



## **Power, Gender and Democracy. From Domination to Gender Equality\***

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**Poder, género y democracia. De la  
dominación a la igualdad de género**

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**Abstract.** When examining literature of gender and democracy, one realizes that the majority of the works on these subjects revolve around two related structural justifications. The first emphasizes on the subjugation of women, reasoning that follows Pateman's ideas on the sexual contract. These approximations preponderantly scrutinize the patterns and practices of domination that victimize women. The second trend of thought targets women's equality or, more concretely, inequality. It pays special attention to the marginalization of women from positions of power and to their exclusion from the public arena. With the commitment of opening a third front, the present article proposes a different approach to the study of gender and democracy. Though it recognizes the validity of both of these lines of advocacy, it takes one step away from the dichotomous logic that places women in one side and men on the other. Namely, it analyses gender relations, as an interdependent and dual social construction that differentiates and singularizes gender dynamics.

**Keywords.** Gender, Democracy, Inequality, Injustice, Gender Relations.

**Resumen.** Al examinar las aproximaciones teóricas sobre el género y la democracia, es posible evidenciar que la mayoría de los trabajos sobre estos temas giran en torno a dos justificaciones estructurales. La primera aborda la democracia desde un análisis crítico que resalta la subyugación de la mujer, razonamiento que sigue las ideas de Pateman acerca del contrato sexual. Estas aproximaciones preponderantemente examinan los patrones y prácticas de dominación que victimizan a las mujeres. La segunda corriente de pensamiento estudia la igualdad de las mujeres o, más concretamente, la desigualdad. Por lo tanto, presta atención a la marginalización de las mujeres de los puestos de poder y a su exclusión de la vida pública. Con el compromiso de ampliar el debate sobre las relaciones de género y la democracia, el presente artículo propone un enfoque diferencial a partir de las concepciones de poder. El artículo se distancia de la lógica dicotómica que coloca a las mujeres en un lado y los hombres en el otro. En concreto, analiza cómo las relaciones de género son construcciones sociales que se originan de la interdependencia y de la dualidad.

**Palabras clave.** Género, democracia, desigualdad, injusticia, relaciones de género.

**Résumé.** En examinant les approches théoriques sur le genre et la démocratie, on peut voir que la plupart des travaux sur ces questions s'articulent autour de deux justifications structurelles. Le premier traite de la démocratie à partir d'une analyse critique qui met en évidence l'assujettissement des femmes, le raisonnement qui suit les idées de Pateman sur le contrat sexuel. Ces approches ont examiné principalement les modèles et les pratiques de domination dont sont victimes les femmes. La deuxième école de pensée examine l'égalité des femmes, ou plus précisément, de l'inégalité. Par conséquent, faites attention à la marginalisation des femmes des postes de pouvoir et de leur exclusion de la vie publique. Avec un engagement à élargir le débat sur les relations entre les sexes et la démocratie, ce document propose une approche différentielle fondée sur les concepts de pouvoir. L'article loin de la logique dichotomique qui place les femmes d'un côté et hommes de l'autre. Plus précisément, analyse la manière dont les relations de genre sont des constructions sociales qui découlent de l'interdépendance et de la dualité.

**Mots-clés.** Sexe, la démocratie, l'inégalité, l'injustice, les relations de genre.

**Resumo.** Ao considerar as abordagens teóricas sobre gênero e democracia, pode-se ver que a maioria dos trabalhos sobre estas questões giram em torno de duas justificativas estruturais. A primeira lida com a democracia a partir de uma análise crítica que destaca a subjugação das mulheres, o raciocínio que segue as ideias de Pateman sobre o contrato sexual. Estas abordagens predominantemente examinam os padrões e práticas de dominação que vitimam as mulheres. A segunda escola de pensamento examina a igualdade das mulheres, ou mais especificamente, a desigualdade. Portanto, concentra-se na marginalização das mulheres de posições de poder e sua exclusão da vida pública. Com o compromisso de ampliar o debate sobre as relações de gênero e a

democracia, este trabalho propõe uma abordagem diferenciada com base nos conceitos de poder. O artigo afasta-se da lógica dicotômica, que coloca as mulheres e aos homens em de lados opostos. Especificamente, estuda como as relações de gênero são construções sociais que surgem a partir da interdependência e da dualidade.

**Palavras-chave.** Gênero, democracia, desigualdade, injustiça, relações de gênero.

## Introduction

Issues of democracy and gender have been a recurrent topic in the research of world politics. For example, while certain international relations theories examine the correlation between democracy and world peace,<sup>1</sup> a multiplicity of transnational feminist groups trespass the barriers of the nation-state supporting gender equality around the globe. (Conway, 2007; Ramdas, 2009; Hudson, 2012).

In both cases, however, several of the readings of the social phenomena capture the visions of the global north, some even portraying the global south as an under-developed "brother" that needs to be educated. (Teivainen, 2011a). Consequently, a group of world politics scholars has labeled the feminist project as imperial and/or colonial. (Liddle & Rai, 1998; Odeh, 1993; Jacqui, 2005; Cunningham, 2005; and Maynard, 2010). These authors argue that the advocacy for women's rights many a times replicates international power structures, in which the feminist movements of the global north force their visions of the male/female relations upon the global south.

When examining literature of gender and democracy, one realizes that the majority of the works on these subjects revolve around two related structural justifications. The first emphasizes on the subjugation of women, reasoning that follows Pateman's ideas on *The Sexual Contract*. (Walby, 1994; Pateman, 1998; Prokhovnik, 1998; Boucher, 2003; Goatcher, 2005; and Keating, 2007). These approximations preponderantly scrutinize the patterns and practices of domination that victimize women. The second trend of thought targets women's equality or, more concretely, inequality. (Jónasdóttir, 1983; Waylen, 1994; Inglehart, Norris and Welzel, 2002; Beer, 2009; and Adkins, 2012). It pays special attention to the marginalization of women from positions of power and to their exclusion from the public arena. With the commitment of opening a third front, the present article proposes a different approach to the study of gender and democracy. Though it recognizes the validity of both of these lines of advocacy, it takes one step away from the dichotomous logic that places women in one side and men on the other. Namely, it analyses gender relations, as an interdependent and dual social construction that differentiates and singularizes gender dynamics, rejecting the homogenizing visions of the global north.

The theoretical approximations posited here try to avoid imposing a narrow vision of the world. One of the fundamental premises contends that the homogenization of gender relations and of democracy hinders the embracement of difference. It neglects the avail of studying the political questions of the world and the promotion of democracy from a perspective that learns from heterogeneity. Bearing this in mind, I hope to articulate a discussion that helps both national and international practitioners and scholars in the task of making the world more egalitarian and democratic by accepting difference.

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1 The Democratic Peace Theory contends that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other (Oren, 1995). Its theoretical premises, however, are prone to conceive democracy as a uniform system of governance so as to identify systemic regularities. This fictitious homogenization and closure is overly problematic. As Heikki Patomäki (2008, 21-22) maintains, "What is wrong with the theory of democratic peace? [That] constant regularities only occur in closed systems [and] the world is anything but closed" (ibid.). See also: Suganimi, 2001.

## 1. Methodology

In disciplinary terms, the study of democracy and gender has extended to various areas of knowledge, such as political science, law, psychology, and philosophy. The variety of concepts allows the use of tools and materials from diverse academic fields. The present investigation, nevertheless, cannot be categorized as multidisciplinary in the traditional sense. The study does not simply juxtapose, for example, a political analysis to legal examination. The objective weighs more on the inspection of real-world processes without retreating into traditional academic partitions. This multidimensional approach enriches the study with collections of theoretical debates that supplement the formulation of the research parameters.

I must underline that Foucault's conceptualizations of power relations hold a position of utmost importance throughout this dissertation. Based on his theoretical formulations, I examine and develop the topics of democratic identity and gender relations. His basic premises help me form an innovative perspective that breaks free from traditional theoretical conceptions, distancing my contentions from the notions of power as domination.

Due to the fact that the approximations framed in this research are primarily theoretical and philosophical, my reflections remain within the realm of ideal types. As an ontological study, most of the sources used come from diverse political, philosophical, legal, and sociological, academic writings. Though the methodology for gathering the excerpts and the literature used in this research might be criticized by some academics, evaluating it as procedure of picking and choosing which passages fit and which do not so as to uphold my propositions, I maintain that my aim is not to codify a dogmatic interpretation of the writings of the array of authors cited. More concretely, I do not aspire to produce an all-encompassing dissertation that contributes to the scholarly debate of the works of Foucault and/or of those of other authors mentioned throughout this article. Consequently, their thoughts and premises serve as long as they contribute to the discussion of the main issues that this dissertation studies. This does not entail the disregard of those ideas that seem problematic. On the contrary, I give particular importance to these, for they provide me with some of the most fascinating insights that help me devise a more thorough assessment of gender relations and democracy.

## 2. Gender is not Sex

Before initiating, it is necessary to clarify the differences between gender and sex. Traditionally, sex was conceived as a biological trait, as the anatomical, physiological, and hormonal characteristics that differentiated men and women. Gender, on the other hand, was perceived as a social construction, which resulted from complex socio-cultural processes that linked certain behaviors to a determinate gender. In recent years, the lines that divide the biological and the social have become obscure. The division between gender and sex has increasingly been questioned (Rossi, 1984). Despite these difficulties, some gender scholars have formed clear conceptualizations that still extricate sex from gender. According to Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987, 126), "doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures.'" Under this conception, gender is not only a condition through which individuals organize their life in order to reflect and express their gender; but also a shared set of beliefs that influence how they perceive each other's behavior (ibíd., 127). Conclusively, while sex "is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females and males"; gender "is the activity of managing

situated conduct in light of normative conception of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (ibíd.).

Taking these explanations into account, when examining the subject of democracy and gender, I will focus on both the idea of doing gender and the concept of gender elaborated by West and Zimmerman.

### 3. Gender and Democracy

The number of publications and authors that study the subject of gender and democracy has grown exponentially over the last couple of years. They have addressed the topic from different perspectives, revealing the extensive substantive inequalities that subsist between women and men. Valerie M. Hudson et ál. (2012, 5) argue, for example, that "gender inequality, in all of its many manifestations, is a form of violence – no matter how invisible or normalized that violence may be. This gendered-based violence not only destroys homes but (...) also significantly affects politics and security at both the national and the international levels." From an international relations perspective, their study indicates how gender aggressions harm society and how the omission of this reality leads to a theoretical and practical deficit. I agree with most of the authors' assertions; and the fact is that their arguments echo the voices of a population of gender scholars who have advocated for equality as a requisite for the consolidation of a more inclusive democratic world. (Inglehart, Norris and Welzel, 2002; Goatcer, 2005; Jonasdottir, 2006; Rosenblum, 2007; Keating, 2007; Beer, 2009; Adkins, 2012; Adkins, 2012).

Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah describe feminism as:

An ideology [that] attempts to understand the oppression and agency of women within a patriarchal structure in the present neo-liberal economic, social and political systems (...) that is against fundamentalism, global capitalism, and imperialism (...) which allies itself with the marginalized, dalit and indigenous peoples (...) which unfolds its practice every day in our lives and continues the quest for collective and democratic functioning.

(Conway, 2007, 63).

Taking this description into consideration, I take a feminist standpoint to analyze gender relations: I reject all forms of oppression of women within systems of organization. But, more than a feminist perspective, I elaborate a critical approach to gender relations from a democratic theory evaluation. This way I explore how democracy is intended to provide an opportunity to minimize practices of coercion and violence, by supplanting domination with political power.

In order to center on the political, I do not discuss the problems of gender inequality in the economy or in the labor market. Albeit it is difficult to detach politics from economy, I focus my theoretical approximations on the subject of gender and democracy. If the "public sphere is the primary connector between people and power" (Young, 2000, 172), then politics can trigger the transformation of economic practices that generate patterns of domination. I direct my analysis to how democratic institutions can oversee and protect gender relations so that they neither displace towards nor replicate practices of violence and coercion. By doing this, I hope to explicate the importance of creating spaces of deliberation to challenge gender relations of power.

Though some might categorize the following approximations as platonic abstractions, I think that they can help us transcend the preconceptions and prejudices that hinder a better understanding of the subjects of gender and democracy. For this reason, by conjecturing a purely hypothetical reality and an ideal type of society, I may be able to formulate an innovative approach to the topic proposed. The theoretical suggestion allows me to distance myself from my own pre-established knowledge and deconstruct the justifications for inequality.

#### 4. Justifying Inequality

During the seventeenth century, those who opposed the participation of women in politics mainly claimed, “women, by virtue of their nature, lacked the capacities required of free and equal individuals and citizens and so posed a threat to the state” (Pateman, 1985: 8). Women were portrayed as lacking reason, which made it impossible for them to participate in the public sphere: “only masculine beings are endowed with attributes and capacities necessary to enter into contracts, the most important of which is ownership of property in the person; only men, that is to say, are ‘individuals’”. (Pateman, 1988, 5). Women, in other words, were not seen as “free and equal ‘individuals’ but natural subjects”. (1988, 53). In this sense, the resistance for the incorporation of women in politics was founded on the belief that there existed some *natural* differences between the men and women, which inhibited the former from participating in politics. *Nature* was viewed as a quality that distinguished the sexes and that gave men and not women the indispensable attributes to interact in and administer the public sphere. Explicitly, the anti-feminist of the time saw women as inferior by *nature*.

As explained by Anna G. Jónasdóttir (1988, 305), the preponderant anti-feminist thinking suffered an ideological shift away from *nature* in the late seventeen century and, more concretely, in the eighteen and the nineteenth century. The ideology that justified the exclusion of women from the political life changed “from a stance where applications to the *reason of (differentiated) nature* were central to a stance that justified itself by applying to various aspects of *social unity*” (ibíd.). The author reveals how anti-feminists no longer marginalized women from politics because of their *nature* but because of their belief that it was necessary for the wellbeing of society. Furthermore, she describes how in the work of Hobbes and Lock one can already identify this utilitarian view of women. As reasoned by Pateman (1985), the placement of dependency in women within the private domain permitted men to be independent individuals. Ruth Rubio-Marín (2012, 102) writes,

In naturally taking on the responsibility of care it was expected that women would enable men’s physical, social, and cultural survival, silently allowing the idea of men as independent citizens and actors in the public sphere to work in practice. Men thus achieved an appearance of independence by shifting toward women the weight of their own dependency.

(Rubio-Marín, 2012, 102).

Consequently, women needed to stay confined to the private sphere in order to preserve the fundamental institutions that supported the unity of society as a whole.

One does not need to go too far to see that these two justifications, when compared to the definition of democracy, do not precisely fit to what one conceives as a democratic identity. They seem more as arguments that warrant a relation of domination, in which certain groups are marginalized from participating on the constitution of the political body. Both justifications, the ones that appeal to nature and the ones that call for social unity, create discursive patterns that ostracize certain communities,

even placing them in the "otherness"; and, by doing so, reject the democratic ideals of inclusion, anti-totality politics, tolerance, equality, and difference, among others. In sum, these types of reasoning resemble more a description of a relation based on domination than one based on political power.

One might ask, however, does the exclusion of women still find ways of being justified in societies that claim to be democratic? How are the discourses that rationalize inequality currently constructed? I will try to address these questions as I dissect the topic of gender relations.

Throughout the elaboration of my study on the subject gender and democracy, I have had the chance to discuss my thoughts with a variety of people. I talked to academics, politicians, farmers, students, and others, most of them from Colombia. (Bushnell, 2007). These spontaneous conversations were by no means a strict methodologically organized set of interviews and surveys, which could provide us with concrete empirical data on the subject gender and democracy. It was simply a process of gripping the perspective of different individuals; an informal exercise inspired by pure curiosity. I did, nonetheless, encounter some curious recurrent patterns and ideas that I would like to share, for they seem to find empirical ratification in the work of other authors.

As I enquired the opinion of several of people, I met few individuals who supported the exclusion of women from politics by justifying this phenomenon based on the idea of the difference of *nature* between men and women. A lesser number of people asserted and accepted the belief that woman should stay away from politics because of the importance of gender roles; a very similar trend of thought as the one of social unity described by Jónasdóttir (1988). There was, however, a great amount of people who, though claimed to be completely in favor of equality between men and women, maintained that gender parity could not be implemented because of the concrete cultural and substantive inequalities between the sexes.

Curiously, in regards to substantive inequalities, Jónasdóttir recognizes the same pattern and captures the substance of these opinions. She asserts, "[c]onventionally, the discussion about the different nature of men's and women's way of exerting, or not exerting, their citizenship most often runs in terms of lack of, or of insufficient *competence* of women; in formal education, in socialization, and/or in practical training in other contexts supposed to foster political competence" (Harrison, 1978, 309). On the other hand, the cultural explanations for the rejection of gender parity tended to resemble the descriptions that Inglehart, Norris and Welzel discuss; that is, the hypothesis that in "traditional societies, women will be reluctant to run and, if they seek the office, will fail to attract sufficient support to win". (Inglehart, Norris and Welzel, 2002, 322). Succinctly put, both arguments focused on the lacks within society that make equal democratic participation improbable, either by centering on the side of the supply (on the actual competence of women to participate in politics) or on the side of the demand (the cultural aspects that would impede women's actual engagement in politics).

One cannot disregard these two propositions when examining the subject of gender and democracy, or fail to understand that both the cultural and the competence arguments can be directly correlated. As a matter of fact, after exploring women's participation in politics, studies of post-industrial societies have found that, for example, the predominance of Catholicism is directly related to a more traditional view of gender roles and, consequently, a more complex environment for women's political involvement. (Karvonen & Selle, 1995; Rule, 1987; Reynolds, 1999).

Additionally, it has also been shown that factors such as culture and economy affect the possibility of women's participation in the political arena. As concluded by Inglehart, Norris and Welzel (2002,

342), “both women’s representation in parliament and a society’s level of democracy seem to reflect an underlying cultural shift linked with economic development.” Explicitly, a reduction of substantive inequalities between men and women generates a corresponding increase of women’s political empowerment.

Besides, one might inquire if democracy is the most apt system to pervade gender equality.

Caroline Beer (2009) tackles this question extensively and comes to a positive conclusion. Although she evidences how some other types of regimes have been more effective in promoting gender equality and in endorsing the participation of women in politics, she argues that democracy tends to produce a more egalitarian society. She claims that even though the beneficial “consequences of democracy and greater political inclusion take time to develop, (...) long term democracy and women’s participation have a significant influence on improving the status of women relative to men”. (Beer, 2009, 225-226). In other words, despite the setbacks that might arise from the implementation of a democratic form of governance in some states (due to cultural traditions that reinforce patterns of inequality), in the long term, democracy enables and stimulates the three domains that augment gender equality: capabilities, opportunities, and empowerment agency.<sup>2</sup>

John Gerring et ál. (2005, 325) write:

[one needs to] consider regimes as historically informed phenomena rather than as contemporary variables. This means looking both backwards and forward in time (via lagged predictors). In particular, it means measuring a country’s accumulated *stock* of democracy rather than its level of democracy at a particular moment in time. The core insight is that institutional effects unfold over time, sometimes a great deal of time, and that these temporal effects are cumulative.

(John Gerring et ál., 2005, 325).

Ultimately, democracy is a process that takes time to consolidate. The consecration of formal institutions, which recognize equal rights to all citizens, does not automatically cause the materialization of democratic practices within society. As the validations for the marginalization of women encounter resistance, democratic practices need to detach society from the discursive forces that want to preserve traditional forms of domination. Notwithstanding the obstacles that can divert society away from democracy, one could hypothetically conclude that, with time, the result of democracy is a more egalitarian society. Nevertheless, the link between time and democracy raises a series of interrogations: How would the end result of this democratic process look like? Would all democracies appear the same? Would all democratic societies share certain common traits? What would distinguish one democracy from another? Would gender relations veer towards homogeneity?

## 5. Inequality as Injustice

If hypothetically, based on the work of the authors discussed, democracy leads towards greater gender equality, one might wonder what the final outcome would resemble. This does not mean that one predicts a determinate future, but that one analyses a possible future scenario in which all the substantive inequalities between men and women are drastically reduced or eradicated completely.

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (2005) has assessed gender equality using these three domains. Capabilities refer primarily to indicators of education, nutrition, and health. Empowerment is related to the subject of representation in government. And opportunities are evaluated by examining the equality of access to resources.

By envisioning this ideal type of system, I can distance myself from the common arguments that reject gender equality based on substantive inequalities or on the lack of competence. I visualize a society in which all forms of substantive inequalities are inexistent, in which men and women have the same competences; and, afterwards, I imagine how the institutions within that particular society might be different from the ones that characterize democratic regimes today. Accordingly, I can picture a society in which all individuals are formally and materially included as equals in the organization of the political body. Conclusively, I propose a deep theoretical analysis, "where the men/women relationship is isolated, [in order] to make progress, and to satisfy demands from women to interpret situations where less obvious barriers than housework and children or lack of competence are at work". (Jónasdóttir, 1988, 310).

The proposal of an ideal type of democratic society, in which all substantive and formal inequalities between men and women are removed, elevates some automatic issues: Would gender still be a pertinent subject in democratic debates? Would there be a need to study the subject of gender and inclusion? Would gender equality be a relevant topic? I believe that the answer to all of these questions is affirmative. The eradication of all the substantive and formal inequalities would only constitute one step towards the transformation of a more inclusive democratic system. Gender would continue to be a relevant topic, but it would focus primarily on difference. Furthermore, the equality of competences between men and women in an egalitarian society would still leave the cultural explanations for the rejection of equal participation of women intact.<sup>3</sup> Let me elaborate these arguments.

In the ideal type society, women are no longer restricted from entering the public sphere. The formal recognition of equality is complemented with policies that guarantee the actual substantive equality between men and women. In this hypothetical scenario, women have equal access to education, health and labor. Additionally, they participate in and attain positions of power in the governmental institutions, enabling them to voice and pursue their particular interests. Fittingly, women acquire full and equal citizenship, exercising their power without encountering overbearing formal barriers, prejudices, and/or other substantive obstacles. Women are recognized as equal members of the political body and, consequently, the groups of individuals do not exclude them from spaces of decision making.

According to T. H. Marshall, citizenship has three parts, or elements: social, political, and civil.

The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom, liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice. By the political element I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political authority or as an elector of the members of such a body. The corresponding institutions are parliament and councils of local government. By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services.

(Marshall, 1950, 10-11).

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3 As stated before, I understand that there can be a direct relation between substantive inequalities and culture, and that it is unlikely that substantive inequalities can be fully eradicated in a society that has a predominantly patriarchal culture. Nonetheless, I want to isolate the subject of culture from substantive inequalities so as to elaborate a philosophical perspective of the obstacles to women's participation in politics. As Inglehart, Norris and Welzel (2002) have shown, economic development leads to a cultural shift. Accordingly, I want to evaluate, from a philosophical perspective, how can the eradication of substantive inequalities affect culture and more concretely democratic identity.

When discussing democracy and gender from a philosophical perspective, I assume that the civil and social elements are prearranged in such a way that men and women have equal access to both of these. By fabricating such an abstraction, I plan to focus primarily on the political element, trying to unveil how this part of citizenship materializes in a completely civil and social egalitarian society. More precisely, I want to analyze how power relations interact in this type of system, concentrating on how democratic identity is formed.

## 6. Power and Gender Relations

Foucault neither conceived power relations as good or bad, but as dangerous, for they always incline towards states of domination. He insisted, however, that we had to “cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms (...). In fact, power produces: it produces reality.” (Foucault, 1979: 194). Rejecting Habermas idea of universal principles of governance, Foucault argued:

The idea that there could exist a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints seems utopian to me. This is precisely a failure to see that power relations are not something that is bad in itself, that we have to break free of. I do not think a society can live without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others.

(Foucault, 1997, 298).

In this sense, even in a completely egalitarian society, relations of power continue to exist. Therefore, the various groups that form society still compete, collaborate, and communicate to put their particular interests within the political body. Despite these relations of power, or as a way to avoid advancing towards conditions of domination, formal democratic political institutions safeguard the principles of equality, tolerance, and difference, creating controls that condemn actions that neglect standards of restraint. Norms and regulations safeguard the rights of the variety of members that make up a society, so that none of them falls into the vulnerable position of where she is rejected equal institutional protection.

The institutional bodies mirror the relations of power but not the relations of domination. In other words, men and women interact as equals in the public sphere. The democratic institutions consecrate and promote relationships of mutuality or of full reciprocity. This is “a relation in which (a) each agent recognizes the other as free and as capable of self-development, (b) each acts with regards to the other in ways that enhance the other’s self-development on the basis of a consideration of the other’s needs, and (c) both agents take such mutual enhancement of each other’s agency as a conscious aim”. (Gould, 1988, 77). Namely, mutuality stands as a key feature of the democratic identity. It is the result of the consolidation of a culture that embraces democracy and rejects practices of domination that propagate the consecration of situations of inequality.

The question then is how to distinguish gender relations of domination? According to Jónasdóttir (1988, 315), if we want to explain “the socially and politically relevant differences between women and men, we have to reveal their generative sources, the sources of power which produce them”. Though the author focuses her critic on the way the capitalist system reproduces gender inequality, it is interesting how by taking this proposal one can begin to elaborate a shift away from conceiving the relation between men and women simply as one of domination. Jónasdóttir argues that we should not reduce relations of power solely to acts of violence, for example, placing rape as the primary

focus. Transcending from the conception of power as domination, the author reveals the need to see the power relations that underlie physical violence. She writes, "it may seem strange, but I think that it is the 'freely given' – and taken – love that should be centered" (1988, 312). This calling to examine love as a power relation takes me back to Foucault's definition of power. Beliefs and desires are the predominant constitutive powers that produce the social and political differences between men and women. This type of powers can only be exercised over free subjects. As such, gender relations, as a set of desires and beliefs, are a form of political organization that creates practices of self-government. This does not mean that coercion is never present, but that it cannot be seen as the major constitutive force that explicates all the historical constructions that led to the formation of the relations between men and woman.

If doing gender causes the "creation of a variety of institutionalized frameworks through which our 'natural, normal sexedness' can be enacted" (West & Zimmerman, 1998, 137), then gender relations embody the power structures that these institutionalized frameworks generate. They are the set of desires and beliefs that replicate patterns of conduct. It is a mistake to deny the power behind the cultural structures that form gender relations. These do not necessarily recreate practices of domination but do have to be carefully scrutinized so as correct any flagrant violation of an individual's freedom.

Consensual beliefs about the attributes of men and women recreate gender roles. "These beliefs are more than beliefs about attributes of women and men: Many of these expectations are normative in the sense that they describe qualities or behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each sex" (Eagly, 1987, 13). Gender relations reflect consensual beliefs, which condition the conduct of men and women. Correspondingly, feminist scholars have categorized the kind of expectations created by these social beliefs as "*descriptive norms*, which are consensual expectations about what members of a group actually do, and *injunctive norms*, which are consensual expectations about what a group of people ought to do or ideally would do" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, 574). These expectations are relations of power that "instruct" both men and women and indicate what actions are "acceptable" social behaviors.

According to Valerie M. Hudson et ál. (2012, 53), there are three "key wounds inflicted by microaggression against women in human society: (1) lack of bodily integrity and physical security, (2) lack of equality in family law, and (3) lack of parity in the councils of human decision making." These three aggressions are vices within gender relations that promote and enable the recurrence of practices of domination. For this reason, a democratic society is called to action so as to change these wounds that contradict the principles of democracy. The recognition of these inequalities and acts of domination, nonetheless, cannot incite us to categorize all gender relations as a form of domination.

Valerie M. Hudson et ál. (2012, 53) write, "Virtually all traditional cultures remain patrilocal, which simply means that brides relocate to the home of the groom's family upon marriage." Furthermore, they argue that the "family psychology produced by patrilocal may have a devastating effect on women and girls." The authors then pass to evidence how a patrilocal culture affects women and how these live in a situation of pure domination, in which the use of violence and coercion against them is persistent. I am not here to refute that these harmful practices occur, as a matter of fact, I recognize this as a problem that needs to be tackled in patrilocal or patriarchal cultures. What I do want to discuss is the dangers of labeling all traditional relations as a form of domination. I think that the tendency of viewing certain cultures as a threat to women's desires and beliefs generates practices of intolerance that affect the formulation of measures that avoid traditional forms of domination. In other words, this view promulgates a way of thinking that advocates for the imposition of western

conceptions of gender relations in the global south, which encumbers the imagination of innovative devices that help promulgate gender equality.

## 7. Gender Relations and Marriage

In order to expand my contention, I will explore the institution of marriage from Foucault's theoretical notions of power relations. As it has been discussed, under this conception, the exercise of power ties itself to freedom; "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (Foucault, 1982, 790). According to Foucault, power relations transcend the use of violence and coercion. They are supported on their strength to mold the subject's desires and beliefs. Foucault constructs an understanding of power relations that unveils the capacity of making exogenous desires unconsciously and consciously our own. This phenomenon is a result of a long process of "education", in which the individual internalizes the rights and duties assigned to him or her.

As relations of power, gender relations also transcend the use of violence and coercion. Marriage, as a type of gender relation, serves as an example for evidencing the similarities. In free democratic societies with traditional catholic roots, women and men can choose whom they decide to marry. Additionally, they are also allowed to divorce. Marriage in this type of culture embodies the type of power described by Foucault. Two free individuals sign a contract, in which they swear to be together until death. In most of these gender relations, the individuals believe in and desire the preservation of marriage. They are not coerced or dominated, but undoubtedly a relation of power exists between them. As Foucault (1980, 93) claims, "power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society." Marriage is one of these complex strategic relations that characterize one type of gender relations; and not merely an institution "to ensure men's power through their access to women's bodies" (Boucher, 2012, 27), as seen by Pateman.

## 8. Gender Relations and Interdependency

The common argument against patriarchal culture is the dependency of women. Because in these cultures the man is assigned the chore of providing the substantive resources and women the task of taking care of the house and children, there is a tendency to criticize the dependency of women as something negative. This comes from the global north capitalist image, in which individual freedom denies the reality of dependency. Accordingly, any type of dependency, let it be to the state or to the spouse, is seen as harmful to the individual's freedom. As described by Ruth Rubio-Marín (2012, 102), "Modernity enshrined the liberal view of the subject of rights as an autonomous being, master of his own life project. (...) with the rise of industrial capitalism economic independence came to encompass the ideal of earning a family wage, so that property ownership, wage labor and self-employment all came to be recognized as forms of economic independence." This abstract fiction of the individual, as someone independent, based on the ideal of production and wage earning, fails to see the fact that relations of power always cause interdependency. Moreover, this call for individualism neglects the fact that not all relations of power in which dependency is present are malignant.

In a gender relation based on equality, for example, in which neither physical nor psychological domination is present, interdependency is recognized and embraced. The woman is dependent on the man as the man is dependent on the woman. They both comply with the traditions made by the relation because they embody their beliefs and desires. Interdependency consists on recognizing the importance of the acts of each of the individuals involved for the wellbeing of the relation. This

does not mean that in these particular gender relations those involved are unequal; on the contrary, to distance gender relations from domination, the individuals engage in a relation in which each appreciates the other as equal.

For years, feminists have studied and criticized the reclusion of women to the private sphere. Raia Prokhovnik (1998, 88) analyses this subject in detail and posit three possible choices that women have. The first alternative is to "operate in the realm of men." The second option is for "women to do a double shift – to undertake paid employment on an 'equal' basis with man, and to sustain and take primary responsibility for a home and children and husband." The third possibility is for women "to stay in the private realm." She adds, "This is many women's choice – for some chosen under the influence of social expectation, for some chosen as a positive preference." Most importantly, however, is what she has to say about this last option:

Women who choose to stay in the private realm are undervalued as people, both by society and by men. The caring and nurturing undertaken by such women is taken for granted; its perceived social value is very low. However this paper would argue that the 'natural obligations' parents are seen to have in bringing up children should also be recognized and valued as ethically-grounded 'civic obligations', as part of citizenship.

(ibíd.).

From this extract is possible to state that the problem lies not in the roles that the individuals decide to play in a gender relation, but on how these are perceived by society. A society that fails to value the pivotal significance of caring and nurturing is one that disregards the equality of all the groups that make up the social body. The aim then is not to propose a homogenization of the gender relations, suggestion that dismisses main problem. The objective should consist on integrating the different social tasks into the democratic institutions. The usefulness of an individual cannot continue to be measured in terms of capital and production. This perspective rejects the significance of the complex relationships that make up a community. Accordingly, even in a gender relation, where both individuals involved value their tasks as equally important, a democratic ideology can subsist. As a Marxist feminist writes,

Maternal feminist eschew the liberal notion of the citizen as an individual of rights protected by the state. For the maternalist, such a notion is at best morally empty and at worst morally subversive since it is the result of a distinctly masculine conception of the person as an independent, self-interested, economic being. When one translates this notion into a broader conception of politics, the maternal feminist argues, one is left with a vision of citizen as competitive marketeers and jobholders for whom civil activity is, at most, membership in interest groups.

(Dietz, 1992, 71).

## 9. Gender and Domination

A thin line divides gender relations from practices of domination. Nonetheless, there is a line.

Within different cultures there is countless ways that gender relations can form. Many of them imply certain gender roles, which men and women replicate in their everyday tasks. The fact that women do not participate in politics, or that they do not occupy the same positions as men, does

not inescapably indicate that there is a pattern of exclusion and of marginalization of women. In different cultures, gender relations can shape the desires and beliefs of both men and women in a very similar way to how relations of power act over society. It is dangerous to fall into generalizations that condemn all gender relations that differ from those of the western world as a form of domination. The use of the burka, for example, cannot be conceived primarily as the result of a culture of coercion and violence, in which men force the women to wear it. Many women, if not the majority of Muslim women, wear this particular attire because of their specific beliefs and because of their desire to live according to their faith.<sup>4</sup> Or the role of women as mothers, who stay at home to take care of the children, which is predominant in some cultures, does not automatically insinuate that women are coerced into occupying this position within the family. Consequently, the difference in participation of women in politics can also be a reflection of the gender relations that exist within that specific society. (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991; and Maynard, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Myrna Cunningham (2005, 55) states, “the homogenizing tendency of the women’s movements sometimes recreates the same frameworks of discrimination and cultural degradation through which national governments exploit Indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women.” Based on this argument, the author emphasizes on the need to respect cultural self-determination when supporting feminist projects that promote gender equality: the recognition of Indigenous women’s own capacities to generate change. (Jones, 2005, 54).<sup>6</sup> Like Cunningham, many feminist authors have also critiqued the western imperialist features of feminism. For example, Johanna Liddle and Shirin Rai (1998, 495) evidence how feminist discourse has changed political circumstances by “producing the Western imperial powers as superior on the scale of civilization, [and] producing Western women as leaders of global feminism”. (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991; and Maynard, 2010).

By assimilating relations of power to gender relations, I do not mean to discredit the subject of gender and democracy. This does not mean that gender relations are unproblematic. As with relations of power, gender relations need to be carefully evaluated, monitored, and studied so as to avoid that they transform into practices of domination. They demand a space where they can be contested, allowing for their transformation when those involved modify their desires and beliefs and decide to distance themselves from the traditional ways of conceiving the interaction between men and women.

If the term domination refers to “asymmetrical relationships of power in which the freedom subordinated persons have little room for maneuver because of their ‘extremely limited margin of freedom,’” (Lemke, 2010, 37); what one has to evaluate and correct when examining gender relations are those asymmetries that restrict the possibility of change. This does not mean that all

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4 As Lama Abu Odeh (1993, 26) writes, “Post-colonial feminists need to examine the philosophy behind Muslim women wearing veils before addressing the issue because the veil is not simply a source of disempowerment as believed by Western cultures. Muslim women’s sexuality is defined by their ability to control their needs rather than by the expression of their desires. The veil allows them to participate in a broader world than the home because it provides a religious barrier to sexual harassment and empowers them to criticize their harassers with social support.”

5 A multiplicity of feminist authors has made a call for accepting heterogeneity as one part of the feminist strategy for equality.

6 The Feminist Dialogues organized by the World Social Forum embodies an initiative in which feminist groups discuss their diversity. It “does not try to produce a common set of outcomes but the characteristics of the space provide diverse possibilities for women to network, exchange experiences, come up with projects among themselves, and have space to discuss issues that are affecting the work of each of us do”.

limitations to freedom that emanate from gender relations are a result of an act of domination,<sup>7</sup> but that the constriction of freedom in an asymmetrical manner can cause patterns of domination. This conceptualization makes the line that separates gender relations from domination even thinner. The essence, however, lies on the premise that, in theory, these types of relations are formed by a mutual construction, in which change is always present; and relations of domination are predominantly a unilateral preservation of a determinate structure.

Marilyn Frye critically explicates how gender roles are reinforced and legitimized. He observes,

For efficient subordination, what's wanted is that the structure not appear to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appear *natural* – that it appear to be quite a direct consequence of facts about the beast which are beyond the scope of human manipulation. (...). The ways we act as women and men, and the ways we act toward women and men, mold our bodies and our minds to the shape of subordination and dominance.

(Frye, 1983, 34).

The claims made by the author capture the delicate line that distinguishes gender relations from domination. The extract can make us think that absolutely all gender relations are naturalized acts of domination and, for this reason, must be contested. One needs to remember, nevertheless, that power relations are inescapable. Any attempt to contend gender relations only generates the transformation of these but does not eradicate them. Confronted with the inevitability of power relations, the question is how to resist domination? I believe that democratic institutions can provide mechanisms to avoid the displacement of gender relations towards domination. Furthermore, I think that this is feasible even without pretending to homogenize or to enact a single true identity that determines what gender relations should look like. Given the permanence of power relations, the aim of democracy ought not to be the constitution of uniformity, but to providing spaces where the possibility of contestation to gender relations is always open, so as to challenge the forces that try to posit an absolute truth as “natural”.

## 10. Back to Democracy

If the power of democratic politics consists on the possibility of change and on the capability of mobilizing the multiplicity of interests (Wolin, 2004, 603), then democracy must open the possibility of altering gender relations. The immobilization of these by acts of violence and coercion stands as clear opposition to democracy. Moreover, taking into account that in most democratic states “gender, race, religious, and ethnic equality are enshrined as constitutional principles, the contradiction between the democratic ethos of equality and the reality of legal subordination for women and political marginalization of minority groups is left exposed, leaving the contract itself more readily open to challenge” (Keating, 2007, 142). Accordingly, when gender relations displace towards domination, those affected can use the institutional norms to modify existing practices. It is foremost then to impede and to change the fact that those benefited by unequal gender relations consecrate laws and regulations that inhibit manifestations that oppose them; and to modify those rules and regulations that “normalize” inequality.

Young (2000, 82) writes, “Political theory would do well to disengage social group difference from a logic of identity, in two ways. First, we should conceptualize social groups according to a rational

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7 Like in marriage, individuals can freely decide to restrict their freedom. Their freedom mobilizes within the territorial limits of their beliefs and desires.

rather than a substantialist logic. Secondly, we should affirm that groups do not have identities as such, but rather that individuals construct their own identities on the basis of social group positioning." Taking this into account, gender relations are a way through which men and women construct their identities, but do not infer the existence of a generalized way of interaction between genders. Consequently, neither man nor women have only one identity; and, therefore, within a society there can be a plurality of gender relations, even if certain types predominate over the others.

## Conclusion

Gender relations change and must be allowed to change. The imposition of a western understanding of women and men relationships dismisses to see beliefs and desires as a source of power that replicates gender relations. It simplifies reality by comprehending that this and that particular gender relations can only be the result of coercion and violence. It also homogenizes women, stating that they should all aim for the same desires and beliefs. What gender scholars should aim towards is for the implementation of a democratic identity and towards the negation of homogenization. They must reject efforts that portray women as uniform individuals, by categorizing them as incompetent or as uninterested in participating in politics. Precisely, democracy is about anti-totality, about tolerance, about difference. Acts of coercion and violence against women should be condemned, but different beliefs and desires need to be accepted. Any action of domination that impedes the transformation of gender relations should also be denounced and criticized. Democratic institutions should guarantee gender relations the possibility of change. They should assure that arguments of competence and of culture are not simply a way to justify the domination of men over women.

As discussed in this article, even when gender relations find a space to voice their disagreements, culture would still play a critical role. Gender relations will continue to be part of a complex set of practices that replicate traditional desires and beliefs. One cannot expect that with the enactment of democracy all societies turn homogeneous. Culture cannot simply be erased. For this reason, I think it is time to stop thinking so much about gender equality as a matter of domination, and to stop focusing on how many women versus how many men are in a determinate post. It is not only a question of quantity or of coercion. I believe it is time to start centering on processes, gender equality being one of them.

In 2002 the slogan of the World March of Women participated in the World Social Forum. Their slogan read, 'the world will not change without feminism; and feminists cannot change women's lives unless we change the world' (World March of Women, 2003, 6). Although the slogan was applauded, it generates one question: how to change women's lives? The slogan cannot be interpreted as a call on women to unify their desires and beliefs. To change the world does not instinctively mean that all gender relations need to be modified. I think that to change the world is to transform patterns of domination and to consolidate institutions that enable an open space where women and men can communicate and question gender relations. Echoing Pateman's words, "We need a conception of universal, participatory citizenship that is grounded in the recognition of sexual difference, so that women, to become full citizens, do not have to attempt to become paler reflections of men, but can actively participate *as women*" (1985, 14).

In a conference, Kavita Ramdas (2009), director of the Global Fund for Women, asked: "Why is it that women are, on the one hand, viciously downtrodden by cultural practices, and yet, at the same time, are the preservers of culture in most societies? Is the hijab or the headscarf a symbol of submission or of resistance?" When trying to answer these questions, she remitted to the story of

three very different women who lived according to their traditions.<sup>8</sup> She reveals how these women have turned their own traditions into opposition and opportunity, managing to reject practices of domination. They do not expect to break tradition, but to embrace it in such a way as to contest and condemn acts of violence and coercion against them. She concludes, "Feminism, unlike almost every other social movement, is not a struggle against a distinct oppressor — it's not the ruling class or the occupiers or the colonizers — it's against a deeply held set of beliefs and assumptions that we women, far too often, hold ourselves" (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

Conclusively, the recognition of difference is essential when undertaking the study of democracy and gender. The theoretical and practical approaches that propose to create a more democratic world must learn from heterogeneity, and not see the world through the prism of uniformity. Those who advocate for the propagation of democracy cannot apply a one model fit all strategy. On the contrary, they must embrace difference and find ways so that democracy can integrate more easily within the cultural imaginary.

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8 Alexander M. Jacqui (2005, 15) writes, "transnational feminism needs [spiritual] pedagogies of the Sacred not only because of the dangerous diffusion of religious fundamentalisms, and not only because of structural transformations have thrown up religion as one of the primary sites of contestation, but more importantly because it remains the case that the majority of people in the world- that is, the majority of women in the world - cannot make sense of themselves without it." The call made by the author runs in a similar path as the premises constructed throughout this dissertation. Namely, it proposes a structural change in which we to stop viewing feminism as a movement that advocates for a homogeneous secular order, as an ideology that refuses to see the importance that faith, beliefs, and spirituality have in the individuals.

9 Sociolinguistics observe, "category membership is more salient to members of one sex than the other; girls are asserting their category identities through language more than are boys. This is consonant with the fact that girls are more concerned with category membership than boys" (Eckert, 1989, 265). If Ramdas and Eckert claims are conjugated, one gets to grasp how gender relations are the result of the desires and beliefs of both men and women.

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