WOMEN

Concept Paper
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Given that women is a highly diverse category, what do we signify when we speak of women as a group? The feminist project began as a rally for women's rights, on the basis of equality. Today, we continue to see women as an identity around which struggles and movements are organized (e.g., campaigns to end violence against women, the celebration of International Women's Day, and the Women's March Movement). Indeed, the category of women has been referred to as indispensable to the feminist project (Gunnarson, 2011). However, the concept of women has been subject to much critique, and charged with being monolithic; third wave feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and Mohanty (1987) pointed out that narratives about women tend to only reflect the experiences of white, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class, Western women. Although woman(en) continues to hold salience as an identity, a lived, material subjectivity, it would be futile to attempt to identify common characteristics of women or to crystalize women's experiences of oppression. Any attempt to do so risks normalizing some gendered experiences, while excluding others. In the following concept paper, we consider the roots of the notion of women, in order to highlight the limits and cautions of working with this concept. We conclude by briefly considering the political possibilities of the concept of women as a position around which struggles for equality are organized.

The idea that there is a naturalized category of *women* stems from the presumption of a binary sex system. This binary sex system is based on two assumptions: (i) there are two distinct categories of human beings, one biologically male and the other biologically female; and (ii) these categories are naturalized and unchangeable, determined by differences in our bodies including chromosomes, hormones, and somatic characteristics such as genitalia. Fausto-Sterling (1993) has shown compelling evidence that sex is too complex and varied to be contained by a binary system which assumes discrete, distinct biological and predetermined categories. Further, biological differences only take on significance within a set of culturally defined values. In other words, the cultural meanings and values we ascribe to our bodies, sexuality, gender roles, etc. all serve to naturalize perceived biological differences between males and females (and thus construct them as essential). The effects of this binary sex system persist in our social worlds and these ideas are propagated by systems of knowledge, authority, and expertise such as science and medicine. For example, Karkazis' (2008) research on the treatment of intersex infants in the USA shows the complexities inherent in the medical process of defining and determining sex. Far from being an objective, clear-cut process, physicians' historically and culturally constituted ideas about gender influence sex assignment. At best we can think of sex as a continuum, with male and female as two points on a much larger spectrum.

If biology provides us with imperfect answers, how does culture influence our definition of women? Ortner (1974) uses a cross-cultural comparison to demonstrate that the blurring of "natural" and cultural processes, such as gendered roles attached to women's biological

function as mothers have contributed to the near universal subordination of women to men. This blurring has shaped regimes of labour and citizenship, which in turn has constrained and enabled migratory flows, on a global scale (Calavita, 2006). Recent scholarship on migrant in-home caregivers highlights these entanglements. Global inequalities between low- and high-income countries merge with the normative feminized role of women as caregivers to create a migratory pathway that women from low-income countries, often formerly colonized and racialized, can utilize to gain legal status and employment in their host country. At the same time migrant women are vulnerable because their legal tenancy, safe and fair work conditions are contingent on the dynamics of a private household in which caregiving is constructed as a feminized, class, and even racialized domain (e.g., Bakan and Stasiulis, 2003 and 1997; Parrenas, 2001). There are also historical examples where assumptions about “innate” gender characteristics (for example male “aggression”) has constrained migration, such as, most recently, the Canadian government’s decision to not resettle unaccompanied Syrian men[1]. These men were cast as less vulnerable than families and women, and the decision was defended by government officials as part of the effort to uphold safety and security for Canadians. At play here is the intersection of masculinity, racialization, xenophobia, and securitization.

Sexuality is another aspect of consideration in any discussion of gender. In dialogue with sex and gender, sexuality is not a direct outcome of biological sex and gender identity. Rather, sexual desires, orientations, and identities are fluid and situated. Thinking about sexuality in this way has particular implications for research on migration. For example, migrants seeking asylum based on persecution for their sexual orientation must communicate their petition within a legal framework that expresses their experiences and practices using Western labels such as gay and lesbian (Manalansan 2006). Furthermore, very few countries recognize sexual orientation and its persecution as genuine reasons permitting asylum protection. This does not mean, however, that sexuality can be rejected as a basis for seeking protection. For many people who are affected, this type of persecution may remain hidden.

We can build on the work of intersectionality and think about the concept of women and gender as encompassing a multiplicity of experiences that are situated historically within multiple and interlocking fields of power. Our Gender-Net Plus project uses the intersection of women and migration as a starting point. The social constructivist perspective broadly and intersectionality in particular eschews essentialists notions of men and women. By adopting the social constructivist perspective, the concept of women becomes an unstable category that can only be understood in relational terms, where male and female co-constitute one another (Riley 1988). This means that male and female are not fixed or given but contested and in flux (Scott 1986). As such, gender is constructed and constantly re-defined. Gender does not exist in and of itself. Rather, it is accomplished through everyday interactions and social structures. Through our social lives, people reproduce normative gender relations but are also continually contesting, resisting, refashioning, and negotiating gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987, Gaudio, 2009) intersecting with other forms of social divisions or fields of power (e.g. West and

[1] If we look at the figures for asylum seekers, we will see that unaccompanied men outnumber all other groups (usually) and Canada does resettle them it’s just that this group is less likely to be selected as GARs or PSRs. This has in part a result of the UNHCR's request that Canada focus on larger and more complicated family units instead.

Zimmerman, 1987). Thinking about the Gender-Net Plus project, we can mobilize the concept of women and gender to better understand how normative ideas of femininity and masculinity impinge on migrant women's wellbeing. We can also think about the concept of women -not to signify a coherent group or essentialist category -but in a way that recognizes individuals positioned as *women*, what Young (1994) refers to as a "serial collectivity". In this vein, we can continue the feminist politic of imagining a different social order and restructuring conditions to bring forward a future based on gender equality.

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