

Review - Masculinities and Femininities in Latin America's Uneven Development

Written by Cristina Espinosa

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Masculinities and Femininities in Latin America's Uneven Development

By Susan Paulson

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In this ambitious book Paulson proposes a radical paradigmatic shift to overcome gaps, biases and invisibilities resulting from the way gender has been understood within sustainable development. In regard to the concept of gender she proposes first moving away from the focus on individual actors towards sociocultural systems that produce and reproduce not only social relations and identities but also gendered spaces or territories and “uneven geographies of development” [1]; secondly, moving away from defining gender as binary discreet categories (men and women) to embrace its intersectionality with other systems of difference and therefore its heterogeneity and variance (different types of men and of women) and thirdly, to contextualize gender systems within broad historical and ethnographic contexts, avoiding the imposition of one form of gender system (usually post-colonial Western) as “natural” or universal. She takes insights from feminist studies and political economy and from territorial studies to redefine the role of gender systems into shaping and reproducing uneven development, and to provide a comprehensive and dynamic review of the Latin American context in relation to gender systems after 1980.

Her proposed conceptual and operational shift allows her to overcome certain invisibilities, like the diverse experience and positioning of men in regard to hegemonic masculinities and power (and of women in regard to hegemonic and subaltern femininities and power); the relational nature of gender systems (men and women cannot be studied in isolation but in their interactions) and the gendered dimension of economic and ecological changes, which makes gender relevant not only for those interested in women issues but in the process of change towards more sustainable, autonomous and just systems.

Paulson is well aware of the limits of using a rich body of literature that mostly relies on dominant views of gender that her approach tries to overcome – for instance the use of “Eurocentric binaries like men versus women, white versus non-white, economically active versus inactive, male-headed households versus female-headed households” [3], which is however a necessary trade-off for a cross-cultural review of gender that requires to organize and compare results and establish some trends across different contexts and moments in history. Well aware of the risks of imposing culture-specific conceptualizations as universal, Paulson's reliance on rich ethnographic studies that highlights the heterogeneity of gender systems, and her reluctance towards universalist categories provides a pragmatic sound methodology to avoid these limitations. She also highlights the cultural hegemonies that after the colonial experience, justify and impose certain ways of knowing, certain views on gender, development or the environment while delegitimizing others – and the need to overcome this.

Paulson's argument for a paradigmatic shift in the ways gender has been addressed within development is not new. In addition to critical scholarship from feminists like Kabeer (1994) Molyneux (2007), Cornwall, Harris and Whitehead (2007), Von Braunmuhl (2002) –just to cite a few, feminist researchers and activists working within development institutions, have also expressed their critique on gender conceptualization and operationalization; for instance, see

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2015 UNRISD critical review of the post-Beijing process of mainstreaming gender, Chant and Gutman (2007) Monsen (2010) Razavi and Miller (1995) and Kabeer (1999) in this regard.

Paulson's contribution to this critique is remarkable in four ways: 1) Paulson defines gender as a sociocultural system that "works by organizing human identities, bodies, practices, goods and relationships, and by imbuing these with meaning and power through symbolic reference to sex and sexuality. Operating through various contexts and scales, gender systems influence a range of institutions, together with the distribution and use of different assets, in ways that impact infrastructure and biophysical environment as well as human lives and livelihoods." [138]. This way Paulson positions gender as part of the "dialectical relationship between material economies and biophysical realities on one hand and cultural visions and values on the other" [139], proposing a more complex, holistic and dynamic analysis. 2) By exploring the intersectionality of gender she identifies how differentiated masculinities and femininities are deployed to justify the exploitation of wider segments of male and female population, which in turn generates further gender asymmetries, contradictions, exacerbating women's subordination and inter and intra-gender differentiation. By exposing this she unveils opportunities for new intra and inter-gender alliances –something missed by usual gender analysis focused almost exclusively on women. 3) By conceptualizing gender as socio-cultural systems and territory as "a socio-ecological space that is continually produced and reproduced via power relation playing out among differentiated groups and individuals" [135] Paulson presents gender and territory as "interacting socio-Ecological phenomena that vary across space and time" [135]. This innovative holistic framework transcends not only disciplinary boundaries but allows integrating areas of interventions that remain isolated, in terms of development policy and programs as well as in terms of activism and advocacy. This new framework has therefore the potential for starting to overcome some of the "blind spots" in the field of development as well as for building up new and more inclusive alliances within social movements. 4) Paulson also offers a combination of conceptual analytical frameworks with an application of this framework to three "case studies" showing how these connections operate. That combination makes her proposal very solid and grounded, overcoming another common separation between theoretical and empirical approaches to gender and development. Paulson also provides a very comprehensive review of the changes experienced by Latin America after 1980, defining a more uneven development where inequalities remain but taking different shapes and rhythms. For instance, her documentation of gender gaps in education where boys are lagging behind girls, the masculinization of rural spaces/the feminization of urban spaces or men as the larger targets for violence, make the case for reviewing common statements about certain forms of gender inequalities portrayed as universal. Here is where the innovation of Paulson framework is connected with the particularity of Latin America as compared with regions like Africa or Asia, where gender systems manifest differently. The first two more conceptual chapters help the reader to understand the following three chapters focusing on "case studies" from Mexico, Chile and Bolivia, which analyze "changing spaces and practices of everyday life" that results from a dialectics between gender systems and territories, where gender systems play different roles in "facilitating or constraining the form taken by select historical and geographical process, together with the impact on institutional and biophysical landscapes" [7].

The framework brilliantly developed by Paulson reflects important long and broad collaborative research from Latin Americans and Latinoamericanists coming from different fields and disciplines, mainly under the support of RIMISP (Red Internacional de Metodología de Investigación de Sistemas de Producción) and her own research engagement with this region for more than two decades, which produced important scholarship on ethnic and gender identities and their role in changes in the use of territory.

There is no doubt that this book is a major milestone for shifting the conceptualization and practice addressing gendered "sociocultural processes that produce, sustain and sometimes transform uneven geographies of development" [1]. It can open up a new way of understanding gender, leading to more equitable and sustainable development. However, the Gender Mainstreaming process has shown that complex frameworks like the one proposed by Kabeer (1999) addressing the role of institutions reproducing gender inequalities, the cultural dimensions of gender as well as its intersectionality, were not well understood or applied. Instead we witnessed a wide return to more simple "user-friendly" whilst limited frameworks like WID (Women in Development). Therefore, the need to operationalize complex analytical frameworks like this one without losing their heuristic power and their political potential for change is quite a challenge that I hope Paulson will take, allowing this paradigmatic shift to permeate down to people who might not have the academic training to lead its operationalization, but who are in the

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position of transforming the practice of gender and development.

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