

# Academic gender and feminist jamboree

by [Sonia Ruiz García](#)

‘Women who seek equality with men lack ambition’, said Sandra Harding the first morning of “Women’s Worlds”, the 10th International Interdisciplinary Congress of Women hosted by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. More than 3000 participants – mostly Western European and North American women - had gathered for this big academic event



The omission of the word “feminist” in the title of the congress indicated that there would be a large spread in opinions, positions and perspectives during the 5 days of plenaries, seminars and workshops. However, the large applause that the brand new Spanish Minister of Equality received in the opening ceremony, as well as the booing for the sponsoring private enterprises, showed that the political cleavages would not be that wide.

Nevertheless, that first day, the lead role was taken by great Nawal Al Saadawi, Egyptian feminist, writer and Psychiatrist, followed by Somaly Man, Cambodian activist fighting for the abolition of prostitution. Al Saadawi spoke about feminist creativity and dissidence, both built on the connection of the political, the economic and the sexual spheres. With her poetic and revolutionary speech she moved the audience by saying that for feminists it is not sufficient to fight against patriarchy without demystifying the free market, neo-colonialism and all kind of religious fundamentalisms. It was a brilliant beginning, emphasising the political stakes of feminism(s) and the struggles ahead, and in this way framing the discussions for the days to come.

## **Main issues...and the missing women’s movement**

The mornings were structured in parallel semi-plenary sessions and the afternoons were dedicated to the participants’ open proposals. After having spent five days in the Women’s Worlds Congress (and

feeling a slight overdose of feminist and gender theory) I would say that postmodern positions are starting to lose ground in the theoretical field, or maybe the lower profile of postmodern theoretical discourses was the result of conscious choices by the organising academic committees at this moment ?

The fact that more than 2000 workshops took place shows that one's choice was always a crucial issue. With such a wide offer and plenty of the lead feminist authors and actors in Madrid, there was always a topic or somebody that you were missing or just sacrificing : Sylvia Walby for listening to Marilyn Waring demystifying global economics from a feminist perspective ; Lourdes Benería – another feminist economist, for Mieke Verloo, a 'nice and smart' political scientist who always takes the feminist movement into account ; how to design an equality plan for freaking out with Sheila Jeffreys and the Coalition against trafficking in women ; and of course, if you took a bit of porno feminist practice you could not be part of a discussion on masculinities.



Talking about men. There were not many participating in the congress, but their presence was more than welcomed. My male colleague from work was horrified by Harding's statement on equality not being enough. He felt offended, what's the problem of being equal to men ? I did not think that she was that wrong though. In my view, Harding was just defending that equality between women and men cannot be reduced to aspiring to sameness with men. She was not rejecting men as such, but showing all the forms of discrimination and oppression a lot of men have to face. It wasn't such a brand new idea. There are plenty of women who just do not want to get 'integrated' in this system mainly built for the profit of white, bourgeois and heterosexual men. Developing a new 'contract' where none of these discriminations exist any longer, is the challenge. And that has to be done taking into account all the different voices and lives of women as well as the ones of the 'non standard' men.

Even with a five-day long congress there are many issues that fail to get a mention. And there were some very important actor(s) absent - the women's and the feminist movement. A registration fee of 150€

excluded many from participating, not to mention the accommodation and the travelling expenses if you do not live in Madrid. In response to the lack of entries and participation of the feminist and women's movement, a part of the movement got mobilised and you could find lots of posters labelling the congress as elitist all around the university buildings. By the end of the registration process the women's and feminist groups in Madrid were given free entrances.

### **The intersection of feminist thinking : complexity cannot be reduced to only one axis...or three !**

Although I guess every participant might have her/his own experience of the key issues at stake, I would like to highlight briefly three of the main themes discussed : the **multiple forms of violence** that women have to suffer, the **economic field** and its links to patriarchy and the concept and practice of **intersectionality**.

The continuum of violence against women adopts all kinds of psychological and physical forms and it is one of the main causes that complicate the advancement of women in the world. It is still an issue for the feminist movement (self-help and self-defence, consciousness raising, fight against prostitution and trafficking...), a rising interest for the academia, and an issue on the political agenda in an increasing number of countries. Miguel Lorente, who at the moment is the representative of the Spanish Government on gender violence, spoke about the aggressors and the actions and relations of what he called 'post-machismo', and stated that the brutality of the gender crimes has increased.

The new labour and economic precarity of women was broadly addressed in the congress. Discussions focused on the counting of women's unpaid work in the domestic sphere in the GDPs, the claiming and visibilisation of the activities in the reproductive sphere as a work, or 'all what the global economy owns women' (Ma Ángeles Durán). The link between economy, women, and ecology was made clear by Marilyn Waring's current analysis of the Antarctica. The future of public goods and services, such as water or health, are at the core of her thinking. Saskia Sassen challenged the current vision of migrant and trafficked women as victims, by saying that they are among the main actors of the present economy. As such they are also in a strategic position - in the households where they are caring, cooking or cleaning for others, in their own homes, or in the public sphere. Rebellion is always a possibility when you take gender as a strategic point of departure.

And what is the fashion concept in gender theory at the moment ? Intersectionality (or the intersection between different struggles). For sure. You can find it everywhere : in public policy analysis, in the theoretical work, and even applied to the feminist movement research. Now that we have already learned what it means to mainstream gender in the agenda, and now that we already know that institutions are not implementing this 'revolution' at all (because of methodological shortcomings or lack of political will, who knows...) - now is the time for intersectionality ! A necessary step that broadens and deepens the scope for feminist political action and discourses.

A great pleasure was to listen to Myra Marx Ferree, a Wisconsin Political Science professor, comparing the equality discourses of North American and German feminists. She showed that they used very different 'intersectionality' models. Simplifying Marx Ferree's speech, one aims at stressing women's voices and their visibility as well as looking for the points of intersection on the axes of inequality : race, class, age, sexual orientation, gender. The 'other intersectionality' is more constructionist and it focuses on the processes that transform each other in particular contexts. It destabilizes identity categories and is linked to the rhetoric of political discourse. Marx Ferree applies the second model to an analysis of the discourses on equality of German and North American feminists. The results are a totally different way of framing gender. German feminists frame it with a class analogy, as they look at the position of women in production and reproduction relations – among others – and ask for a 'social market economy' with a strong and active state. United States' feminists have a 'race'-central framing, with an anti-discrimination approach.

These different approaches of framing gender are coherent with the history of rights claiming in both countries. Intersectionality, in fact, drives from the critics of women of colour in the States and in the UK. One of the 'creators' of the concept was also present in Madrid. Kim Crenshaw, civil rights activist and professor of Law, made a presentation focusing on the question "if 'other' women should have a room of our own". She stated that not paying attention to the intersections and the margins, where power overlaps, means that many women's needs are not integrated and important alliances are not made (it even pits the movements against each other). For example, the intersections of struggles and oppression were invisible for the first wave feminists in the States, and they failed therefore take into account black women's demands. Not being able to get into a 'white persons bus', simply was not a gender issue for the mainstream feminists. Although some progress has been made since then, it is clear we still have quite some way to go to fully integrate a strategy which includes and takes into account intersections between different struggles !

And coming back to nowadays : is the institutionalisation of intersectionality a reality in the European Union (EU) ? This is the question raised by Mieke Verloo and Emanuela Lombardo in a work in progress. The trend that they are confirming is that there is a change in discourse from gender to sex and that the 'axis of class' is not a concept that appears in the EU policy design and implementation. In relation to the dynamics of civil society there are no evidences that state that there's an intersectional work or practice done by the diverse non-governmental actors. But there's still hope : there is a political opportunity open - and the 11th International Interdisciplinary Congress of Women will take place in three years time, in Canada, we'll see what's going on then.

The website of the congress : [www.mmwwo8.org](http://www.mmwwo8.org)

To view files of the conferences : <http://www.ucm.es/info/mmedia/congreso/diferido.html>