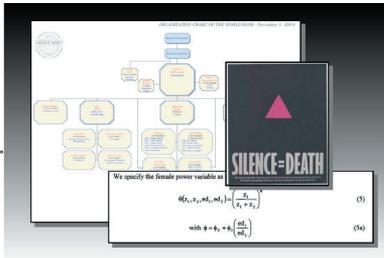


## Looking for Sex in All the Wrong Places: The Silencing of Sexuality in the World Bank's Public Discourse

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*"The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic... But it is precisely at times like these, when we live the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality." (Rubin, 1999, p. 143)*

### Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the way that the World Bank addresses issues of sexuality and how its approach produces a sanitized discourse, which, through its silences, further contributes to a standardized view of sexuality.

Such discourse has the power to set the agenda for public policies, establishing boundaries and limits to what can and cannot (or must and must not) be addressed in the associated debate. Nevertheless, unexpected and paradoxical results may arise from that process, which do not necessarily lead to the furthering of a comprehensive conservative agenda.

There is a key background assumption to this paper, which will not be detailed here; the conception of sexuality as an intersection of politics, desire, culture and biology, along the

lines discussed by Altman, among others. This conception is an important tool in the struggle for sexual rights, especially when taken as an affirmative right built upon a set of crucial ethical principles (Petchesky, 2000). One part of that struggle is the deconstruction of the received, naturalized view of sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Precisely because of that, a political discourse that silences sexuality is inherently reinforcing the conventional, heteronormative view of sexuality. As we intend to demonstrate in our analysis of an absence, this is precisely the case of the World Bank's public discourse. It follows that a starting point of the discussion is a closer examination of the World Bank's constitution and inner workings, in order to dispel prevailing conceptions of a monolithic and impervious Leviathan.

## Theoretical Framework

There are two main conceptual references within this paper: “discourse” and “surface of emergence,” both based in Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1972). (For a detailed analysis of Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, see also Gutting (1989). Foucault suggested a process of textual analysis whereby the “discourse” focuses entirely on the words in the text without regard for what he called the “surface of emergence,” that is, the social, historical and political context of the authors. In this study, we consider the ensemble of texts made available by the World Bank as the “discourse” and the Bank itself as its “surface of emergence.”

To support our inferences regarding the effects of specific types of discourse we relied on concepts from the work of the Polish epistemologist Ludwik Fleck,<sup>2</sup> specifically the “thought

<sup>1</sup> An enterprise that as Altman reminds us extends far into the past at least to Freud and Marx (Altman, 1995, p. 97). Altman criticizes some of the excesses of the “social constructionism” movement when examining sexuality, both with regard to its historical roots and to its apparent denial of extra-textual domains of existence. To a certain extent, his positions are echoed in a broader context by the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking in his (1999) book, *The Social Construction of What?* But Hacking also makes the point that the common denominator to social constructionism is the political goal (which he apparently endorses) of destabilizing some object or institution or other, strategically demonstrating that that “thing” need not be the way it is since it is not a “naturally occurring” object. This is the tenor of much of the recent literature on gender and sexuality, and quite correctly we would add.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Fleck's views, see Fleck (1979) and also Cohen & Schnelle (1986), a book that presents some of that author's previous papers and critical assessment and commentary by a variety of authors. On Fleck's relevance to contemporary studies in science, see for instance, Hacking (1999, p. 60) or Kuhn (1979 and 1996, pp. viii-ix).

collective” (*Denkkollektiv*),<sup>3</sup> “a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction,” and “thought style” (*Denkstil*), “...the entirety of intellectual preparedness or readiness for one particular way of seeing and acting... a definite constraint on thought.” Our underlying assumption is that a specific thought style and thought collective is identifiable in the intellectual work of the bank, characterized and dictated by neo-classical economic theory. This thought style and thought collective frames how problems are perceived, what tools are adequate to deal with them, and, ultimately, what constitutes a solution and thus has a major impact on the various actors involved.

## Methodology

We selected material for our analysis from the bank’s online database<sup>4</sup> of over 14,000 documents (as of October 11, 2005). A simple interface allowed for searches by specific words, groups of words or expressions, which enabled us to retrieve an adequate set of relevant texts (Table 1).

**Table 1: Query results**

Search expression	Type of search	Number of hits
<i>Sexual rights</i>	Exact phrase	0
<i>Sexual diversity</i>	Exact phrase	0
<i>Sexuality</i>	–	18
<i>Sexual health</i>	Exact phrase	15
<i>HIV/AIDS sexuality</i>	All words	9

After our initial searches we ended up with a sample of 34 texts. (Although we did not use any quantitative methods we still consider the word “sample” is applicable.) To enhance

<sup>3</sup> The translations of “*Denkkollektiv*” and “*Denkstil*” to, respectively, “thought collective” and “thought style,” were adopted in the 1979 English version of his book, possibly to stress their nature as specific concepts within a general theoretical framework.

<sup>4</sup> At the following address: <http://www-wds.worldbank.org>.

the odds of finding further relevant material, we conducted another search using the word “gender,” yielding 1,256 hits. We read the online abstract of each of those documents and excluded those that were irrelevant to the present discussion, narrowing the selection to 200 documents. After these were downloaded and examined we were left with 38 documents. We do not present the analysis of those documents here, but we do quote from some of them.

The documents used (see page 19) have diverse names in the Bank’s taxonomy – reports, working papers, publications, data sheets, and so on – but for the purposes of this paper they are grouped under four broad categories: research papers, commissioned work, policy proposals, and appraisals of results.

These documents are placed in a hierarchy, with the research papers at the bottom and official Bank documents at the top. Research papers are signed by individual authors and in almost every case carry a disclaimer stating explicitly that their views are not the Bank’s views. The authorship of official documents is attributed to the Bank itself. Papers at the bottom are much more open to ongoing debate within and outside (and even against) the Bank, being much more attuned to current political thinking and actions. However, these ideas do not necessarily percolate to the top, and contentious points of view are usually expunged from the official bank documents.

Commissioned works are, as the name implies, bodies of text (most frequently books) funded to some limited extent by the Bank through research grants and/or editorial aid. The authors are usually from academia, with a high degree of independence from the Bank. Thus, as with the research papers, they are not branded as “official” documents and have only varying influence.

Policy proposals and appraisals of results have similar editorial inputs: itemized texts, graphs and tables, boxes to highlight important points, and lots of examples from “good practices” or success stories. The appraisals of results usually start out by posing a few questions, followed by responses that are almost invariably positive, and ending with the assertion that further work needs to be done.

It should be noted that the Bank has a very diverse staff, and responds to ever changing political demands – a combination that is reflected in its polyphonic (at times, cacophonous) discourse. As an ensemble the documents constitute thick discursive layers that cross-reference each other, weaving a network of statements that seem impenetrable at first sight.

We faced an additional, and major, obstacle in this analysis – namely, how to write about something that isn't there. We presumed from the start that discussions on sexuality would be, at best, a marginal component in the Bank's discourse but the research proved even that was an optimistic expectation.

### **The World Bank: Introductory notes<sup>5</sup>**

Despite decades of investment supposedly geared towards producing more development and reducing poverty, the economies of most poor and developing countries are in dire condition, fueling an apparently endless cycle of social crises. Much of this can be attributed to the actions of the twin global financial institutions — the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) — in tying their loans to unpopular structural adjustment policies, more often than not with catastrophic results.<sup>6</sup>

Both institutions are much maligned around the world as tools of imperialistic domination by the richer countries and in particular the United States. And yet the World Bank has demonstrated, time and again, sensitivity to pressure from organized actions mounted by civil society. For more than 10 years it has consistently demonstrated a commitment to take gender issues into account, at least in the copious literature it produces, and it became a major player in the HIV/AIDS arena. How, then, do we reconcile these seemingly disparate aspects of the oppressive juggernaut crushing Third World economies, and the sensitive international bureaucracy that responds to political pressures from grassroots agents?

<sup>5</sup> The main source for this part of the text is Mattos (2000). Some additional information was provided by Chamberlain (1996) and the Bank's own website. A more detailed account of the inner workings of the World Bank group is presented in the annex at the end of this text.

<sup>6</sup> For local impacts of the bank's policies, see in this publication: Cáceres, C., Cueto, M. & Palomino, N. Sexual and reproductive-rights policies in Peru: unveiling false promises, p. 138; Beresford, B., Schneider, H. & Sember, R. Constitutional authority and its limitations: the politics of sexuality in South Africa, pp. 211-212; Le Minh, G., & Nguyen, T. M. H. From family planning to HIV/AIDS in Vietnam: Shifting priorities, remaining gaps, p. 284.

In a nutshell, the Bank is a multinational bureaucratic organ that needs to continually propose and implement loans and projects to certain countries in order to justify its own existence. In order to do so it needs to maintain the delicate balance of being financially and intellectually credible to both lenders and borrowers; it must demonstrate the authority of its knowledge in many fields of expertise while at the same time holding firmly to the economics-based thinking of our times. In the dispute over ideas – on how to preserve the core of the economic rationale that it in a sense embodies, while at the same time responding to widespread criticism – the Bank’s task is eased by the hegemonic status that neoclassical economic theory, the scientific ideology of neoliberalism, has achieved.

This prevailing ideological consensus provides the Bank with a fallback position to deal with even the most negative impacts of structural adjustment policies around the world. In terms of economics, much of the debate on public policies has been recast in the last two decades. Economic theory became the *de facto* yardstick to measure good governance, and not just any economic theory, but neoclassical economics dictate the rules,<sup>7</sup> for better, or (as is more often the case) for worse.<sup>8</sup>

Neoclassical economic theory can be briefly described as the encounter of Adam Smith’s invisible hand with Newtonian physics (and mathematics), having as its starting point a research program pioneered by Walras and Jevons in the late nineteenth-century (Fullbrook, 2004, p. 71; Ormerod, 1994, p. 41). Neoclassical theory ultimately hinges on the conception of society as a simple sum of individuals as consumers who are constantly competing with each other in order to maximize their gains (Hodgson, 2004). From that axiom it builds a series of deterministic mathematical models to “prove” that, left to themselves, markets maximize social welfare and therefore any intervention is inherently destructive. This picture has two important implications: the *homo economicus* is guided by nothing but self-interest, and the least intervention of the state in the economy, the better. From this latter point stems the technocratic view that politics are a disturbance in the management

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that the Bank adopts that particular theory as its official discourse; in fact, discussion within the Bank is permeated by other views, such as institutionalism in particular (one could argue that the Bank itself would not make much sense in purely neoclassical terms). But since that is indeed the hegemonic view in economics, by and large, it is bound to have an effect on how the technical arguments are cast.

<sup>8</sup> The effects of decades of adjustment policies were already mentioned at the beginning of this paper; for the catastrophic repercussions on individual lives of this state of affairs, see for instance, Forrester (1997) and Sennet (1998).

of society at large, and thus technically sound policy proposals should be “armored” against such “spurious” interference.<sup>9</sup>

### **Findings: Looking for clues in a barren landscape**

We found three discursive formations that interface with the broad definition of sexuality that we mentioned at the beginning of this paper: “women/gender,” “sexual/reproductive rights,” and “sex-as-a-risk.” For each of those discursive formations we were able to find at least one reference that appears to address the complexity of the underlying issues. But these references are, in fact, systematically omitted from the more official documents.

#### **First discursive formation: women/gender**

We found a considerable number of documents referencing “women/gender” mainly in relation to the international mobilization around the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. But the overwhelming majority avoid discussing any issue related to sexuality, concentrating instead on framing the discourse around gender inequalities in terms of income, education, and power as obstacles to development and as such must be contested. “Power” is apparently seen in terms of man/woman relationships in a household, thus reinforcing heteronormative views of what constitutes a family.

Such framing simultaneously reinforces the central role of economics in the political argument while appearing to respond to the organized political pressure of women’s movements. It is also a recent transformation of the old “women in development” discursive formation as the following passage suggests:

*“Gender. Differences created by social (including cultural, religious, and political) constructs that result in different roles for, and power relationships between, men and women. Such roles are learned, vary across different societies, and change over time. However, in this document, it is also used, as commonly understood within the Bank, as a surrogate for ‘sex’.”*  
(The World Bank Group, 2002a)

<sup>9</sup> This discourse is present to some extent, for instance, in the already quoted paper by Williamson (2000). For a more extensive critique of neoclassical theory, see also Keen (2001).

This passage is particularly relevant since it was extracted from a document that assesses the progress of the Bank on gender issues.

The overall economic framing of the argument is demonstrated in two other excerpts that together form a paradigmatic example of the neoclassical capture of gender. Consider first Figure 1, from a series of equations included in one of the papers that supposedly represents female power. (We would also say it reflects the over-mathematization of economics strongly criticized by Ormerod.)

Figure 1: “Female power” according to some economists

We specify the female power variable as follows:

$$\theta(z_1, z_2, ed_1, ed_2) = \left( \frac{z_1}{z_1 + z_2} \right)^\phi \quad (5)$$
$$\text{with } \phi = \phi_0 + \phi_1 \left( \frac{ed_1}{ed_2} \right) \quad (5a)$$

(Koolwal & Ray, 2002, p. 7)

And then, in pristine economics-speak, the authors state:

*“This paper extends the collective approach by proposing and estimating a framework where the weights are endogenized and simultaneously determined with the household’s expenditure and earnings decisions. Defining a female’s ‘power’ as her endogenously determined welfare weight, the study finds on Nepalese data that the woman’s share of household earnings understates her true ‘power’ in influencing household outcomes.”*

(Koolwal & Ray, 2002, p. 8)

Or, in other words, women are actually more powerful than previously thought! And note the use of “female” to refer to women, again belittling the whole discussion on the differences between “sex” and “gender.” In the desexualized version of gender favored in the Bank’s dis-

course the reader is presented with a binary classification system perfectly adhered to the traditional man/woman dichotomy associated with sex (where, curiously, actual sexual expression plays no role), instead of a complex relational system that encompasses a significant part of people's lives and is closely related to sexuality and its expressions.

### **Second discursive formation: sexual/reproductive rights**

With regard to “sexual/reproductive rights” there is a 1998 document that frames precisely that concept and its consequences:

*“Reproductive health is not merely the absence of disease or disability. It is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters related to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that women and men have a right to a safe sex life, and to reproduce if and when they wish. This includes the right of men and women to be informed about, and to have access to, safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable methods of regulating childbearing. The reproductive health approach requires health services that enable women to go safely through pregnancy and childbirth and provide the best chance of having a healthy outcome for both mother and child. It also encompasses information and services to improve reproductive and sexual health through disease control and increasing gender equity.”*

(Tinker, Merrick, Jonas & Adeyi, 1998)

This definition, however, seems to be lost in the bulk of the documents that address the discursive formation. “Sex” is often dropped from the expression. For instance, in a review of gender issues (The World Bank Group, 2002b) there is a heading, Sexual and Reproductive Health, in the section on Haiti but the word “sexual” is not used in corresponding headings in the sections about Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Moreover, the discursive formation appears captive to its previous history in population control, that is, reducing fertility among the poor as a means of reducing poverty. Despite the fact that demographers and economists of a different persuasion than the neoclassical orthodoxy have over and over again made the point that this is a causal inversion – that it is the reduction of poverty that brings a reduction of fertility rather than the other way round – the notion that birth control is a strategy to reduce poverty is still evident.

Another important feature: “birth control” is almost invariably mapped to women only, dismissing the point made in the quote above about the role of men. Additionally, reproductive health is often conflated with family planning, thus reinforcing the heteronormative versions of sexuality – that is, sex necessarily linked to reproduction and reproduction necessarily linked to “families,” a term that no one bothers to qualify. Discourse around this discursive formation is also often linked to the third, placing sexuality into the medical domain.

### **Third discursive formation: sex-as-a-risk**

The “sex-as-a-risk” discursive formation is articulated with the “sexual and reproductive health” theme in relation to the prevention and control of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) on the one hand, and with HIV/AIDS prevention on the other. The overall argument ties disease prevention and treatment with the recurring theme of promoting development and fighting poverty. This has been one of the key aspects of the Bank’s overall discourse at least since its 1993 publication, *Investing in Health*, which covers STDs and HIV/AIDS and more general conditions such as maternal mortality or phenomena like teenage pregnancy. There are at least three aspects to the sex-as-a-risk discursive formation, with poor to non-existent internal dialogue: a discourse on education as a means of prevention, a medicalized approach to sexual activity, and HIV/AIDS.

The most sophisticated discussions on sexuality are found in the overall discourse on AIDS prevention (and even then, with some constraints). The most comprehensive presentation was found in an academic publication on culture and public action co-edited by the Bank and the Stanford University Press. The chapter dedicated to HIV/AIDS presents the following reasoning:

*“In much of the world, a significant part of what may be called sexual culture is the deliberate withholding of information from youth. Although the discourse of biological reproduction dominates, the majority of sexual acts taking place, anywhere, at any time, are non-reproductive... Linking all erotic behavior to the requirement of a species to reproduce threatens to confine explanatory models and delay understanding of what is really going on. Culture is the primary process by which the human being meets biological needs, both organic and perceived. Thus, sexual cultures can be understood to be those*

*constellations of ideas, practices, and artifacts and their meanings and contexts in which people participate, either as a lifelong involvement or at various times of their lives, that are adapted to meet felt erotic needs. The erotic components are linked to the body through gender or role presentations, expectations and actions, larger kinship and social roles and structures, demographic dynamics, economic environments, beliefs and attitudes, political forces, and, as we are becoming increasingly aware, disease and its meaning. Sexual cultures vary through time and place and are thoroughly influenced by a myriad of factors. The HIV pandemic can be counted on to be a major factor influencing changes in various sexual cultures as time passes.”* (Jenkins, 2004, p. 264)

But again, when we look at the specific literature on education as a means of prevention (for HIV/AIDS as well), it too falls into the “deliberate withholding of information from youth” pattern. Even when acknowledging the need to address, say, sexual education, the policy guides are usually silent on the nitty-gritty details necessary to actual interventions, as can be seen in reference materials produced by the Bank, most characteristically in a 2004 publication, *A Sourcebook for HIV/AIDS Prevention Programs* (The World Bank Group, 2004b). In a chapter describing experiences in Africa, for example, the general goals and intentions are presented, but little information is forthcoming on how the programs address those goals in daily practice. Moreover, no reference is made throughout the text to the existence of diverse sexual orientations, although one would suppose this would be at the forefront, on several levels, when dealing with HIV/AIDS prevention – as yet another official Bank document makes abundantly clear in these passages on “men who have sex with men” (MSM):

*“More importantly, this study confirms other research findings, namely that the sexual identity and sexual behavior of MSM only slightly overlap. In fact, the large majority of MSM do not identify themselves as homosexuals, and furthermore, most of those MSM that were interviewed for this study acknowledge having had sexual relations with a woman during the last month preceding this survey... The homosexual and heterosexual circuits are closely interlinked, and therefore, the cost to society of maintaining the taboo of same-gender sexual practices and marginalizing people engaged in same-gender sexual contact, is very high.”* (The World Bank Group, 2004a, p. vi)

*“In underdeveloped countries, MSM are not integrated in the prevention and treatment strategies for HIV/AIDS. In assessing the inclusion of MSM in prevention strategies, one study notes that only 25 percent of national HIV programs mention MSM as an important target group for prevention campaigns, and a mere nine percent of them mention specific programs targeting male sex workers (Parker et al., 1998)... The exclusion of MSM as a target group in HIV/AIDS programming has led various international organizations, such as the World Bank (our emphasis), to formulate responses that seek to incorporate MSM in the fight against HIV/AIDS.”*

(The World Bank Group, 2004a, p. 4)

This seems to indicate a compartmentalized approach within the Bank, where the threads concerning sexuality are never woven in a single narrative. It is particularly visible in this last discursive formation; as the preceding quotes show, despite the presence of specific documents that tackle issues of sexuality comprehensively, they are the exceptions rather than the norm and the documents deemed institutionally more relevant (project appraisals, handbooks, resource guides) are not among them.

Finally, an important common trait is apparent in the last two discursive formations where sexuality is reduced to a set of medical prescriptions. This can be seen in many of the researched documents but particularly in three project reports (The World Bank Group, 2005a; 2005d & 2005e), and especially with regards to HIV/AIDS programs and policies. It is part and parcel of the overall technocratic view of the Bank, in which technical and scientific principles generally dictate norms and priorities, whether in public policy or private lives. A restricted view of “health” – namely, the absence of disease – takes precedence over any consideration of rights or pleasure. Corporations of specialists – medical doctors and, even more powerfully, health economists – are assumed to know “what is best for you,” be it the individual or society, thus effectively producing a normatized, de-politicized and de-sexualized (paradoxical as it may seem) view of sexuality, described chiefly through silences and discursive gaps.

## Conclusion

*“As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuver, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political. But there are also historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated.”*

(Rubin, 1998, p. 143)

As expected, a comprehensive view of sexuality is conspicuously absent from the World Bank’s public discourse. In the face of an economist thought style that permeates the Bank’s analysis, and the inherent effects of its institutional arrangements, it is unlikely that an agenda centered on a positive conception of sexual rights, such as fostered by Petchesky (2000) can make headway in its public discourse. To a certain extent, this is a reflection of a process not entirely dissimilar to that analyzed by Petchesky (2000, p. 86); we also encountered an absence that can be traced to a complex drama in which “the fine points of the language become a critical terrain for the contestation of power – and the meanings of sexuality – through endless spirals of domination, resistance, and reconstitution of discourse.”

However, there are two important differences; first, as an organization, the Bank is far less open to organized political pressure from civil society, and second, arguments backed by scientific rhetoric (economics, in particular) carry much more weight than in general political discussions within the United Nations. As a consequence, the discursive formations that arise from this “surface of emergence” reinforce an essentialist, biological conception of sexuality, inherently heteronormative. Petchesky (2000, p. 91) provides us with a list of ethical principles that are relevant to a positive agenda concerning sexual rights: “sexual diversity, habitational diversity (diverse family forms), health, decision-making (personhood), and gender equality.” We found that only the last three are considered in the World Bank’s literature and even then in a limited form (such as sexual health conceived in terms of not having sexually transmitted diseases), and/or in a way that clearly conflicts with other principles – like acknowledging the need for gender equality but framing it as little more than “sex” by another name, shedding all its interactive dimensions and restricting its respect towards women; or in reinforcing the heteronormative conception of family as consisting of a man, a woman, and their offspring.

Given the political strength and epistemic authority that the Bank's discourse wields, this state of affairs constitutes a clear obstacle to the acknowledgment of positive sexual rights. Coupled with that, the technocratic/economicist thought style of the Bank effectively delegitimizes any claims based on rights or in attributing importance to pleasure, while at the same time conceding even more authority and power to the technical specialists – medical doctors and, even more so, health economists – over “lay people” in matters not only of public policy but of private lives as well.

And this, in turn, helps us to understand the deafening silence on sexuality in the Bank's discourse. As Lützen (1995, p. 27) states, “A researcher ought to keep in mind... that the study of sexuality is not just a study of *la mise en discours* but also of silence. In some instances, silence must be interpreted as silence, and with this silence as a track one must reconstruct the attitude causing the refusal to talk about and touch on certain areas.” The Bank's silence on sexuality – or more precisely, *silencing of*, if we consider that these issues and deliberations are present in some bottom tier documents but disappear as the narrative moves up the hierarchical scales – clearly indicates how this whole area of human experience is a non-issue for the *homo economicus*.

This does not mean, however, that the pragmatic consequences of such discourse are necessarily a setback for progressive forces. The reliance on “scientific evidence,” despite all the criticism that can be leveraged against it, at least allows room for discussion of a number of issues around sexuality that competing discourses, such as the religion-based, simply prohibit. As activist and researcher Almeida (2005, p. 19) recently wrote:

*“My trajectory has been that of admitting my undeniable bias in dealing with issues that are part of my own experience and struggle, without ceasing to consider the fascination that the scientific discourse has always exerted on me, precisely because it offers a point of view from a lens that needs not be that of any fundamentalism and, because of that, can promote discussions without disrespecting differing stances.”* (Our translation)

Another example is Brazil's experience with HIV/AIDS Bank-funded projects, which, in addition to frequently including activities that went against some of the Bank's positions, also

became an important element in boosting civil society participation as a (possibly not totally anticipated) consequence of successful demands to include non-governmental organizations from the outset.

We would also add that this text should not be taken as a blanket indictment of Bank-sponsored programs and activities, or demean the relevance of the goals put forth in the documents examined, even when we point out their limitations. But this does mean that the public discourse of the Bank is yet another important arena where the affirmation of a constructive conception of sexual rights has to be fought for, potentially with repercussions on a global scale.

### **ANNEX – A brief sketch of the World Bank**

The World Bank, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was born out of the Bretton Woods conference that took place in 1944 while World War II was still raging. It was inspired by a generation of statesmen and economists, led by John Maynard Keynes, who wanted to avoid a recurrence of the events that led to the 1929 crash of the United States economy and which, indirectly, contributed to the rise of fascism in Europe. The purpose of the conference was to design a set of international institutions that would dampen the shocks in international finance; the IMF would act as a sort of global central bank, stabilizing the relationship among different currencies, while what would later become the World Bank would fund the rebuilding efforts in Europe and elsewhere. Over time, these organizations would stray from Keynes' vision but that won't be dealt with in this text.

The World Bank is a conglomerate of five organizations, which together are known as the World Bank Group. Only two – the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and International Development Association (IDA) — relate directly to this study; thus, in this text all references to the World Bank should be taken to refer to those two branches, unless explicitly stated. In its own words (at its website),<sup>10</sup> the Bank defines its present<sup>11</sup> mission as follows: “Our dream is a world free of poverty.” The Bank's basic opera-

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org>.

<sup>11</sup> As was previously stated, the World Bank was born as part of the effort to rebuild Europe after the devastation caused by WWII. The inflexion towards poverty is fairly recent.

tional procedure is to provide funds and expertise to countries that require them. Both items are structured around projects (larger programs, called sectoral programs, differ mostly in scope and are also tied to projects) constructed in cooperation (to varying degrees) with the Bank's experts, which, when approved, provide the borrowing countries with the required loans at lower rates than those of the financial markets (in the case of the IDA, the loans are either interest-free credit or grant financing).

As previously noted, this would be one way through which the World Bank could exercise power over borrowers; since they are usually in great need of the loans they would have to comply with the attached strings – “conditionalities” in Bank parlance. But, again, the picture is more complicated than that, and in order to better grapple with these complexities we have to look at where the money comes from not just where it goes.

The money loaned by the IBRD is raised through the sale of World Bank Bonds (the IDA works on a slightly different basis, being financed through a fund created by member countries).

Given its AAA credit rating (the highest possible), the Bank can do this with the lowest interest rates in the market. In order to secure the inflow of resources for new loans, the Bank must be capable of continuously selling the bonds; and in order to achieve the latter, it must constantly reassure buyers of its solidity, that is, it must keep its AAA rating.

Part of that assurance lies in the Bank's capital, which is mainly “virtual” — i.e. it is not real money deposited in a safe somewhere, but rather a potential fund composed of shares (callable capital). These shares are divided as follows: the U.S. is the largest single shareholder<sup>12</sup> with 16.41 percent of votes, followed by Japan (7.87%), Germany (4.49%), the UK (4.31%), and France (4.31%). That assurance, however, is the last line of defense — if the Bank ever had to resort to its own capital to honor its bonds (or even worse, to the virtual callable capital) that would probably be the beginning of its end. The full assurance, then, is backed by

<sup>12</sup> Due to agreements that date back to their creation, the Bank's president has always been an American, nominated by the U.S. government, whereas the IMF president has always been a European. At the time of writing, the current president (the tenth) is Paul Wolfowitz, who took office on June 1, 2005, after being one of the architects of the controversial Iraq war. He succeeded the 10-year tenure of James D. Wolfensohn, under whom most of the Bank's gender and HIV/AIDS initiatives were fully developed.

three guarantees: the technical quality of the projects; the backing of the borrowing governments; and the Bank's own capital (the shares of the shareholders).

So, in order to run its operations, the Bank must be able to demonstrate at any given time that it does have expertise on the issues it tackles, namely those revolving around economic development, and that its plans do work; if the plans work the situation of the borrowers improves and thus they are able to keep honoring their back payments. The following quote is a paradigmatic example of the Bank's spiel in this regard:

*"The World Bank makes loans and designs projects in its "borrowing countries" using policies and economic formulas that seek to ensure successful development. However it is the definition of success — the fundamental goals of development — that creates differences between the many parties who are affected by the bank's operations. As an international lending institution, the Bank is unmatched in its ability to maintain financial stability and success. Through sound and innovative economic policies, the ability to consistently collect loans, and the largest developmental experience and research base in the world, the bank can ensure its continued significance — which is reflected in its invariably superior credit ratings"* (Chamberlain, 1996, p. 8).<sup>13</sup>

It turns out, however, that changes in the international economics landscape threatened this virtuous circle; the unilateral decision of the United States to revalue the U.S. dollar in 1979 effectively ignited a recession that dragged in the rest of the world (while reaffirming the U.S.'s economic hegemony). Most of the poorer countries were plunged into economic crises (often with high inflation) and thus had difficulty in keeping up with the payments on their national debts (or even functioning at all), triggering the international debt crisis.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Another example specific to gender issues can be found in the suggestively titled chapter "The Bank's Comparative Advantage in Gender and Development," (The World Bank Group, 2002a, pp. 61-67).

<sup>14</sup> There is a vast bibliography on the ongoing economic downturns of the last decades of the twentieth century; some of the elements presented here are taken from Tavares (1997, pp. 33-36) and Castells (1996, pp. 119-133). It should be noted that, at that point, the bulk of the debt of the developing countries was due to loans contracted not with the World Bank but with private banks, which had an abundant supply of dollars generated by the added revenue of the oil-exporting countries after the first "oil shock" in 1973.

In the years that followed, the World Bank and the IMF created structural adjustment loans, that is, loans that weren't related to specific projects but aimed at recovering the "health" of these "ailing economies" (the medical metaphors are abundant). Most of the affected countries requested help from both the Bank and the IMF to restructure their debt. Throughout the 1980s both institutions sponsored a number of such structural adjustment proposals, offering loans so long as the recipients overhauled several aspects of their organization and economy. It turns out that in many – if not most – of these cases, the heavily recessive "adjustment policies" further compromised the economies of the borrower countries and threatened their political stability. For example, in the case of Latin America, which had recently emerged from a series of right-wing military dictatorships across the continent, the economic downturns produced by the adjustment policies threatened to replace friendly governments with unknown variables. In order to minimize the negative impacts of the adjustment policies, without substantially changing them, the World Bank added another ingredient to the mix: compensatory policies specifically aimed at ameliorating the living conditions of the poorer segments of the population.<sup>15</sup>

At that historical juncture the Bank effectively broke ranks from its lockstep march with the IMF, becoming increasingly more vocal in its criticism of neoliberal orthodoxy, particularly through the voice of Joseph Stiglitz, its chief economist for a brief period from 1997 to 2000 (Stiglitz, 2003, p. ix). During this time the Bank started to call publicly for the cancellation of the debt of African countries, sought to work closely with NGOs from all over the world and redefined its mission of "fighting poverty."<sup>16</sup> As a result, several aspects of public policy gained prominence – one of the earlier and most remarkable products of this shift was the document *Investing in Health* (1993). The results of the "good intentions" of the World Bank aren't as evident, however; the national states have been compromised in their

<sup>15</sup> Williamson, the original architect of what became known as the "Washington Consensus" thus defined the checklist of that policy proposal: "Fiscal discipline; a redirection of public expenditure priorities toward fields offering both high economic returns and the potential to improve income distribution, such as primary health care, primary education, and infrastructure; tax reform (to lower marginal rates and broaden the tax base); interest rate liberalization; a competitive exchange rate; trade liberalization; liberalization of inflows of foreign direct investment; privatization; deregulation (to abolish barriers to entry and exit); secure property rights," (Williamson, 2000, pp. 252-253). Note that only one of the elements (the second) refers to "compensatory policies."

<sup>16</sup> For more on those changes, see Stiglitz, 2003, pp. 241-242.

policy-making capacity,<sup>17</sup> inequality has increased even where economic development was attained, and public infrastructure everywhere has been dismantled and/or privatized.<sup>18</sup>

The Bank acknowledges this critical discourse:

*“Some critics move beyond the idea of the bank ‘not doing enough’ and claim that its programs, policies, and projects impact women negatively. The bank’s ‘structural adjustment programs,’ or SAPs, are an important example. SAPs generate major socioeconomic change by imposing austerity prescriptions on a borrowing country — including fiscal conservatism, decentralization, economic privatization, and market-orientation — and have been widely criticized for disproportionately harming the more disadvantaged and poor members of society, including women. While the bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) say these programs are necessary for developing countries to revitalize their failed economies, many critics condemn SAPs and say that their negative social and environmental impacts betray a sustainable approach to development.”* (Chamberlain, 1996, p. 6)

Note, however, the subtle way the burden of responding to that criticism is shared with the IMF. In any event, with regards to the “adjustment” part of the SAPs, as far as the Bank is concerned the argument is over, as illustrated by the following intervention from one of its staff members:<sup>19</sup>

*“There are a number of issues which could be raised as far as structural adjustment is concerned. We all agree that it is important; there is not even a debate now on structural adjustment issues (our emphasis). But it is, like in this country, on balancing the budget: it is how you balance it, not just that you want to balance it.”*

[Laughter] (The World Bank Group, 1995b, p. 25).

<sup>17</sup> The policies were devised to restrict the role of the state, based on a fundamentally technocratic point of view that “politics get in the way” of sound (i.e., in accordance with the hegemonic economic thinking) policies.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Stiglitz, 2003, p. 259 (note 2).

<sup>19</sup> Mr. Ali Bourhane, World Bank Executive Director, Benin, at a forum thus described: “The program provided a forum to reflect on conference outcomes, their implications for the bank, and the bank’s commitment for future action. Through exchange of words and through art and music colleagues from inside and outside the bank explored the themes of Beijing: Equality, Development and Peace.” (The World Bank Group, 1995b, cover letter).

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