

**Global Feminisms
Comparative Case Studies of
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

BRAZIL

Shirley Villela

Interviewed by Sueann Caulfield

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Shirley Villela was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1964 and lived there until 2003, when she moved to Maryland for three years with her husband and two children. She began her professional work in gender issues in the U.S., volunteering at the International Gender and Trade Network.

After returning to Brazil in 2006, Shirley settled with her family in Brasília where she graduated in Portuguese-English Literature from the University Center of Brasília (UniCeub). She worked at the Ministry of Education in the Department of Continuing Education, Literacy, and Diversity (SECAD), particularly with the publication of books on topics such as gender, feminism, women's rights, field work, indigenous education, racism in schools, and environmental education. From 2007-2012, she also worked at UNIFEM,¹ coordinating, monitoring, and managing projects developed under the Gender Responsive Budgeting program in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. During that period, Villela had the opportunity to engage in discussions on other UN projects, such as combating violence against women and the economic rights of women.

After returning to Rio, in 2012 Shirley began to work at the Maré Development Network where she has been the Coordinator of the Maré de Sabores project, a vocational training project in cooking for women. She is also the coordinator of the House of the Women of Maré, which was being constructed at the time of this interview in 2014. As part of the project, Villela introduces the women in the training program to issues of gender, encouraging them to reflect on the condition of women in contemporary society both at local and global levels.

Sueann Caulfield is Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where she was the former director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and currently heads the Brazil Initiative Social Sciences Cluster. She specializes in the history of modern Brazil, with emphasis on gender and sexuality. She has won awards and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Council of Learned Societies. Her publications include *In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, And Nation In Early Twentieth-Century Brazil*, the co-edited volume *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin American History*, and various articles on gender and historiography, family law, race, and sexuality in Brazil. Her current research focuses on family history with a focus on paternity and legitimacy in twentieth-century Brazil. She is particularly interested in questions of human rights in Latin America, and has participated in a number of workshops, cross-country teaching projects, and exchanges around topics of social justice and social action.

The Global Feminisms Project is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews

¹ The United Nations Equality Fund for Women.

from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborators in Brazil are at the Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem - UFF (the Laboratory of Oral History and Images at the Federal Fluminense University in Rio de Janeiro, [LABHOI](#)) and Núcleo de História, Memória e Documento (the Center for History, Memory, and Documentation at the Federal State University in Rio de Janeiro, [NUMEM](#)). The Brazil interviews were conducted with support from the Third Century Learning Initiative and the Brazil Initiative (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies), both at the University of Michigan, FAPERJ (The Research Support Fund in Rio de Janeiro), and CNPq (The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development in Brazil).

This interview was translated by Lucas Limoncic and Kristin McGuire.

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Sueann Caulfield: So we are here today with Shirley Villela,² who is the coordinator of the social project Maré de Sabores, in the community of Maré,³ which is part of a bigger group, the Maré Development Network,⁴ an NGO that works in Maré. I wanted to start talking a little bit about the work of this organization, what the Maré of Sabores is about, and how it works as part of the bigger network in Maré.

Shirley Villela: The Maré Development Network works within the region of Maré, which is an area that I should give some context for: 16 communities make up the neighborhood of Maré, and according to the most recent census, from 2010, there were 132,000 people among 40,000 homes, domiciles. So it's kind of a city, you know. It's a huge area. It's very complex. And it's long been under the control of criminal gangs, with the police trying to get in, so there's a lot of confusion there, and historically it's a place that has been seen as a violent place, really like all the *favelas*⁵ in Rio. But actually it's a place that is rich in culture. A lot of people came from the Northeast of Brazil to Maré, it first started with these people, who came from the Northeast to seek a better life in Rio, and they were the first ones to settle in Maré. So it's a place with a lot of people and little structure, despite having schools, a health center. It hasn't been totally neglected by the government, but the school is of very poor quality, the clinic rarely has a doctor, it's this kind of very precarious situation. And the Maré Development Network has been working there for many years now, almost a decade, and it's active in many areas. For example, education, trying to enhance the education in the schools of Maré. And also public safety, to maintain a dialogue with other organizations, with the local government and security offices, to discuss which public policies would be beneficial for the area, for the people who live there. They work with communication, and art and culture, and development issues, which is where we fit in. The Maré de Sabores is the only project of the Maré Development Network that is completely focused on women. And although the Development Network has things about gender and race in its statutes and all of its materials – because it's been clear forever how Brazilian society is structured in terms of gender and race, especially in precarious and poor areas. And this intersection of gender and race is important, it's defining. So there's been this point of view forever. But there are so many basic needs and so much poverty that the organization never really had a chance to start a project completely focused on women. The Maré da Sabores fills that void. It started in 2010, as a request from women themselves, mothers of students who were at the schools, mothers of students who studied at schools supported by the Development Network. And they used to say, “You offer so many activities for our kids. We want some of those activities too. We are housewives, we take

² See an interview with Shirley Villela and a discussion of feminism in the context of Brazil's *favelas* at <http://mediadiversified.org/2015/03/07/feminism-in-the-favela/> (accessed 1/19/16).

³ Maré is a neighborhood and *favela* in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. For more information on current political action in the slum, see “I Died in the Maré” at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/23/i-died-in-the-mare_n_5009708.html (accessed 1/16/19).

⁴ The Maré Development Network, or *Redes da Maré*, is an NGO that works on promoting sustainable development in the slum communities of Maré. For more information, see <http://redesdamare.org.br/paginas-ingles/about-us/>.

⁵ A *favela* is a Brazilian slum or shanty town.

care of our children, but we want to do something. So what can you do for us?" So... from there, a big discussion started and we realized that women cook, but they had never been professionally qualified for it. And at that point someone came along who is a cook, who had graduated in gastronomy at the university, and she had lived in the Maré community for a long time. And she came to the Maré [Development Network] and said, "Well, let's offer a workshop for these women, a workshop in gastronomy, and they will have a professional qualification that will allow them to work at a restaurant, or they can even open something in their homes, to sell things and start to make some money." So the project started inside a school and six months later, we went to another space, the Lona Cultural da Maré, which is a public facility of the town hall, but the Maré Development Network manages the building. So we took two of the rooms and changed them into a kitchen. And the Maré da Sabores started there. So what we do is professionally qualify women of the Maré in gastronomy. And from that point we began to have groups of women who started to make small buffets, small catering services for events, and they would prepare the coffee break for seminars, or cocktail gatherings for book launchings, or end of the year parties...

SC: In the Maré community?

SV: For the Network, for the *Observatório de Favelas* (the "Slum Observatory"),⁶ for the Federal University, which is nearby and has a close connection with the Development Network. So if there was a seminar at the Engineering school, they would call Maré da Sabores to prepare some food, and that's been going on for three years now, with a lot of success because the number of women has increased, and the number of events that we can do per year has increased too. This group has between ten and twenty women, and we can, if we have to... there's a core group, a more fixed group of ten to twelve women, and there are others too that have their jobs and activities. But if they are needed, they can also come along. And the gastronomy course continued happening once a year until this year, when we decided to make two semesters, so we just graduated twenty-five new students this last semester. And in the next one, in August, we are already opening a new class to graduate 30 more. We offer a certificate, they learn baking, pasta, how to make bread, how to work with organics and whole grains. And they come to understand, to increase their knowledge on what it means to cook in a certain way. And it's beautiful because to them, cooking in general, I don't know how this is in other countries, I know in some, but here in Brazil, women learn to cook very early in their lives, especially the ones who come from poor families, because they have to take care of their brothers. The mother who goes out to work leaves three, four brothers sometimes to a girl who is ten or eleven, to take care of, make lunch. So this is something they learn very early, and they absorb as something that is part of life, which is cooking for themselves. But in their case, it's more of a necessity and they never have the opportunity to really learn something more, some interesting aspects. They never stop to think about what it means, the act of cooking. They never stop to think what the production of food means, what organic production is, what whole grain

⁶The *Observatorio de Favelas* or the "Slum Observatory" is "a social organization that undertakes research, consultancy and public actions to produce knowledge and elaborate political proposals focused on slums and urban issues." See <http://observatoriodefavelas.org.br/en> (accessed 1/29/16).

production is, and whole grain food, what it has that other things don't have, like refined foods, foods with GMO.⁷ So we teach them about all these things, and they also take a class in gender and citizenship. And I am responsible for that part, as I don't understand anything about gastronomy (laughs), but I understand a little about gender, and so I do that part. Anyone who takes the gastronomy course has to take the course on gender and citizenship. We call it gender and citizenship, but it's more of an action. I always say that they are meetings, very rich meetings, where very interesting exchanges occur. And in every class I learn something. So it's really an exchange, it's not a class. Of course I take some of my knowledge to them, about violence against women, the Maria da Penha law,⁸ about protective mechanisms that the law offers them.... The Maria da Penha law is a law that protects women against violence, it goes against violence against women, it actually criminalizes violence against women. It's from 2006, and since then many mechanisms and tools have been made available to women so they are able to use this law. The project also tries to account for this a little because in this way, well... obviously the cycle of violence against women is a cycle that involves lots of aspects, you see, and one of them is, sometimes, not only this, but sometimes, the financial dependency that imprisons the woman, and it doesn't allow her to have many choices if she has children, she can't go out, she doesn't have professional qualifications, she doesn't have a formal education, so there is this old question, "What am I going to do"? And the cycle keeps going. So when we teach them an occupation, when we give them the opportunity of working in the project, we are also thinking about breaking that cycle a little so she can somehow have options and can make choices. Not that she has to leave the house, or has to take some position, because that is a very personal choice. But she will have other choices.

SC: The course is free?

SV: Yes, everything.

SC: And how is this project funded, not just this project, but the Network in general. It's an NGO, and has funding from where?

SV: Well, it has many supporters and funders. The Network's main project right now, and already for some time, is a program called "Criança Petrobras,"⁹ which takes place inside the schools, where Maré de Sabores was first started, where they used to work with all of the professionals of the schools, with those responsible and with the children, the students.

⁷ GMO, or genetically modified organisms, are foods that have been changed through genetic engineering.

⁸ The Maria da Penha Law on Domestic and Family Violence was passed by the Brazilian government in 2006, named after Maria da Penha who suffered from domestic violence and whose case remained forgotten in court for two decades. This law aims to criminalize domestic violence and make prosecution in these cases more effective. Although violence rates have significantly decreased, domestic violence is still a major issue in Brazil due to challenges with implementation, especially in rural areas.

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/8/maria-da-penha-law-a-name-that-changed-society> (Accessed 4/9/15). Maria da Penha was interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

⁹ "Crianca Petrobras" is a program led by the Brazilian oil company Petrobras that promotes education in low SES areas of Brazil. For more information in Portuguese, see <http://www.programacriancapetrobras.com.br/>.

This project is funded by Petrobras,¹⁰ which is the Brazilian oil company, right, the state oil company. There are other funders too, like international funds. We have the support of ActionAid Brazil,¹¹ the Ford Foundation¹² on some of our projects, because each project is responsible for bringing its own resources. We already had funding from the Caixa Econômica Federal,¹³ which is a public-private bank, something for when you are just starting out. So now we don't have that anymore. We have the Instituto Lojas Renner,¹⁴ which is now... we participated in a call for proposals last year, and this year we are building the Casa das Mulheres de Maré, which is a "plus" to the project Maré de Sabores. The idea came from Maré da Sabores, and then the Network had this property, and we are building a three-story house where the Maré de Sabores is going to work. We are leaving a space that was adapted for a space that is being built especially for us, and not only for the gastronomical classes, but also for the buffet, for a restaurant, we are going to have a small restaurant that will serve the community, which is also an interesting thing in a lot of ways. And we will offer other qualifications. And we plan to have legal assistance, to offer legal assistance and psychological support, social support for women of the Maré community in partnerships with universities, somehow to work in partnerships. But it's obvious that a center like this is going to need funding, right, and that's my main job. I always say nowadays that my main job is to raise funds. To try to find partners to enable us to do the things we believe in, and doing those things inside the Maré community, we can definitely guarantee a better quality of life, especially for the women there.

SC: And how did the Network start? How was it conceived? Could you tell us a bit about the history of the Network. You said that this gastronomy project came from women from the community who asked, who came to the Network, and to the people at the NGO, saying, "We want something." But who conceived of the Network itself?

SV: The Network was created, it was founded by people who were already working in the community, and most of them were people who lived there or used to live there. They were people who were able to get to the university and get a master's degree or a doctorate and see the world from an academic point of view. So they always used to look back and ask themselves, "Why did we get here and other people from the Maré couldn't? Why is it so low, the number of people who can do it?" So this was a research question that a number of

¹⁰ Petrobras is a Brazilian semi-public multinational oil company, which is the largest company in Latin America. Members of the governing party in Brazil are facing corruption charges due to accepting bribes from the company, which has also led to impeachment calls for Dilma Rousseff as she headed Petrobras for seven years before becoming President. "Brazil: Thousands Back Dilma Rousseff over Petrobras." BBC.com.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-31880325> (accessed 3/13/15)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrobras> accessed (3/13/15)

¹¹ ActionAid is an international NGO that aims to provide education, counseling, and support to people living below the poverty line worldwide. For more information on the work being done in Brazil, see

<http://www.actionaid.org.uk/where-we-work/transforming-lives-in-brazil> (accessed 1/29/16).

¹² The Ford Foundation is an international NGO dedicated to "social change worldwide" through a wide range of development projects. See <http://www.fordfoundation.org/> (accessed 1/29/16).

¹³ Caixa Econômica Federal is the second largest government-owned bank in Latin America and the fourth largest bank in Brazil.

¹⁴ Instituto Lojas Renner is an NGO founded in 2008 to invest in projects that generate jobs for women in the labor force. See <http://www.institutolojasrenner.org.br/en/instituto/> (accessed 1/29/16).

people, not only from the Network, but also from the Slum Observatory, came here to do, trying to ask and trying to understand what are the processes that led some to succeed and others not. So within the same family sometimes, you have one person who goes to college and another who gets involved with drug dealing. So how do you explain this difference, inside their own homes? So that's how they started, this core that went on to create the Maré Development Network – Eliana, Edison, Dona Helena, they were people who used to live there for a long time, and their families still live there. And they were always this was. They were in the neighborhood association and they were part of the political movements inside the Maré. So it's not only because they went to the university that they got involved with the politics in the community. And from that, they started to think about what could really help, and structurally change Maré. And education appears as... it's education, education has to happen. So they created a preparatory course for the university and this was the first project of the Development Network inside the community.

SC: When was that?

SV: 2006. The course began before, the Maré Development Network was officially created in 2007. But this group had already been working, from other organizations inside Maré, or through their own commitment to the community. So they created this preparatory course, which still exists today. So for example in ten years, no, less, in eight years, eight years ago 0.03% of people had been to the university – that's people from Maré who had been to the university, and not even people who graduated, because we don't have this in the data. It's just whoever was able to get into the university, 0.03%. So in eight years, now 2% of the people are able to access the university. And that's possible not only because of this preparatory course, but also because of other courses that appeared from other organizations. So from that, a language course began, because there was a partnership with someone; a dance course because a choreographer wanted to work in Maré, so he did that, and then he had to leave and someone else came along. And there's theater, and art and education in schools, and martial arts, graffiti, languages, music, dance, public safety, which is something that came a little more recently, because it wasn't discussed much before. So this started to grow and to turn into all of this.

SC: So then you seek funding for certain projects, like the cooking.

SV: Exactly. So then we start looking, each one seeks their funding. We have a photography project, for example, using a pinhole camera, which is a camera inside of a can. It's a wonderful project that I love. We have tile painting, they have an oven and they paint them. We have memories and identities from Maré, which is also a beautiful project – through older people who live here, kids and teenagers recover the history of some of the communities of Maré and then they make books and drawings. They're going to name streets after old residents. So it's a project for rescuing and remembering what is amazing here.

SC: So now let's talk a little bit about your work specifically, not only in this project now, but what led you to do this job. I wanted to ask you first if you see this job as a feminist job, if you consider yourself a feminist, and what feminism means to you.

SV: I think the work we do, although it doesn't have the intention of educating women about feminism, because these women are not coming to us for that, they're not coming because they're interested in that. They contact us because they want to be professionally qualified. This is a hook that we use to get them to think about other matters. So I even avoid talking too much about feminism while we're here, because I realize that they are a little narrow minded about it. I think that many of them don't really know, they don't really understand what feminism is, but they have this preconceived image of a feminist being someone who is tough and who wants to be better than men. I don't know. They have a very simple idea of what it is to be a feminist, so I try to get them there by other ways. But I think it does have an effect, and I hear their stories, many start coming to classes and they come with stories.... There is this case of a girl who split up with her husband because he hit her. He had serious problems with violence for a number of years already, but she hadn't been able to leave him. And through the things she learned in our classes, she said, in her own words, that she found the courage there, in the conversations... There's another one got who got a job. Her husband didn't want her to get one, but she got one, and there was big family tension. So I think these are all also possible paths of feminism, which are much more about the practical, more of the street, you know, it has more meaning than a theoretical point of view. They don't have that, and we don't try to give them a theoretical aspect of feminism, but the whole time we're there, we're talking to them about it. The fact that it is a project focused exclusively on women, for them this is already a novelty. But since it's a kitchen, it both is and isn't something new, because they don't see this space as somewhere a man could be in. So they have a lot of preconceived ideas, and we try to break those down a little, you see. I consider myself a feminist, yes, although I don't have a history based in a lot of feminist theory, because feminism kind of made its way into my life through different paths. And I ended up absorbing it well, of course that's because I also already had, I think I already had a very strong tendency toward these things. The way in which I was raised, since I was little, I already used to question things, I had some... I remember in my books when I was little, one time I asked my mom this question, because in my house things were different. I am turning fifty now. So, fifty years ago, a little over forty years ago, women in textbooks always had aprons on, they were cooking, or with their children, or with the shopping cart, and the man was always in a suit or a working outfit, or driving a car, or leaving the house to get the car and go to work. And there was the woman, with her children, saying goodbye at the front door. I remember these images and they did not match anything in my life, because my mom worked a lot. My mom was not a feminist, but she worked out of the house since she was very young because the family was very poor and everyone had to work. Seven kids, you see. So they had to work.

SC: What city are you from?

SV: I'm from here. My mom came from Santa Catarina¹⁵ to Rio¹⁶ in a family of seven children. So everyone started working little by little. And everyone stopped studying and went to work. That was the reality.

¹⁵ Santa Catarina is a state in the Southern part of Brazil.

¹⁶ Rio refers to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

SC: Her family was poor, so she had to work?

SV: Yes, exactly. She always worked her whole life. She worked until she retired, so –

SC: She worked where?

SV: She worked at Petrobras, as an administrative assistant, in human resources, and she had –

SC: And was she able to graduate college?

SV: No, she managed [to go back to school] after she already, well, when I was 12 or 13 years old, I remember my mom studying at night to finish high school because she hadn't been able to finish her elementary education, so she completed her elementary school in a year and then she finished high school. And then she stopped. She didn't want to go to college.

SC: Did your father go to college?

SV: My father didn't go to college either. My father had very little education. He was a very smart man, very smart, but he had very little education, for the same reason. He had to stop going to school in order to work. Life was very hard. And it still is for a lot of people, right? But at that time, it was a very precarious life. And so the scene in my house didn't match, because my mom was never at the front door waving goodbye to my dad who went to work. She always left before him. She used to go to work before him. My mom was never at home, cooking. She used to cook at night in a hurry before she went to class. She had a life where she was always running. So it didn't correspond [with the images in the books]. I always wondered about this. Why don't they show the woman working? My mom works. She goes out to work every day, why don't they show that here? [In the books], there weren't the two different versions. It took a long time to show two versions. And still today, the textbooks are very far behind. Black people are always in a subordinate position – it's the mechanic in overalls, it's the maid, the nanny, always jobs like this. There's never a black woman doctor or an architect or an engineer in the book. It's always men in these positions. Still today, it's unbelievable. And I remember I always used to question these models, you know, because they were weird to me because I used to see my friends, and their moms used to stay home. And I always had a conflict with this. They were childish conflicts, because I also wanted my mom to stay home, taking care of me. As a child I had that thought, but later, not any more. I thought it was great for her to go to work. And then I went to work. I worked at a newspaper as a secretary for a long time. And then I went to

IBASE.¹⁷ IBASE is a very old NGO here in Rio, founded by Betinho,¹⁸ who was a major figure in Brazil, a very important person in Brazil. And I had the pleasure of working with him. And there was a core group that addressed these matters, gender matters, in the times of Beijing. I remember Sônia Correa,¹⁹ one of the early feminists, and she went to Beijing;²⁰ she worked with Magaly [Pazello].²¹ So anyway, there were always these intense discussions. They were good to hear.

SC: Beijinho?

SV: Beijing. It's when –

SC: Oh, Beijing!

SV: Yes, to the UN meeting. They all went, they all went –

SC: What year was that?

SV: Hmm, '95. I believe it was 1995. And before that there was Copenhagen²² for human development, and also Cairo.²³ So there were all these conferences and this was –

SC: And the group of women was?

SV: It was small. It was two or three people.

SC: But this was quite an internationalized group?

¹⁷ IBASE, the *Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas* or the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis, was founded by sociologist Herbert “Betinho” de Souza in 1981 as one of the first Brazilian NGOs. See <http://www.ibase.br/en/quem-somos/> (accessed 1/29/16).

¹⁸ Herbert de Souza, also known as Betinho, (1935-1997) was a Brazilian sociologist and activist against economic repression by the Brazilian government. He is known as the founder of IBASE and for his self-exile after the 1964 Brazilian coup d'état due to his Marxist ideals. For more on his career, see <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Herbert-Jose-de-Souza>.

¹⁹ Sônia Correa is a Brazilian feminist who became involved in the women's rights movement early on. She does research and advocacy for gender equality, has founded several NGOs, and has followed and participated in the UN negotiations on gender since 1992. She has published extensively in English and Portuguese. See <http://dayagainsthomophobia.org/march-8-interviews-brazils-sonia-correa-on-sexualgender-rights-2/> (accessed 2/3/16); <http://rhrealitycheck.org/author/sonia-correa/> (accessed 2/3/16).

²⁰ The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in 1995 in Beijing, China and is often considered a turning point for global women's rights due to its participation and its outcome, the Beijing Declaration.

²¹ Magaly Pazello is a Brazilian feminist activist and researcher, affiliated with DAWN, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, a network of feminist scholars and activists from the “economic South” working for economic and gender justice. <http://www.dawnnet.org/feminist-resources/> (accessed 2/13/16).

²² The Second World Conference on Women was held in 1980 in Copenhagen.

²³ The United Nations coordinated an International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994.

SV: Yes, very much, very much. And also very connected with feminist organizations here in Brazil, SOS Corpo in Recife,²⁴ CFEMEA in Brasilia,²⁵ and also some in Rio. So there were these connections. So this theme had already started, and it grew in a way that was a little more –

SC: Older than you.

SV: Yes. Yes.

SC: So you joined them when you were young?

SV: Yes. As an apprentice. (Laughs.) But hearing all of this was, you know that feeling you get when you find something, something that fits, and you don't really know where it comes from, but as you talk about it, suddenly you hear it all and I was like, woah, hold on! That's exactly how I feel! It's hearing what you are feeling. And then, well, I went to live in the U.S. for three years and I did a volunteer job at an NGO near Washington D.C. named Central of Concern.²⁶ There was also a group there that addressed gender issues, international trade, all the international agreements. I volunteered there because, you know, I had been staying home alone, just being at home because they didn't let me work, they gave me a visa that didn't allow me to work in the U.S., and I didn't have work.

SC: And so, it was your husband?

SV: My husband went to work, yes. And since it was after 9/11, it was 2003, all those laws on visas and everything had changed and we didn't realize it. We found out about it when we got there. So the volunteering job was a sort of refresh in my life. It was very good. I started working with a lot of women's movements in Latin America because I put together a report, I was gathering information for a report for the Women's Committee of the *Alianza Social Continental* (Hemispheric Social Alliance).²⁷ The Committee took initiatives and organized events with feminist organizations throughout all Latin America and Central America and the United States, Canada – throughout the hemisphere. And it was very interesting because I started to learn about what was going on in Bolivia, in Peru, Argentina, Uruguay. And I got to know about all those movements myself. I mean of course

²⁴ SOS Corpo is a feminist organization dedicated to promoting democracy in Brazil. It is located in Recife, the capital of the Northeast state of Brazil.

²⁵ The *Centro Feminista de Estudos e Assessoria* (CFEMEA), or the Feminist Center for Studies and Advisory Services, is a Brazilian NGO that monitors Brazilian legislation and policies, and partners with many other NGOs for women's empowerment.

²⁶ The Center of Concern (CoC) is a Catholic non-profit that works for social justice throughout the world; their Global Women's Project advocates for the rights of girls and women by focusing on women's empowerment through education, the fight against violence, and the concerns of the global economy. See <https://www.coc.org/> (accessed 2/4/16).

²⁷ The Hemispheric Social Alliance is housed at the Transnational Institute (TNI), an international research and advocacy group that brings together activists, scholars, and policy makers. The network was formed for organizations of the Americas to share information and promote joint action to block the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. See <https://www.tni.org/en/network/hemispheric-social-alliance> (accessed 2/3/16).

I knew of them because my husband used to work a lot with international issues. He has always been involved in every conference, he always worked for IBASE. So these issues and themes, they end up being in both your personal and professional life. But I got to know all those movements and it was very interesting to realize how alive they were, very alive, and strong, here in Latin America. We have a problem here in Brazil. Brazil is isolated from the rest of Latin America, and I think it's more that it isolates itself than that it is isolated. Because it is not only a question of language, there's a question of... we don't really know what's going on in Latin America and Central America. We don't exchange a lot of information from a cultural point of view, in arts, music, theater and cinema, nothing, with the exception of Argentinian cinema, which is wonderful and has come to Brazil. But you don't know a lot about what's going on unless you're really into something, or if you have a particular reason for knowing about it. Otherwise, not. So it was kind of like a breath of air, oh, good that this is all happening, right? I remember women in Bolivia, they tried to nationalize the water, they tried to privatize the water company. And they made a movement, a wonderful movement, throughout many cities. And I realized they were very small places, and even though they were small, they were still able to reach them and reverse the situation and they had to step back. They had to nationalize everything over again and everything went back to the way it was. So I thought that was very powerful, very strong. And when I returned to Brazil, we went to live in Brasilia. And I went to work in what was back then UNIFEM, which became UN Women²⁸ in 2011, early 2011. So I was part of this transition from UNIFEM to UN Women. I worked there for five years coordinating a project of gender sensitive budgeting.²⁹ I didn't start as the coordinator, I was the assistant to the coordinator, until the coordinator had to leave and I started learning that job, and learning, and learning, until I was functioning as the coordinator, and I ended up assuming that role. And it was very interesting because it was a different issue. It was the budget thing. It was the budget itself, the planning and the budgets for countries. We worked with local governments and cities in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay. With some of them we tried to work with these issues at a national level, although this was a little harder to do, to achieve, we really weren't able to do that. But we got to know these local realities and work from the perspective of the local with women's organizations that are connected to or work in partnerships with town halls and cities, as was the case in Rosario in Argentina, for example, which was a very interesting movement. This partnership hadn't been working before, it was hard. It was damaged, and somehow through that budget work, we were able to make that partnership a little more interesting and elaborate. And the university joined and they started an initiative that I hope has continued to develop. And we worked in Montevideo and in Recife also, it was very interesting work. And within UNIFEM, it's obvious, right, that all of these gender issues, and the intersection of gender and race in Brazil, this nucleus was very strong. We had quite a big project, a Latin American project that addressed exactly these matters of gender and race, among other themes, like violence against women. This permeates all conversations and discussions,

²⁸ UN Women is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, created in 2010. This merged a number of UN sections that had been devoted to promoting gender equality, including UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women). See <http://www.unwomen.org/en>.

²⁹ Gender sensitive budgeting (GSB) is a form of mainstreaming gender into budget analysis. The aim is to take into account gender in the process of creating a budget for projects of policies as well as implementation and monitoring.

seminars and meetings that include diverse segments, women's movements, governments, universities. So we were able, I was able actually, to really understand these themes from daily practice and you know, from my trips to Latin America, I was able to finish what I had started previously. I went to Peru, I went to Ecuador. I went to see close up, on trips where we met with the groups, in Panama, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay. So we were able to do very broad-ranging work.

SC: So for you, the relation between feminist theory and the concept of feminism itself... it's very related to working on projects, to action, and always with an international point of view.

SV: Yes, yes. Much more empirical... Much more empirical and in the context of learning a little. And I, this absolutely doesn't mean that I somehow think theory, coming to this through theory, is not good. With me, it happened this way. But obviously that made me seek theory, because to ground my work I also had to search, you know, and read things, read the authors, and I got to know much more of the theory than I would have before; for me it came afterwards. My entrance was in the world of working with women.

SC: So then when you came to Rio, you looked for work in social movements that were more local? Because you come from a very international experience, the UN and going to different countries, and now you are working in a community, a big community, but still a community, with grass-roots projects, real community work. You always were doing more of a global thing, thinking about women and gender worldwide, from a very wide angle. And now you are working in a very local way.

SV: Yes, this path is very interesting, and it was very quick. I came to Rio still working for UN Women because the project was finishing, so I kept working in Rio for six months, and when I finished this work, I was invited by the director of the Network who had met me at some point and knew that I worked in this area. She had this project that she didn't know what to do with it. The project had grown beyond expectations, so she didn't know what to do. So she thought, I have to give this to someone who knows how to handle this and has knowledge to make this work because we are not handling it, because the project of course started without any intention that it would grow to more than what people could handle. Or at least that is what she said.

SC: So you got into that project, Maré de Sabores?

SV: On that project, exactly! Because the project was actually started without a specific vision. It started as a workshop for these women and all of a sudden it became something a lot bigger and it had been growing for three years already, growing and growing. And she wanted someone who wasn't only going to think about the professional qualifications, gastronomy, and the nurturing of... she wanted me to think about the direction of the Network, the expectations that we are starting to build, that I would get involved with other projects, and bring a little more of the gender issues into other projects, so that gender would become really present in all of the projects in the Network. But this is something very slow. And anyway as I told you, the demands and the problems are so

many, especially with the youth, the younger males between 15 and 24 years old who are brutally murdered in Brazil. Anyway it's a problem, a gap that is being created. So you deal with this. You have to think, you have to deal with women and to some people that's enough. To me it's not enough, I think we have to do both jobs. Because women are more vulnerable, those women who are from a slightly lower social class. They are in a very vulnerable state that exposes them, maybe not to being shot to death themselves, but to other violence that they have to live with daily. Anyway, talking about this work – I used to work in an office in Brasilia, and I had very little contact with the organizations we used to support. We used to support many organizations. Twice a year I did these tours, these trips to be able to know what was going on. I met with these organizations, but that was it. I wasn't in the daily life, working with them. I had people doing that in those places. So all of the sudden, to be there, working with them directly, wow, that's a brutal leap, it's.... I wouldn't even know how to explain it. I feel more.... For me, the more interesting work is what I'm doing now, in terms of being together with the women, seeing directly what their needs are, what the main issues are of the women of this community, and there are many of them. And also to say "women," it seems like there is one type, but "the women" include many different people, right? And some of them you can't even put into a category, they mix categories. So observing that directly, wow, it's so rich. Not that it hadn't been, but it was another kind of richness. But this work with the organizations themselves, with the grass-roots organization, it's very intense and strong and powerful. We see these things happening and it's very cool, you know.

SC: It's very interesting this movement of a global organization and international funding and where the theoretical question is always present for work that is very practical, for the day-to-day lives of women. I was wondering how you see the relationship between this work you're doing in the communities and feminism – and the history of feminism in Brazil, or any aspects of feminism in Brazil. In other words, if this is typical. If I'm understanding correctly what you're saying about the NGO, the Network of the Maré has a number of people who work in, have an interest in, or a background in theories of gender, who are interested in changing unequal gender relations. And they are working through these social movements, these workshops and these training courses, and you're there to help do this work. This is a form of feminist work within grassroots movements, broader social movements. Do you see this as a common thing in Brazil, or is it a specific feminist action, in the broader context of feminism in Brazil.

SV: Yes, I saw through various experiences, including my experience in IBASE and other organizations that I know, big organizations, big NGOs in Brazil and the university itself. The truth is, it's very difficult to understand the gender question as a structural question. In theory it's absorbed, but in the daily work of these organizations, there are very few projects that, if we are speaking of each one, these days it's rare that an organization works with only one theme, right? Within the themes that a specific organization works with, however, if you read the project, it's inserted there, there's a position, there's an eye on gender inequality that has so many implications in women's real lives. But even though it's described there, you rarely see it... So it's very much in the discourse, but not in the practice. When it comes to the practical, I see this in the Network, and I also saw it in IBASE,

I saw it in many organizations that I was familiar with. But outside of women's organizations, of course, of organizations that work with this theme directly, in mixed organizations – that's what we call them, they are the organizations that work with men as well, they are not aimed at only one public – they struggle a lot to integrate that. And I think that's a little bit of a historical matter. And I think there's a movement to change this, there's an effort to break that. It was easier, for example, I realized, to integrate race, because in Brazil racism is so outrageous. Because people say it's hidden, but I don't see anything hidden, I see a lot, completely outrageous... The issue of race entered on its own, it was able to be introduced in many of the projects in these organizations, even if the main issue, the main theme wasn't race, somehow they could make some openings and insert it there. The gender theme is not that simple, right? For questions of gender, the whole time you have to be raising awareness and sometimes even, for example at the UN, we discussed this a lot. The UN as an institution, which is an institution, a crazy business, something enormous that is in 198 countries. And they have very rigid internal rules, because they have to serve each and every country and for each of them they have to live with their cultures and realities and they are very different in each of these countries. So we realized there were some difficulties sometimes, even at UN Women, it was like this: "No, UN WOMEN will take care of this. You don't have to take care of it." So if you take, I don't know, the question of refugees, you have to have, most people who are there, generally, according to data that I've read, they are women, because women flee with the children, often men go to fight or they are captured. Anyway, in situations of war, there is often this question of women escaping with their children when there is still time, you know, with the kids. So in refugee camps there is specific work, in my opinion, with women – my opinion and other people's as well. So there was a bit of this discussion. In other organizations, the UNDP³⁰ itself, there was a council, no, what was it called, it was a workgroup (WG), a gender WG that incorporated here in Brazil and that all the organizations had to do. The ILO,³¹ for example, did this well, they were able to incorporate the gender issue very well and they addressed the question of work and gender quite intensely. It's work that has an impact, you know? Research surveys and campaigns and the question of domestic workers, the issues of race and gender intersect. I think the ILO integrates this in a way that is very interesting, and the WHO³² organization too. Although I'm talking about these two, actually in the UN complex, they are a little more independent, a little more loose. So anyway, when you think about a very huge organization like that and the micro, like a local organization which is what the Maré Development Network is, we have difficulties bringing in gender. And I think that's historical. But I think there's a trend toward changing this, I also saw this in the Center of Concern, back in the U.S.: there is this core gender group, addressing these issues, they had this gender group, but it didn't affect the rest of the organization. There wasn't a lot of exchange. I think the time I was working there was a moment of change. I remember this discussion was in the middle of everything: "No, we have to include a

³⁰ United Nations Development Program.

³¹ The ILO, International Labour Organization, is an agency of the UN.

³² The World Health Organization (WHO) is a branch of the United Nations that aims to promote international health.

gender angle here....” On the issue of Bretton Woods,³³ which was a discussion of financial matters, structural matters, and so on, so there was always someone calling attention to that. And I think they were in a moment of adapting a little more. That’s a move I would like to see happen in organizations in general. The university also has these difficulties, you know, and it ends up that some departments create core groups, study groups. I don’t know how it is in the U.S., but here it’s that kind of isolated core that addresses gender, as if gender weren’t permeating all of the themes, as if women weren’t experiencing different situations in all of the disciplines, in sociology, and anthropology, and economy. In all of this, there should be a gender dimension, right? As I told you, I studied languages. When we were chatting before, I mentioned that I have a degree in languages, and when I had to write my final essay, I was working with UN WOMEN. And I said I wanted to do something useful, something that would serve me as a scholar but also serve other people. I realized that in Brazil there was no discussion about sexist language. There wasn’t even a question, not a discussion. It was like, this is how it is, just because. Because it was set up this way, it’s how it is. The grammar says so, and we accept grammar as right. I had been questioning this ever since Dilma³⁴ took office as president, and no one could call her “*presidenta*.”³⁵ That was the subject of much discussion when I was a student. She became president when I was a student at the university, and I always raised this question, and there were always discussions. I remember the day she was elected and during the early hours, I was watching the news and they were having this discussion, “What will people call her now. How will we address her?” (Laughs.) And it was decided, in the Globo Organization³⁶ at least – and I think it was previously discussed there, that they had already decided – but they declared, “We are going to call her *presidente*,” because “*presidente*” is common to both genders, it’s a noun that is common for both genders, referring to both the masculine and the feminine, so we are going to keep calling her “*presidente*.” Because “*presidenta*” is very ugly, it’s very ugly. And I heard this many times, but “*ministra*” is not common, “*governadora*” is not common, “*prefeita*” is not common; “*vereadora*”³⁷ didn’t exist, “*engenheira*,”³⁸ all of these were being created in a feminine version, because women hadn’t occupied those places, they hadn’t been allowed to occupy those places. She wasn’t allowed to occupy those spaces and she wasn’t allowed to make the grammar rules. The ones who made up the grammar rules were men. So in my field of study at that moment there was something, a question, a sexist matter in the Portuguese language. In English, German, there are other issues, but it’s just like Spanish, and Spanish is very ahead of us in

³³ Bretton Woods was a conference in 1944 that established the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as the foreign exchange rate to regulate global trade. Its institutions have often been criticized for neoliberal Westernized policies that limit developing countries and benefit developed nations.

³⁴ Dilma Rousseff is the current President of Brazil (2011-), now in her second term. She is a member of the Worker’s Party and was formerly Lula Da Silva’s Chief of Staff; she is the first female president of Brazil. She was reelected for a second term in 2014, but with significant controversy around economic issues and corruption. People typically refer to everyone, including political leaders, by their first name.

³⁵ In Portuguese, words can be feminine (often indicated by ending in “A”) or masculine (often indicated by ending in “E”). The word for president is masculine (“*presidente*”) and led to debate about whether the word for a female president should be “*presidente*” or “*presidenta*.”

³⁶ Now called Grupo Globo, this is the largest mass media group in Latin America, founded in 1925 in Rio de Janeiro. They own the main private television channel in Brazil.

³⁷ “*Vereadora*” is the Portuguese word for council woman.

³⁸ “*Engenheira*” is the Portuguese female word for engineer.

this. The Spanish language has absorbed many words and many forms of treatment specifically for women, without fear of being happy,³⁹ so there [in Spain], *presidenta* is what it is, there's no discussion about it. And they have studies... Spain with its period of left-wing socialism made a lot of progress, you know, on women's issues, with their ministry, and all the policies focused on discussing gender issues and making this topic something important for the country. They have many studies and they have NOMBRA.⁴⁰ I also based my thesis very much on NOMBRA. NOMBRA carries this discussion. NOMBRA is appointed, feminine and masculine, things have names, be it female or male. NOMBRA has this. They have NOMBRA for the professions – they appoint the professions, they appoint titles, they nominate people, they nominate subjects, everything. And in my travels through Latin America, through Mexico, I don't know, I became aware that people had integrated this in a much easier way. In the Portuguese language, it's not in the rules and it's not in how we use it. It doesn't get integrated. So it was a very interesting study.

SC: I see we are getting a little short on time, so I just wanted to ask you one more question. How do you see the future, and your future in terms of your work? Do you see yourself working with this project, expanding it, and continuing in it? Or do you see yourself doing other things. And how do you see the future of feminism in Brazil, if these two things are related?

SV: Well, the Casa dos Mulheres is a dream that is literally being built, it's in the process. I can see myself coordinating the Casa dos Mulheres, and that's the expectation of the administration and of me. And I think we have every intention, and the will and the capacity to be in that space, and to really do something there that will attract the women of the Maré. We can broaden it to other things, expand their world in as many ways as possible, as possible in one place, right? And I see perhaps creating a young feminist group, starting something, that's also a thought I have. How are we going to do this? We have to move toward that. You know, learning as we move forward... And about feminism in Brazil, you have to think partly about the world and partly about Brazil, because now things are so global. It's hard to think about that. Things that happen outside often reverberate right here. Brazil is a country that really has a lot to do to advance matters of gender. There is a lot to advance in this discussion. And I think the government, the last

³⁹ This is a reference to the campaign slogan of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva of the Worker’s Party (PT) in 1989, “Without Fear of Being Happy.” Lula, a member of the left-wing Worker’s Party, was President of Brazil from 2002 to 2011. He made his way to power from poverty, becoming involved in unions that under his leadership became strong independent movements. His presidency advocated social democratic reforms and social programs that left him with the highest approval ratings in Brazilian history. It is common throughout Brazil to refer to leaders with their first names. For more on his campaign, see John D. French and Alexandre Fortes, “Another World Is Possible: The Rise of the Brazilian Workers’ Party and the Prospects for Lula’s Government” in *Labor Studies in Working-Class of the Americas* Vol 2:3 (2005) at: <https://fds.duke.edu/db/attachment/73> (accessed 2/25/16).

⁴⁰ NOMBRA is a guide put out by the Institute of Women’s Advisory Commission on Language (in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs) in Spain starting in the early 1990s. They published pamphlets about gender and language for a variety of areas, including health, professions, legal affairs. Although the effort was compromised when the socialist party lost power to a conservative government in 2012, the pamphlet inspired women throughout the world on issues of language and communication. See <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1581> (accessed 2/25/16).

government, when Lula was president, his first and the second governments, as much in the first as in the second, he took very big steps in matters concerning gender. He organized national meetings, he created an office with the status of ministry, which he gave real power to and he put a person in the office who really advanced the gender agenda in Brazil. I thought that was very important. Just like he did with race, he created a ministry for racial equality. So they were very big steps. And when Dilma arrived, we had expectations of her, being a woman, to take even more steps. And I don't think we took them. I think we just stood where we were, if we didn't take a step backwards. But I think this issue has to come. It has been coming. It's been happening, this social network stuff. Despite the criticisms that I have toward the social networks, although of course I participate in them, but although I am critical about the alienation, the superficiality, and the shallowness, etc., the volatility of this information, right, how they are volatile, how everything you post changes in a moment. But at the same time, they also bring something that is very interesting, which is this dissemination, this spread. It is this getting information to people who perhaps wouldn't have the opportunity to have that information or to have access to that reflection. It's not information, sometimes it's just a phrase that a person reads and it gives her a wakeup call to rethink some habits. Not long ago there was a campaign called "Chega de Fiu-fiu." Fiu-fiu is the sound made when a woman passes on the street. Here in Brazil, this is very unpleasant because it's very offensive and they say very unpleasant things. I know it's not just here, I know that it's worldwide. And then there was this campaign where women said, "Hey, stop that, I don't want that." And men were shocked, they were saying, "Gosh, we thought we were being nice." (Laughs.) So bringing information as silly as this, that 70% of women feel bothered and harassed or threatened by those things that are said on the street, those looks. Then men could see it from a different perspective. That's great, having this kind of discussion. And the issue of violence against women, criminalizing that, like, "Look, you're going to jail if you hit. It's not right, it's not normal. You don't have to follow this pattern. It's not how it works." It's interesting and I really think this brings about a change in behavior. But we still have a long way to go. We have a lot to break through. We have a lot of ideas that are crystallized inside our heads, not only men's, but in our culture, in society because women are also there being educated in and observing the same kind of culture. And I think we have a long way to go. But we will. It's one step after another and we will go about our work, just like little ants. (Laughs.)

SC: Thank you very much.

SV: You're welcome. I hope it was good.