The concept of gender emerged at the end of the 1950s. In the 1960s, its use became more widespread in the psychomedical field. Feminism in the 1970s made it more relevant for other disciplines, and by the 1980s, the term had gained strength academically in the social sciences. Gender came into public prominence in the 1990s and, in this new century, has become firmly established as “the” explanation for inequality between the sexes. This move from an analytical category to causal force or explanans has to do with the fact that the concept became, in itself, a way of understanding the sociocultural origin of women’s subordination. In addition, one must note the broad dissemination in political institutions and multilateral agencies of the “vision” denominated as the gender perspective. International agencies such as the World Bank and the Interamerican Bank began to grant loans to governments under the condition that they utilize a “gender perspective.” Thus, this concept has attained a profound cultural impact beyond its academic meaning, and its use has been politicized. And, since what is at stake in the concept of gender is an idea about women’s role in society, it provokes a
reaction from hard-line conservative groups. The Vatican held fast to its immutable explanation that the social subordination of women is a “natural” consequence of sexual difference and, therefore, God’s plan; this led an all-out attack on gender.³

Nevertheless, this term gave rise to the phenomenon that Carlos Monsiváis has called “social contagion,” by which feminist discourse filtered down in an understandable way to large sectors of the population and popularized an aspiration for equality between women and men. This is why in Mexico, despite conservative pressure, by 1997 the term gender was completely integrated into the political discourse, and even the PAN employed it in their electoral platform “Democracy for a Good Government.” It is not surprising, then, that in 2000, in his inaugural speech, President Vicente Fox promised that his government would use a “gender perspective.”

But in addition, gender has become a euphemism that incorporates several things: women, relations between the sexes, and feminism. This ambiguity conceals the fact that there is discrimination or oppression, as in, for example, the use of the cliché “that happens because of gender.” Saying “an issue of gender” sounds less harsh than saying “a problem of sexism.” In the same way, in daily, colloquial speech, it is increasingly common to hear, “It’s a question of gender” when alluding to something having to do with women. In this way, addressing the “advance of gender” refers to the leadership positions assumed by women in the last part of the century, when they occupy more public positions and have a growing political presence. This conflation of gender with women is old and is repeated in all fields, even in academia.

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* Translator’s note: In Spanish, the phrase is “avance de género.”