



In Conversation with Professor Rhoda Reddock

Interviewed by Ragi Bashonga on 23 August 2021

Ragi Bashonga is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Her ongoing PhD study, *Mirrors in Frames: Identity and Belonging in young Congolese people in South Africa*, explores the intersections of various identity markers – race, class, gender, nationality; interrogating how these play into a broader understanding of in- continent migration and its implications for Africanity. Ragi has experience as a researcher at a number of organisations including the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the South African National Department of Social Development. She currently serves as a youth representative to the United Nations for International Sociological Association (ISA).

Rhoda Reddock is Professor Emerita of The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. She is a graduate of the University of the West Indies, the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague and gained her doctorate in Applied Sociology from the University of Amsterdam. Her multi-disciplinary research interests include gender and feminism, women's social and labour history; radical, social and feminist thought, critical development studies, masculinities, critical race and ethnic studies and gender and sexualities. Among her numerous awards is an honorary doctorate from the University of the Western Cape in South Africa in March 2012. Her most recent publication is the co-edited volume, *Entangled Inequalities: on Decolonial Perspectives: Europe and the*

Caribbean, with Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Anthem Press, 2021. An activist in the Caribbean Women's Movement and other social movements she is currently an elected expert on the UN CEDAW Committee. A former president of ISA Research Committee 32, she is currently a member of the Executive Committee of the International Sociological Association (ISA).

Ragi Bashonga (RB): Thank you so much Professor Reddock for spending your time with me today. I'm really excited about the interview. I've been doing some reading about your career journey and the role that sociology has played in the work in academia and the work that you're doing at the UN. Still I think it's a valid point for us today, could you just speak to us a bit about the ways in which the discipline of sociology has influenced your work and your career trajectory.

Rhoda Reddock (RR): Growing up, I had a very strong sense of social justice, and I knew that whatever I did would have to have some social component. At first, I thought about social work and then I decided no. I didn't think that I could deal with all of those interpersonal interactions, so I thought that sociology would give me a larger frame from which to analyse and understand human behaviour. However, very interestingly I did not do sociology for my first degree. I did something that no longer exists at our university. It was called Social Administration in that it was a core sociology degree, but

with a focus on the administration of social services. I think that at that time I felt that I needed to somehow still include some social justice/social change phenomena so, I did Social Administration, but I still did all the basic courses in social theory, methodology, sociology of development social psychology and all the other sociology courses. But then also did course in social policy and administration and a one-year placement at a social institution and I chose the prisons in Kingston, Jamaica, which was quite an experience; I don't know if you know but even at that time, Kingston Jamaica had one of the highest crime rates in the world.

I spent a year in one of the oldest colonial instituted prisons, The Kingston General Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison. I also spent some time in a very minimum-security prison, the Richmond Farm Prison in a rural community, and the contrast was amazing. So sociology, for me, has always been linked with other disciplines. For my second degree, I decided that I did not want to do pure sociology, that I would try to look at social planning. However, I didn't end up doing social planning. I completed a Master's in Development Studies with a specialization in Comparative Development Strategies in The Hague, which was wonderful because it was multidisciplinary. I had to do politics of development, economics and development, labour studies as well as social planning and a number of other things. This was a very exciting time for me, as it was then that I was introduced to academic Women's Studies. The Institute of Social Studies in The Hague where I did my Master's was piloting two courses in what was then known as Women and Development. There were two of us, a friend from Colombia and myself. We were the first two students to register for that course, although many persons from this and other universities attended and audited the courses. So I was involved in academic studies related to gender and feminism very early and I ended up doing my doctorate in Applied Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, completing a historical sociology of women in my country Trinidad and Tobago. Therefore, even though my experience in sociology has not been a

very pure, it landed me in a number of related fields which greatly enriched my work. I am also very open to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research. I have been part of multidisciplinary teams and led interdisciplinary research teams including collaboration with natural scientists, psychiatrists, historians, agricultural scientists' etc. I think the way in which sociology has influenced my work, is that for me the social and the social historical are important lens from which to view the world. It has influenced my work by giving me a broad vantage point from which to view the ways in which systems operate, how they are created and transformed and the ways in which systems- social, economic, gendered etc., influence the lives of individuals and groups within societies and vice versa.

RB: Thank you for that. I think the broad vantage point is exactly what drew me to sociology as well. I initially wanted to do psychology, but the deeper I got into sociology, I saw the benefit of having this broader perspective into how society actually influences the individual and vice versa. But, what I like most about what you're saying is how this journey led you into practice, policy, and then also this interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary lens leading you into this route of applying gender across these. For me, what's interesting are the ways in which you can have the gender conversation on so many different levels instead of just a single disciplinary focus on gender studies or women studies, but the fact that gender exists on a multiplane. I think that also speaks to my next question, which is, how would you describe the progression of gender studies and the evolution of gender policies?

RR: Well, when you're as old as I am you can look back on historical events. I was lucky to be there at the beginning of this field, which was a very exciting time. A time of challenging old ideas, creating new ideas, but also something that continues - challenging patriarchal structures that are continuously being re-erected. In other words, I think Women's Studies and Gender Studies will never be really established in the way that other fields are. Just like

many of the fields that relate to groups that have been excluded and challenge the status quo, e.g. African(a) Studies, Black Studies, Disability Studies, Lesbian and Gay Studies, Women Studies, etc., all these fields in a way have to fight to maintain their space within academia. I have found that there are good periods and periods when it's not so good. For example, this very neoliberal period that we are experiencing globally, I have argued is characterised by the rejection as 'the social' in many aspects of human life. Many sociology programs are being cut, gender and women's studies program as well and critical race theory is under serious threat in the United States. All these programs that challenge the status quo and address 'the social' and social inequalities in relation to the broad existing political-economic system, have to fight to survive and consistently justify their right to exist. This has been very important to me in relation to the trajectory of gender studies and gender politics, which varies in different parts of the world.

We were fortunate in the English-speaking Caribbean in that we were able to establish programs within The University of the West Indies close to thirty years ago. The Institute for Gender Development Studies is a university wide division with units on each of our three main campuses with full-time staff paid for by the university. And also, we are also institutionally located within the Office of the Vice-Chancellor which is a very good space bearing in mind the challenges that programs like ours often face in terms of legitimacy and sustainability. So I think we are in a good place, but we have had to fight to maintain this place. We are now, in a process of developing further in this period of crisis, you know, all over the world. However many other countries have not been so successful. They are many parts of Europe, for example, where Women Studies and Gender Studies programs are quite weak or non-existent, and there are some parts of Eastern Europe, where they are definitely under threat.

In the United States I think they're still quite strong and some parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America but the situation is uneven and varied and I do be-

lieve that the formation of global networks of support are very important for the survival and strengthening of these institutions. Certainly, at the University of the West Indies, one of the factors that contributed to our development and continued strength is that we work together across campuses. So that even though we are located on different campuses (and you must understand for us, each campus is on a different Island), we have insisted on operating as one institution. Additionally we did a great deal of outreach work to build local, national and regional awareness and engagement which is extremely important to build sustainability.

RB: As you are speaking about this rejection of the social, I am thinking of just how important the social became in the moment of Covid-19. It is at the core of everything we do. And, how gender became such an interesting and intersecting subject. I'm just thinking of the fact that in South Africa, as is the case in so many other parts of the world, gender-based violence numbers shot sky-high with Covid-19. There were also issues around access to water and sanitation in the moment of Covid-19 and what this means for women and girls; these have serious implications. If these fields are continuously side-lined, also in terms of budgets – gender units and gender divisions in government not having actual budget allocations, then this is really problematic.

RR: Exactly, those are the kinds of fights that are necessary and they can only be fought with support and networks. For example, if a strong gender unit is established within the African Union then it can provide political and psychological support to state and non-state actors/institutions on the continent. This could take place for example through annual meetings, national and regional policy positions clear accountable structures and links to global mongering institutions. In other words, I have found that it is very difficult for individual units to survive without the support of colleagues and other organizations with similar goals.

In addition, you are right, the Covid-19

pandemic (I think people will be writing about it for generations) has been historically important in so many ways and has the potential to reinsert 'the social' if we as sociologists are able to grasp the opportunity. Relatedly Covid-19 has also reinserted the state, which for decades, had been seen as irrelevant, with business and the private sector as the main drivers. Now in the crisis, we see the same private sector looking to the State for support and relief. We are also seeing slight policy shifts, which we hope will continue post-Covid-19 in relation to e.g. enhanced social inclusion policies, food security, local agriculture and a renewed focus on local industrial production and reduced reliance on imports in the Global North and South. The new US focus on social support, decent work and re-industrialization is one example and in my country, there is greater acceptance of social responsibility in relation to gender-based violence although the broader linkages to the local and global political economy are not always made. It is up to us therefore, as professionals, activists, researchers and educators to really bring these lessons to the fore so that we don't go back completely to the pre-Covid situation and not benefit from the lessons and opportunities that it has presented.

RB: What I am picking up from what you're saying on this question of visibility and even with the remarks you made earlier about the importance of collaboration and union is that visibility is increased when people know who to contact in order to have these multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations.

I'm actually going to take us back to your career as a sociologist and the lessons that you have learned, to ask you how your early career roles as both an educator and a social activist have prepared you for the initiatives that you're taking forward at both the national level in Trinidad and Tobago and on the international platform you have through the UN.

RR: Going back to my career, over the years I rose from lecturer to Professor in the Institute for Social

and Economic Research, the Department of Sociology and the Institute for Gender and Development Studies where I was founding head for 14 years. In 2008, was invited to become the deputy principal of my campus – The St. Augustine campus. The deputy principal is like the deputy Vice Chancellor in South Africa, but for one campus and executive Vice President, in the US. That was a huge shift from what I was accustomed. Working in gender studies you were primarily among women and we worked in a very democratic kind of way. You have debates; you have disagreements, but a very democratic kind of structure. I was also accustomed to a very activist approach to scholarship within the IGDS and going into this position as the only female in very masculine senior management system was a kind of culture shock. It was difficult for me for a long time. I learnt a lot though about the institution and the way that it worked. As someone said, sometimes you learnt things you wish you didn't have to know; it really broadened my knowledge and experience. I maintained links with the Institute, which continues today.

The deputy principalship was another area in which I sought bring my social imagination to influence what was taking place within the institution. I was able to strengthen the student support systems with a complete overhaul and the introduction of new units to provide more of the social care that students require. I also sought to develop social responsibility programmes through community engagement programmes, co-curricular courses to provided additional skills not included in the curricula. As a feminist scholar, I worked on a University-wide sexual harassment policy and an after-school care centre for the children of staff and students. I was not able to achieve everything that I wanted to but most importantly, I wanted to bring 'the social' into what has always been a very technocratic university.

I am no longer in that position, and trying to catch up on the many outstanding publications not completed because of those ten years in administration. I have been working a lot with sociology, which as in many parts of the world is

facing lower enrolment and questions about its relevance. We recently collaborated with the ISA on an academic writing workshop for emerging scholars and graduate students, which was extremely successful and I hope that these connections with the ISA will be strengthened in the future. I also continue to work with gender studies, to see how we could strengthen these two areas that can sometimes be under threat.

RB: I have a question based on what you said about how difficult it was being in this senior management space because it continues to be something we are grappling with even today as women. And as we have more and more young women entering positions of senior management, how do we actually navigate that kind of space and create voice? ‘Take up space’ to use the words of Zozibini.

RR: I think the thing you must do in those places is to get allies who can advise you. In other words, when we as academics enter those spaces, we enter from a totally different space, but there are women who have been in the senior administration for many decades, and they can really help you go through the ropes because understanding those university systems is another lesson in themselves. I also found that the understanding of the social was missing from these senior management systems. In my case, nearly all the senior managers, had a background in engineering. This is an example of the technocratic character of the campus that I mentioned earlier. Part of my responsibility was for student development, and it was difficult for me to justify expenditure related to student development and student enrichment. I just had to keep at it and keep persisting and insisting, and by the time I left I was able to leave with a division for student services and development.

And that vision... the way in which I have worked in those areas had to do with my sociological understanding which intersected with my gender analysis and critical political economy frame. My understanding about people, and their needs... about the complexities, strengthening developmen-

tal programs, financial support systems with the students with disabilities, support for LGBTQI students. Strengthening the counselling services. All of these were much an applied sociological praxis. In fact, I used to say that I didn’t want to do social work, and here I am, ending up doing much of that. Yes, I was able to leave a number of structures and programs that have survived although it is very difficult in the current economic climate. A climate where many people do not understand the importance of the social and you still have to fight for its recognition and support. I was also critiqued for being an academic in an administrative position as I always prepared in depth research papers on issues that I wanted to address.

RB: So your fight has resulted in a number of gains for these institutions that you worked in, for the people that you are able to provide the support to. Thinking of your own contributions, in terms of gender policy as well and how we are seeing things beginning to shift – different historical moments, different focuses – what would you say some of the key historical moments that you witnessed are? And what would you say are some of your own personal key achievements?

RR: Well, I think first, I was very fortunate to be at The Institute for Social Studies, The Hague at that time to do those two courses and be part of the discussions and debates. I was a student in a very formative stage and these were probably two of the first women’s studies/gender courses in the world, taught by my mentor, brilliant scholar and later doctoral supervisor Maria Mies.

Another historical moment was my involvement in the establishment of gender studies at the multicampus University of the West Indies with units on three campuses. The programmes now include undergraduate minors, and undergraduate Major at the Mona campus in Jamaica and post-graduate diplomas, MSc, MPhil and PhD programmes on all campus units. There is also a biennial certificate course aimed at ngos, activists, state sector etc. As a graduate student I was invited by Peggy

Antrobus to prepare the first discussion paper on which a road map to institutionalise women's studies/gender studies was developed. After eleven years of lobbying, teaching, research and publications, in 1993, the Centre/ later the Institute for Gender and Development Studies was established as an autonomous interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary unit located in the Vice Chancellery... a very important historical development for me. This structure and location provided us with the autonomy and flexibility to create our own programmes and to include our feminist and social justice activist traditions within the research and teaching.

As a feminist activist the decades of women 1975 to 1995 and 1985 were very important. I had just graduated from undergrad and beginning to get interested and involved in women's groups and organizations. By 1985 I had completed my doctoral work at the University of Amsterdam, and was so pleased to be able to attend the mid-decade World Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Nairobi, Kenya. That was really a historic event for me. I have so many fond memories of that great experience. 10 years later, I was also able to attend the end-of-decade conference in China, another fabulous experience. I do not know if there will ever be one of those in your lifetime. If there is, you should definitely take it up. It is just so empowering to meet women from all over the world and men who come along as allies. What is fascinating is the diversity of the movement and the activities that were involved; the program was just mind-blowing and I think those two conferences were two of the high points of my life.

Another historical moment for me as the hosting of the Interdisciplinary conference on masculinity studies at the IGDS St. Augustine in 1996. I recall presenting it at university academic board and seeing puzzled looks all around. This was a landmark event at a time when masculinity studies was not yet 'a thing'. I recall difficulties to get the volume emanating from it published, but it eventually was as – *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses by the UWI Press*. The IGDS was also one of the first

places to integrate masculinity studies into the undergraduate curriculum already in the 1990s.

Other historical developments have to do with some of the things collectively achieved in my country in terms of legislation on sexual offences, domestic violence, etc. What was also important was the impact of my research e.g. my PhD study, which is a sociological study of women in Trinidad and Tobago and still has a very strong place in Caribbean scholarship, as well as some of the other writings that I have done.

I think another very important thing for me was, joining the International Sociological Association. I was introduced to the ISA by a colleague while still in The Hague, and was later invited to present at the World Congress in Madrid. At the conference, there were many people who I met before and near the end of the Congress, I was invited to become a candidate for the chair of that research committee, RC32 then Women and Society. I was still fairly young and these older foremothers of RC32 and the global women's movement from India Neera Desai and Vina Mazumdar, came up to me and they said "Rhoda, we want you". That was really such a shock because I was new to the organization even though I knew some of the people before. Now the ISA was and continues to be a very Northern-based and primarily European even less USA, based organization. At that time, I was often one of or sometimes the only person of colour or African descendant persons in our research committee and one of very few in the organization as a whole. Research Committee 32, however was a very nurturing space. It was led at the time by some feminist women who were committed to diversifying our research committee. Many innovative efforts were made to encourage and support membership and participation of low-income persons and from the Global South, including the south of Europe. Our committee always was the most diverse. We are probably the second largest research committee, if not the largest and we would do innovative things. For example, we would arrange collective housing at conferences at cheap prices so people who did not have the finances

could get cheap accommodation. It was a supportive space and I think that is why I stayed. I went on to serve as vice president, president then regional representative.

Later I joined RC05, now Racisms, Nationalism, Indigeneity and Ethnicity which reflected some of my more recent research interests and now serve as a board member. In 2018, I was elected to the ISA Executive Committee (EC) and I must say that there is a lot of commitment now within the executive and the leadership to diversify the organization, but it is not very easy bearing in mind, the structural dynamics of the global economic systems. We have come a long way, certainly from the situation when I began. Therefore, being a part of the ISA, being president of Research Committee 32, and now being in the ISA Executive Committee, these are all very important milestones in my life. And then I have one more, two years ago I was elected to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As with others, this was not a self-nomination but made by others and that is a distinct honour. CEDAW is a lot of hard work and intense work, but it provides an opportunity to influence the lives of women throughout the world and to me that is a privilege. Therefore, I think I have been lucky. I have had a rich life and wonderful experiences, but there is always more to do and more to learn.

RB: I'd like to congratulate you on so many moments of affirmation. It speaks a lot for the work that you do and what you bring to the fore in those spaces. I am thinking about this Global North – Global South and the power relations. Even in the ISA a lot of us as sociologists are constantly grappling with this question of power and how it plays out in terms of race and nationalism. I am thinking of the work that you do, in reading through your career journey, I see how Trinidad remains a very central focus of your work. I was wondering if you could speak of your motivations for working that way.

RR: You know, I really believe that Global Knowledge can come from anywhere. I think one of the great fallacies currently constructed is that knowledge created in the North is assumed to have global relevance. Books written about towns in the US or villages in the UK, become our global references, what we read and teach. My favourite is *Middletown*. It was a study of participant observation in a US town. That was a classic research methods text that we all had to read.

What I have been arguing is that what we do in our parts of the world, even though we are humble and state the location of the research in the title, our work can provide new insights to persons elsewhere. It is not provincial. We can learn from analyses that take place anywhere. Those of us in the South have been learning based on so-called global analysis that have taken place in other places. It should be possible therefore, the other way around as well. There are specific insights that we would bring to knowledge that unless we bring them, they remain hidden. So, for example, the work that I have been trying to complete for too long, looking at race, gender, class and intersectionality, but from a Global South decolonial perspective. I am focusing specifically on multi-ethnic post-colonial societies like yours and mine with various racialized structures imposed through colonialism. Even though colonialism is 'gone', these legacies continue, wreaking havoc in our countries. That is why I have always felt that the work I do in my neck of the woods may help in clarifying issues in other locations. We in the South, always have to approach our work with a global lens in addition to our local specificity, and our work is valuable for the international as well as the regional and local.

RB: I want to relate what you're saying to our next question, which is around the role of social media in the debates on gender and the creation of knowledge. I am wondering, in recent years we have had a number of key historical moments in the landscape of gender and sexuality and a lot of these have been amplified by social media. I think of the Me Too movement and others such as the Fees

Must Fall and the Fallist campaigns in South Africa, for example. The centrality of these on the use of social media. I am wondering what's your perspective on the public discourse that is taking place on social media? What is your take on how that is playing out?

RR: Wow, that is such a complex topic because there are so many variables. I think that all media, but certainly today's social media, are part of a global communications system. A commercial system, that is not in our control even though we are all active participants. We speak about globalization of knowledge and experience however, it is not an equal globalization. Social media is still very much controlled and managed and shaped and shapes us through our use. It's a very complex issue and I do think that we need to pay a lot of attention to the work that sociologists of media and communications who are studying social media are saying to us. I think that social media provides great possibilities and the examples you have given here are excellent ones. Because we don't control it we need to be alert. The film, *The Great Hack* detailed the ways in which data companies get hired by governments to shape their elections campaign. Our country was used for one of the pilot campaigns on behalf of a political party. What is interesting is how sociological knowledge is used. In our case, they used understandings of the racial and ethnic differences and the social and cultural differences, to shape their campaigns. It is amazing how people's minds could be shifted so easily. The current anti-vaccination movement is another example of global reach and local impact of social media. Sociologists have a stake in this media which is after all 'social' and have a lot of work to do to address the 'social' in social media.

In this regard our work can't just remain in our journals. We have to find ways to make this work visible. We have to teach this for our courses, we must speak about it on television. We have to do summer programs about it, what we need are conscious users. For example, we have had instances in the local women's movement of what we call cancel culture, a US Phenomenon that has be-

come globalized. We have seen young people who are in like feminist organizations or other progressive organisations get cancelled because of something that's uploaded onto social media. We have seen very good young organizations, which may have made some mistakes, but there is no room for mistakes on social media so they have been cancelled. By being cancelled they lose funding, they lose membership, they lose support. The organization is obliterated because of the cancel culture on social media.

Yesterday someone was speaking to me about data science, which is a whole new field that is emerging incorporating the use of data, as well as the analysis of data. To me, this is very much linked to what we do in sociology, especially in demography. Many data science programmes are located in Mathematics Departments. Those programs need to have input from sociology and the social sciences to give context to the numbers that data scientists are collecting and analysing. This must be a new area for sociology. In other words, I think that are all kinds of new and exciting ways that sociologists can influence what's happening in the world, including with social media, but we really have to get out of our journal articles and into the world and that includes those of us located in the Global South.

RB: You've already mentioned that for sociologists, it's important to know more and get more involved. Any practical tips for sociologists wanting to get to these UN committees and how we can actually leverage them?

RR: The UN has a number of agencies whose work related to what we do as sociologists so first we need to understand the global institutional framework and actually include the relevant ones in our teaching. My sociological knowledge has been critical to my work on the UN Treaty Body.

As a younger scholar or student, sometimes there are internships, but with the financial challenges facing the UN, you may need to identify your own funds to do internships or find some other mechanisms to get internships in various UN

bodies and committees this of course privileges persons located in the North. It is also important to monitor one's country's reports to and recommendations from various UN Human Rights bodies; these can be useful mechanisms for influencing the process and lobbying for implementation of the recommendations.

UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies rely a lot on NGOs, on local national human rights institutions, UN regional agencies, residents in the country, or region and local research and media reports to supply us with information. When countries come before us, we can put relevant and well-documented questions to them and to get the relevant responses. If the response is inadequate, then we make recommendations and monitor over the next two to four years. These reports are all public so they are available for review, teaching and lobbying.

I must say, as a sociologist and a feminist scholar, this background has been important. While there are many lawyers, who bring important skills; as a sociologist and a gender studies scholar I also bring strengths that are very useful to the work of the Committee and this would be true of other UN treaty bodies as well.

RB: This takes us back to the beginning of our conversation with the broader lens and a bigger way of seeing and making sense of the world. I have one last question for you. Which direction is your work taking at the moment?

RR: Well, it's taking too many directions [laughs]. I wish I would focus. Well, I have a long, outstanding manuscript, which I have to finish by this time next year, of course, I keep being side-tracked with other demands, but I've already contacted a publisher. There are a few important biographies I want to complete. I also do a lot of work on radical social thinkers and I continue to work in that area.

RB: Any final remarks, closing statements?

RR: I think that sociology is at a very critical time in its history. But it is also at a time where there are possibilities and opportunities because of the social fallout of neo-liberalism exacerbated by COVID-19. We have to come up with innovative and exciting strategies to, as the new language says, pivot sociology to the place where it should be. The colonial critique of sociology must continue and be deepened but we need to democratize that critique, make it a really, truly global discourse, even beyond people who are ISA members. The de-colonisation of sociology is an important project that must continue even as we seek to bring 'the social' back into global, and to make 'the social' central to a post Covid world. That is if we ever get post-Covid...

RB: We are hoping for post-Covid. Thank you so much for those words and thank you so much for your time. This has been a greatly valuable session, I think there's so much that can come out of this. I am really excited to be able to share this conversation.