

Food, Gender and Oppression in a Feminist Brazilian Perspective

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1. Introduction

Since the end of the last century the traditional western diet based on “meat, milk and bread” has been under intense criticism due to the growing concerns about its health and environmental implications together with the awareness of the cruel treatment of animals by the meat industry and the social inequalities in food distribution. How to “eat right”, however it may be defined, stopped being only a concern about the nutritional aspects of “what we eat” and became also a concern about the social, environmental and moral aspects involved in the production, marketing and consumption of our food. Expressions like “voting with your fork”, “eat consciously”, “responsible eating” express the understanding that our personal food choices stopped being only a matter of individual tastes and preferences and became a matter of moral and public concerns and implications (Barbosa,2014;Twine,2010). In short, “the personal became political” as the popular feminist mantra says (Hanisch,1969/2006).

In this context, the growing of vegetarianism/veganism diets all over the world, mainly among young people, is a response, among others, to ethical concerns regarding not only our health and environmental crises but also to the welfare and rights of animals, that have been championed by philosophers like Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Evelyn Pluhar, Gary Francione, Dean Curtin among others who are fierce proponents of what is called “ethical/ moral vegetarianism”.

Less known and discussed is the moral link between feminism and vegetarianism theoretically developed by ecofeminists in the eighties of the XX century. It argued in favour of vegetarianism as the correct ethical behaviour for feminist women, perceived as an expression of their fight against their own, nature and animal oppressions.¹

Historically, the relation between feminism and food, eating and cooking has been a troublesome one, since it was predominantly approached through the lenses of patriarchal oppression, (Barbosa, 2012, Avakian & Haber2005). With the establishment of the moral inter-relations between feminism and vegetarianism this situation has become inverted. Food is transformed into a key political weapon to dismantle patriarchalism, capitalism and their oppression over women, animals and nature. It is about this connexion and its repercussions, examined through of a piece of qualitative research carried out in the end 2018 and beginning of 2019 among a small group of Brazilian feminists, that we would like to focus our attention,

Our working hypothesis was that most Brazilian feminists are still not mobilized around the relations between feminism and vegetarianism because they are predominantly engaged with the achievement of political, economic and social rights due the profound social, racial and economic inequalities that traverse Brazilian society. Although the percentage of vegetarians is increasing in Brazil, the adoption of this diet is more related to a desire to fight the meat industry, capitalism, animal suffering and

¹ The difference between the ecofeminists and other feminists scholars discussing animal and interspecies relations, such as Donna Haraway, (posthumanism), Lucy Irigaray, (post-sturcuturalism), Elizabeth Grosz,(new materialism), and others, is their focus on speciesism and sexism and other forms of oppression as being interlinked and operating on similar principles.

environmental concerns and health than to an ecofeminist perspective of fighting simultaneously sexism and speciesism. However, this is a situation that might be changing among the younger generation of feminists, deeply interested in intersectional feminism.

We argue that the agenda of social movements is not simply reproduced in the same manner as it moves around different societies. Some issues gain more relevance in one context than in another as a consequence of preexisting academic, cultural, social and political factors which give rise to new semantic networks, discourses, disputes, political confrontations and relations. In our specific case, the emphasis is on the confrontation of sexism and speciesism.

Our point of departure was the academic debate which emerged between feminists and ecofeminists in the United States, from 1980 onwards, and has been gaining momentum, for several reasons, in the second decade of this century. Based on the arguments developed by ecofeminist theory that defends vegetarianism as the correct ethical behaviour for women we interviewed Brazilian self-declared feminists about their knowledge, engagement and thoughts about on this issue and also on how they positioned themselves on it.

II. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that links feminism with vegetarianism, in an ecofeminist perspective, is rooted in the idea that all forms of oppression are interlocked, reinforce one another, and are equally the consequences of a single system of inequalities brought about by the patriarchal society (Gaard, 2002; Donovan, 1990; Adams, 1990; Kheel, 2005; Warren, 1987). In this perspective, the fight against the oppression of all women, as well as animals and nature, should be adopted simultaneously. It rejects a hierarchy of causes, as has been proposed by mainstream feminism, with the argument of not dispersing forces and efforts (Adams, 1993).

Susan Griffin (1979) was one of the first authors to indicate the similarities between the condition of animals and women under patriarchy. After her original work in the 1970s, other feminist theorists supported the idea that a patriarchal “logic of domination” rested at the heart of the mistreatment of women, nature and animals (Warren, 1990). For ecofeminists such as Geert Gaard, (2002), Carol Adams, (1990), and Lori Gruen (1993), vegetarian feminism is the logical development of feminism and ecofeminism. Gaard (2002) goes even further and suggests that vegetarian feminism should be a special strand within the fight against speciesism. She argues that to exclude the oppression of non-human animals from feminist and ecofeminist analyses is to offer an incomplete picture of reality.

For Carol Adams, (1990), the oppression of non-human animals is at the root of all other types of oppression. She argues that social inequalities among humans are structurally similar to the treatment imposed on animals, and as we see non-human animals as inferior and subordinated to us, unequal treatment of people is acceptable in the eyes of society. This attributed inferiority has been used to justify slavery, genocide, discrimination and many other forms of brutality and injustice. However, for Adams, (2007), the association between the oppression of women and non-human animals should not be seen as a devaluation of women or a dismissal of black people’s suffering during the period of slavery, as has been argued by many feminists and black activists when they react to these analogies made in different circumstances. These associations allow us to perceive the structural links that lie behind the treatment bestowed upon both of them, and how different forms of oppressions are intertwined and can be

captured in negative associations of women and animals in everyday situations and language.

In this context, “ethical vegetarianism” should not be understood as a diet based on nutritional/health/environmental reasons or a position adopted for the sake of animals rights, as argued by utilitarian and liberationist perspectives developed by Peter Singer, (1975), and Tom Regan (1983) which focused on the amount and quality of suffering imposed on animals. On the contrary, for ecofeminists such as Donovan,(1993); Gaard,(1993); and Adams, (1990), the adoption of a vegetarian diet represents both an ethical attitude and a political act. It is a form of resistance to a capitalist male-dominated culture, in which meat consumption is one of its sharpest expressions, that treats unequally and oppressively both women and non-human animals (Lewis, 2015). To be feminist, therefore, implies also to be a vegetarian.

Not all feminists and ecofeminists agree with this proposition. Most reject the idea of an absolute moral norm to be applied in all circumstances for reasons of cultural, environmental, ethnical, racial and social differences and suggest a **contextual moral vegetarianism** (Curtis,1991;Bailey,2007). Others like George, (1994), criticise the higher nutritional costs that vegetarianism as a moral mandate would imply for women, children and old people infringing the universality, equality and impartiality principles on which moral theories are based.

The anthropocentric perspective of the ecofeminist moral argument for not eating meat by defending the universalization of the elitist practices of **urban western society and by treating all others cultures as exceptions to what is considered to be the ideal norm** has been criticised by Plumwood (2004). In its place, the environmental philosopher proposes the idea of ecological animalism that encourages a dialogical ethics of sharing between humans and non-human animals and a new frame of reference for human identity, not outside of nature, but on the contrary reinserted into it, as an integral part of the ecological system, as part of a holistic food chain, not only as predator but also as prey.

Many other feminists also argue against vegetarianism as the correct moral behaviour for feminists based in the loss of feminine autonomy, usurped for centuries by patriarchy. For these it represents an unacceptable imposition and contradicts their freedom of choice. Accusations of value imperialism and cultural chauvinism have also been put forward, (Meyerding, 1982; Cuome and Gruen,1998). In addition, these feminists argue that the absence of reciprocal relations between humans and animals releases us from the moral obligations of adopting a vegetarian diet (Nording,1984).

III. Brazilian Feminists and their Views about Feminism and Vegetarianism

III.1 Research and Biographical Data

Brazilian academic literature on feminism and vegetarianism is very limited, and will not be discussed here due to lack of space. We concentrate on a number of aspects of the research directly related to our central theme.

Our research was carried out among seventeen self-declared feminist women between 2018 and the first semester of 2019. The participants were chosen through the snow-ball technique. The interviews were divided into three different parts. In the first, we explored our interviewee’s history and engagement with feminism. This was followed by their food habits and their respective vegetarian, vegan and meat eating perceptions and habits. In the third phase of the interview we explored their thoughts about vegetarianism as the correct ethical behaviour for feminist woman.

Our interviewees’ ages ranged between 19 and 61 years old. Most women lived in urban centres in the Southern and Southeastern regions of Brazil at the time of the

interview. 65% declared themselves singles, 23.5% married and 17.6% living with a partner in a stable relationship. When their educational formation is considered, 70% had both a masters and a doctoral degree and 30% were undergraduate students. In terms of their actual professional occupation 60% were university professors, 30% were university students and one was a professional archivist in a local State institution. Their personal and family income places them in the middle and upper middle classes of the Brazilian population, according to the income criteria of the IBGE. 65% of our sample participated in some type of feminist, environmental or animal rights organization or group, while 35% declared that they did not formally engage in any kind of activist organizations. None of the interviewees declared affiliation to any political party. However, most displayed affinity with leftist parties, such as the Socialism & Freedom Party (PSOL), the Workers' Party (PT) and the Democratic Labour Party,(PDT).

III.2 Feminism and Vegetarianism

Most of the women interviewed had their first encounter with feminism at a very early age. To be a feminist is a central aspect of their identities and most of them are very active in their daily lives in terms of formal and informal activism. They subscribe to different feminisms such as progressive marxist feminism, intersectional feminism, pre-figurative feminism or “just feminism”. Notions of “equality”, “respect” and “sorority” and agendas regarding the equal pay, the right to abortion, sexual harassment, feminicide, the fight against inequalities such as racism, in addition to participation in public life and political representation were frequently mentioned. Feminism is, therefore, also a key factor in their political life and in their decisions in whom to vote. Vegetarians (35%) and vegans (17%) comprise a slight majority of the sample (52%), with 47% of the women declaring themselves as meat eaters. For the vegetarians/vegans feminism came first before vegetarianism and veganism, with the exception of one for whom both arrived together. Half of the meat eaters are uncomfortable with their own diet and are decreasing their meat consumption. Some of the vegetarians have plans to become vegans in the near future but the decision carries a high cost in terms of planning, practical aspects and taste.

The most frequent reasons pointed out to become a vegetarian/vegan were animal suffering /rights, the fight against the meat industry/capitalism, environmental problems and health. None mentioned feminism as the original reason to become a vegetarian.

III.3 The Links between the Oppressions of Women and Non-Human Animals

The majority of our interviewees was not familiar with ecofeminism in general and with ecofeminist theory regarding vegetarianism as the correct moral behaviour for feminist women, based on the similarities and the interlocking of women and animals oppressions. Most of them reacted with surprise and interest to the ideas exposed and some admitted some similarities with caveats, needing more consideration. Only three, the youngest ones, reacted positively to the idea.

Citation 1. The world has been subjugating animals, owning and disposing of their bodies as if they were created to serve them, and this is similar to what has been done all along with women... That is why women manage to identify themselves more with vegetarianism than men; we have empathy with this thing of domination...”(M.,21, US)

For all the others interviewees, although some points in common could be established, the social, political and legal conditions of women were seen to be extremely different from those of animals, and no such comparison made sense to them.

Citation 2. *I think that the oppression of women and animals can be explained from philosophical and moral questions similar to each other, but the social and political grounds from which they are constructed and where they insert themselves are different, which would lead me to say that these forms of oppressions are not equal... and should be understood and confronted on the basis of very different social political and legal mechanisms, because they are not equal ... The violence against animals and the violence against women are inscribed in very different political relations, that are not related in terms of struggles and results. (AP 37Y)*

Some also emphasized the total independence between the two types of oppressions, pointing out that the oppression of women could end without this meaning the ending of animal's oppression and vice versa, while others reaffirmed the moral differences between women and animals.

The final part of the interview dealt with the question: Is vegetarianism the correct moral behavior for feminist women? Of the 17 interviewees only two, also the youngest ones, agreed explicitly with the idea that to be feminist also implied being vegetarian/vegan; but they agreed with caveats, not seeing this as a moral injunction and with care of not to disqualify other options.

Citation 3. *"I always try to elucidate my position in order to at least help to diminish the consumption of meat. We need to place patriarchal oppression at the center of the discussion about meat but this does not invalidate the struggles of other women who are not vegetarians/vegans" AG (22YO, US).*

All the others interviewees had difficulties with the link between feminism and vegetarianism/veganism as a moral mandate for many different reasons. These included: considerations which recognized some similarities between the oppressions of women and animals, but considered them to correspond to two different social causes implying different types of solutions; feminism understood as being able to choose and decide what one wants to do in all spheres of your life; a rejection of the idea that being a feminist means that a woman has to assume all social causes; and considerations on the possible obstacles this position would create for both causes politically. While feminism is plural vegetarianism is singular.

"The point should be what are the differences between gender and the consumption of meat. Besides, we are discussing questions like animal rights, environment problems and meat consumptions as if they could be resolved by individual decisions and control." (I,40Y,US)

"I do not consider that to be a feminist woman also implies being vegetarian or vegan. I eat meat and I do not intend to stop doing so for feminist reasons. What worries me is the sustainability of our food habits and animal welfare and suffering, in the sense that it bothers me to eat an animal that was ill-treated. I also do not like to finance the meat industry, but not as an expression of fighting oppressions. I would not feel less oppressed as woman for not eating meat – at most I would be collaborating less with the meat industry." (C,29Y,US)

IV. Discussion and Final Remarks

Our sample is a small and composed of highly educated and self-declared middle and high middle class feminist women. Anything that can be inferred from the

interviews cannot therefore be extrapolated to feminism or feminists in Brazil as a whole. However, they provide important insights which can serve as inputs for a broader picture and future research and hypotheses.

The sample as a whole showed only slight intimacy with the central topics investigated in this research. There was little familiarity with ecofeminism, its major theses, authors and proposals. On the other hand, all the participants displayed interest in the questions presented to them. The idea that women's oppression is similar to animal oppression and that they both reinforce one another was looked upon with sympathy by the some of them, but only the three younger women agreed with the idea.

A similar pattern repeated itself when the question raised was vegetarianism as the correct moral behaviour for feminist women. Again the younger feminists were the ones that readily accepted the proposition, while all the others rejected this moral mandate. Even though agreeing with it, the younger feminists were eager to establish that their position did not imply any disqualification of other feminist positions and options.

Although all those interviewed showed concern with animal suffering and disapproval of the meat industry, speciesism was not a central concern for any of them. Animal suffering is approached more as an unacceptable dimension of the meat industry and capitalism than as an expression of speciesism, a word that was rarely mentioned.

For most of our interviewees, feminism has to do with freedom, freedom of choice, of deciding for yourself what to do and how to live your life. To establish a moral norm such as vegetarianism/veganism was seen to go against everything they had conquered and, for most of the women, it also meant to ignore the different social/economic/environmental conditions that women have to face in their lives and at the same time to delegitimize their choices and solutions in particular situations. For them it would be to ignore the diversity that feminism has continually emphasized and embraced. At the same time, the extreme social and economic inequalities prevalent in Brazilian society make it hard to argue that people should not hierarchize causes and resources. As one of the interviewee put it: I do not have to deal with and be accountable for everything, just because I am a feminist!

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