta Soler, Karla Bessa e Irma Erlingsdóttir,

Dear participants in the plenary and semi-plenary round tables,

Dear attendees,

As coordinator, and on behalf of CIEG, I welcome you all.

1. In the call for papers of the 2nd International Conference of CIEG we noted that we are living difficult times that raise questions and answers on which it is urgent to reflect. That is what scientific conferences are for. To relate the results and knowledge produced within the various studies and research projects conducted in between conferences, but also to reflect and discuss together the main topics affecting us today, in this case the ones with an impact on gender issues, in particular. In our specific scientific field, which is directly related to the everyday realities experienced within society, reflections on legislation and public policy, or on initiatives and the effect of different types of activisms, also play a crucial role.

Difficult times that led us to choose a program with diverse and pressing topics, which urge us to find answers, or at least identify questions and lines of research, as well as pertinent actions.

Alongside reflexivity, which is the main exercise of these types of encounters, we have chosen the words resistance and action to identify goals and realities that mark our present time.

Resistance in a double sense. Firstly, because gender and feminist studies, as well as those on women and gender equality have been under attack globally, even though these attacks have been resisted in various ways: through large street protests, social media movements, unprecedented initiatives. Therefore, attacks and resistances will be central topics in many papers presented in this conference.

Secondly, because the opposition to feminism and gender equality endures – throughout time the first suffragettes and LGBT movements have been subjected to it, but so are activists fighting today.

It has always been necessary to fight hard and argue fiercely against the established order, in order to move forward, from voting rights to rights over one's own body, or to the enjoyment of a full and free sexuality. Even though many of these rights are now recognized in Portugal, and in many other countries, problems still endure, and in many cases they have become worse.

Action, because we hope not only that this conference may generate a series of publications and productions, similarly to what has happened in the previous conference, where various reflections inspired theoretical contributions to our scientific field, but also that it may contribute to a change in public policy that can improve people's lives and materialize into a real fight against multiple discriminations.

Let us go back to those difficult times and what we believe should be urgently discussed in this conference.

We just have to remember what happened in 2016, when we held our first annual conference, to realize the complexity of the time in which we are living and also how quickly some of these changes took place.

In May 2016 Trump had not been elected yet, Dilma Roussef had been completely removed from the presidency of Brazil a month before,

as our colleagues denounced in this conference – there are photographs to prove it – in the so-called Temer coup. We could not yet anticipate that Bolsonaro would come to power. Brexit would only be approved a month later, Orban had not been elected in Hungary yet, in Poland the regression was not as obvious then.

Since then, all of the worst diagnoses came true: Trump won, Bolsonaro was elected, Brexit now looks like a bottomless pit, with increasingly bad prognoses, three years on.

In the U.S., alongside the insults, misogyny and explicit sexism of the president's declarations, who sought support from the worst corners of the evangelical church, a regression regarding abortion rights, the persecution of immigrants, and Islamophobia, clearly reminds us of the rise of Nazism in Germany.

In the case of Brazil, after confrontations and escalating tensions before Bolsonaro's election, when an atmosphere of true persecution and terror was installed, there was the murder of Marielle on 14 March and the election of Bolsonaro on 28 October, 2018. An atmosphere of true persecution arose, forcing many activists into exile, similarly to what had happened at the time of the military dictatorship of 1964. Inciting hatred towards the left, archaic and traditionalist discourses, attacking gender equality, persecuting anything related to gender issues in schools and universities.

But we do not have to leave Europe to find murder as a political weapon. We cannot forget that before the referendum of 16 June, 2016, the Labour M.P. Jo Cox, in favor of the U.K. remaining in the European Union, was murdered. Several witnesses have said that the perpetrator shouted "Britain First!", the name of a far-right party against immigration. We are certain that Sue Scott will speak about this subject and others more in-depth.

2.

Why this regression, this return of populism, the far right, antisemitism, the horror regarding the "other" and immigration?

If we look at the history of the 20th century we can recognize a period with similarities to current events. Ten years after the financial and economic crisis of 1929, in 1939, the Second World War started. And in those ten years, Europe saw the growth of populism, antisemitism, and horror regarding the Other, which culminated in the horrific holocaust, as we know. Ten years after the 2008 crisis, with other associated factors, no doubt, we are faced with the growth of the far right, populism, the same horror regarding the “other”, now encompassing a wider population: immigrants, women, blacks, roma people.

What do these two periods have in common? Both took place after a great crisis of capitalism, a financial and economic crisis, which gave rise to high unemployment rates, bankruptcies, fear, insecurity. In this sense, we can say that there is a structural dimension to this escalation.

In fact, confronted with this financial and economic crisis of capitalism, traditional political forces cannot address the degradation of the living conditions of millions of people. Even though it is differently felt in different countries, this crisis is global, it has a domino effect, affecting every country, given the interdependence of economic exchange in global markets. The more vulnerable and dependent are precisely the ones who bear the brunt of the crisis, even though significant sectors of the middle class are also affected. For many, the specter of unemployment heightens the fear, the realization of a lack of control over one’s own fate generates feelings of impotence.

Before a series of complex problems, authoritarian and revanchist discourses become popular since they reduce the complexity by identifying great enemies – the “corrupt”, immigrants, Islamists, blacks, gypsies, gays, nonbelievers, in short, all of those who have become the “Jews” of our time.

Politics become increasingly opaque, differences regarding a solution for the crisis, turn any debate into a painful parade of perspectives. Before the fragmented answers provided by traditional political parties, insecurity and conflicts, religious and/or authoritarian leaders seem more appealing.

And if we know that powerful economic and military interests underpin these leaderships, the fact is that the poorest and most vulnerable tend to believe that these leaders are the solution to their problems and that is why they support them.

Structural factors, such as the financial and economic crisis, thus combine with subjective and emotional factors. Authoritarian leaders evoke precisely these basic and archaic fears, exploiting fear and insecurity.

2.1 But why do these leaders also resort to sexism, racism and homophobia, directly attacking gender equality, or even openly defending the use of violence?

But why is gender equality under attack?

Why is it in that even in countries where these policies are not as expressive there is now a kind of backlash, denominated anti-genderism by some male and female authors?

Among others, these are the questions we will try to give answers to in this conference. As a working hypothesis, below are a few ideas that we would like to discuss with you in the next few days.

2. 2 To begin with, we can say, as Judith Butler has suggested, that the election of Trump represented, for many, an unexpected or unforeseen reaction to Obama's election and to the threat of a woman becoming the president (a woman who ended up having more votes than Trump). In other words, the factors behind the 2008 crisis, which we have identified above – unemployment, precarious living conditions and a lack of prospects – might have pushed sectors of the impoverished white middle class, as well as other popular sectors, towards feelings of resentment and racist and sexist revanchism. Or, as J. Butler stated:

“We did not know how widespread anger is against elites, how deep the anger of white men is against feminism and the civil rights movement, how demoralized by economic dispossession many people are, how exhilarated people are by isolationism and the prospect of new walls and nationalist bellicosity. Is this the new ‘whitelash’? Why did we not quite see it coming?” J. Butler

In other countries, such as in Brazil, we can also posit that a relative

progress in women's and gay rights, the advances in the fight against gender violence and women, such as legal changes, including the Maria da Penha Law, the relative progress regarding gender equality in schools, may have unleashed the same reactions of resentment and anger so deftly exploited by religious groups.

Sexist anger against Dilma's election was also visible in the episode of her removal. Here too economic and political interests knew how to exploit these archaic feelings, unabashedly drawing on the horrors of the military dictatorship, now using them as trump cards.

There are certainly those who still have not forgiven Lula and Dilma for proving that it is possible to lift people out of poverty and lower the country's glaring levels of inequality. But Karla Bessa and other Brazilian colleagues will certainly provide us with a clearer view on these aspects.

These attacks have been vigorously opposed in street protests. Both in the U.S. and in Brazil, women and youngsters took to the streets. But there were also "pro-dictator" protests in both cases, exposing political and social divisions, similarly to other countries such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, Poland, among others.

In Spain too there have been great advances in the last few years in terms of gender equality. Recently there were large protests and public demonstrations that led to court decisions being reversed, such as the famous "la manada" trial. But nationalist and fascist movements have also grown, not only those who praise the dark times of Franco's dictatorship but also those who are explicitly against gender equality, such as Vox. Marta Soler will undoubtedly help us analyze these situations.

2.3

This series of attacks on gender equality and human rights, or the attempt to negate the existence of racism can be explained by factors shared by other historical periods – unemployment, a lack of prospects, a lack of policies that address people’s concerns tend to push large sections of the population to support authoritarian leaders. But there are new factors too.

What is new today is that the attacks are directed at the progress made in some countries regarding gender equality, human rights or the fight against racism and xenophobia, now “demonized”.

In our view, two reasons explain why these are the new targets. Firstly, the mobilization of archaic feelings through a narrative that evokes an idealized past when none of these “modern ideas” existed.

To explain, for example, why a man would chase and murder his ex-wife when she leaves and wants to separate against his will, we certainly have to confront ourselves with the primitive expression of resentment, the loss of control and the feeling of ownership – an extreme example of male domination, which responds with violence when challenged.

What is new compared to the past, especially in our cultural context, is not that there is more violence today, but that women react to it and will not tolerate it. Unfortunately, they pay a very high price for their audacity.

The same is true of homophobic reactions to a clear public affirmation of gay, lesbian, trans and queer movements.

Secondly, however, we have to admit that despite the hope of those who have been involved in the fight for human rights, and despite a few victories secured in the legal and political arena, the fact is that these victories and the movements that sustain them are relatively recent, compared with the millenary domination over women or

the wounds caused by slavery and colonialism over hundreds of years.

But let us go back to what Butler stated earlier.

“We did not know (...) how demoralized by economic dispossession many people are. Is this the new ‘whitelash’? Why did we not quite see it coming?”

This question contains a reflection that might have been absent from the analyses made by the feminisms confronted with these situations. Why did we not see it coming?

From our perspective, this reflection summons an old question that has been debated within gender, feminist and women’s studies. The question of giving relevance again to identity questions or social and economic contexts so as to reject the simplistic logic of either/or. In other words, if we do not understand the contexts in which identities are lived and experienced, we miss out on aspects of reality that are crucial to understand it. Therefore, we must be aware and connected to the everyday experiences of many people: men, women, black, white, roma people, gays, lesbians, trans, queer, or any other identity affirmation or the rejection of all of them, who experience the effects of globalization, the difficulties of the present time in these different contexts.

Not because economic or social dispossession is the predominant factor compared to other identity characteristics, or because the ones we have mentioned are more important than others. But because the different types of inequality intersect and can only be understood when analyzed in context, combining structural dimensions – social and economic – with institutional and systemic ones, as well as the symbolic and emotional planes.

If Butler’s perspective has always helped us see the limits of categorizing identity, drawing attention to fluidity, the need to look at other people’s suffering and various interdependences, Nancy Fraser’s more recent approach also provides a possible answer to the questions that we have posed.

In fact, for Fraser, in the analysis of the realities related to gender discrimination and social justice we must combine three factors, three Rs: redistribution, which generally relates to social inequality, recognition, or status, which relates to dignity and the valorization of the right to freely express one's sexuality, sexual orientation and gender expression, and representation, related to political representation and power.

In this sense, we are living at a time when we must look at the different levels of inequality and the way they interlink. An inequality of resources, but also a vital or existential inequality, as Ferreira de Almeida proposes, inspired by G. Therborn.

As Fraser insists, "this does not mean that we have to remain quiet about the urgent questions posed by racism and sexism. What we need to do is show how these ancient forms of oppression find new expression and ground today through the action of finance capitalism. Rebutting the false notion of an irreconcilable split, we should link the prejudice suffered by women and ethnic minorities to the difficulties faced by Trump's electors."

But even these generic answers will not suffice. To face the difficult times that we are living we must count on research made in various parts of the world, which have been valuable to the field of gender studies, but have less visibility since they do not come from Europe or the U.S.

In Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, all of Latin America, but also Africa, there are important reflections of seasoned colleagues as well as younger ones, from black feminisms in their different versions, from LGBT and trans movements, whose contributions are decisive for better understanding these different realities and contexts.

In Portugal as well, even though the CIEG is recent, studies on gender, feminist and women's studies have been developed by several researchers, from the more seasoned to the less experienced. In our conferences, we strive precisely to give visibility to this production.

This type of events allow exchanges like the one that took place in our 1st Conference, which resulted in two books with rich and diverse texts both in Portuguese and in English. With your contribution, we hope to replicate those results now.

By promoting nine semi-plenary tables and choosing three central topics for our plenary roundtables, we have tried to showcase a diversity of perspectives. We have invited male and female researchers, but also activists, national and international participants whose reflections will certainly enrich the debate.

For our first plenary roundtable, we chose the topic *Rights, Policies and Resistances*, a pressing topic in the scientific and political realms.

In our second plenary table, we also wanted to discuss masculinities, since gender issues are not just women's problems but larger social issues. When reflecting about various masculinities we come across identity constructions, male domination and inequality, constraints, as well as extreme cases of toxic masculinity and violence.

Lastly, we thought it was pertinent to address inequalities, ethnicity/race and discrimination – topics that are related to a more historical dimension and to a globalized world that is still plagued by a colonial and post-colonial legacy, generating and updating old and new forms of discrimination where the pervasiveness of gender issues can be felt.

3 – What do we hope for CIEG and this Conference?

We are holding this conference after obtaining a classification of Excellent within the last international assessment promoted by the FCT. We were obviously delighted not only with this result, but also with the praise that we received, confirming that our work is recognized. On the other hand, it was important to see that being translated into a considerable reinforcement of our resources, allowing us to expand and strengthen our action. This made us very happy, but it also came with a sense of added responsibility.

In our seven years of activity, we have managed to reach and even surpass our goals.

We develop projects of so-called fundamental research, train Master's and PhD students, promote specific post-graduate education and specialized courses on gender equality aimed at various publics; we assess and contribute to the design of public policy; we disseminate knowledge, and promote the social impact of our activities.

The promotion of international conferences every three years fulfills several key goals of our diverse activity.

On the one hand, the goal of giving visibility and expanding the Portuguese field of gender, feminist and women's studies, but also of internationalizing it.

On the other hand, arising as a meeting point of female and male researchers from several continents – Europe, U.S., Latin America, Africa, Australia – so that from these regular encounters and exchanges advances in the scientific knowledge within this area can be achieved. In this way, we can improve our ability to critically and thoughtfully interpret and intervene on the different territories where our action is developed.

Alongside research, as you will see in several presentations, we will debate public policy, the impact and advantages of adopting different approaches and courses of action. Therefore, we will benefit from the contributions of everyone who intervenes in this field – researchers, but also

political representatives, activists – and from the many experiments developed in other countries.

For us it is equally crucial, through the research findings and the collective reflections that might arise in this conference, to give visibility to several types of inequality, as well as more direct or subtle forms of discrimination.

In fact, even though the fact that women do not reach decision roles is a direct consequence of the patriarchy and women's inferior status, we all know that these legitimate demands are more visible than other forms of discrimination – such as the low salaries earned by the vast majority of low-skilled female workers – or other more direct or subtle forms of discrimination, such as covert racism or homophobia.

Privilege is invisible and that is why it is crucial to make the media show these unequal realities experienced daily by so many.

If we have no illusions that it is not sufficient to demonstrate what our results are 'shouting', that social movements and activism have to push towards change, that we need top-down public policy for these transformations to materialize, these actions need to be complemented by a constant and assertive persuasion effort so as to solidify these changes, as recent history seems to teach us.

We are counting on you to help us along this path.

Anália Torres

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