

Pause for thought

Lessons learnt and ways forward for women's human rights advocacy

GEO - ICAE

Gender and Education Office of the
International Council for Adult Education

REPEM

Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres de América Latina y el Caribe

18 de Julio 2095/301

11200 Montevideo - Uruguay

Telefax (5982) 409 7982 / 408 0089

Design:

Mariano Arbelo

Printed in:

Gelly Ltda.

Editorial coordination:

Paz Alonso / REPEM Uruguay

Supported by:

ActionAid

Translation:

Ana Agostino, Beatriz Simonetti, Marcela Hernández

Language editing:

Niki Johnson and Paz Alonso

D.L.: N° 338.238

March, 2006

CONTENTS

Prologue.....	5
I. Mapping the moment.....	9
Women’s human rights advocacy: Obstacles, opportunities and future challenges – <i>Niki Johnson</i>	
II. Looking forward.....	29
Power to... power with... – <i>Peggy Antrobus</i>	
Advocacy or counter-power? – <i>Gina Vargas</i>	

PROLOGUE

Rather than a prologue, the point of this introduction is to explain how we came to put together a publication out of our shared reflections and concerns about feminist movements, their politics and practices, within the new world context, in which we continue to fight for social justice, equality and equity.

Within the context of a history of work that has been sustained by strongly-held principles, and in line with their firm conviction regarding what it means to contribute to the achievement of social and gender justice, GEO/ICAE and REPEM decided to produce a “guide to women’s human rights advocacy in the year 2005”. In 2005 a series of global events coincided: the Beijing +10 evaluation of the World Platform for Action; the G8 meeting; the Millennium Summit +5 and the 6th WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong.

Our aim was to draw up a proposal, with both theoretical and practical dimensions, to serve as an advocacy tool that would contribute to achieving greater participation by the different currents existing within the women’s and feminist movements in important events on the global agenda, which undoubtedly have a differential impact on the various regions in the world.

However, along the way we realized that, as important as this original aim, was the need to pause in this frantic path we have chosen to follow as feminist activists; pause to reflect upon our advocacy strategies, to see where we are and how we are feeling, and to identify the main challenges facing us, in order to assess our practices, actions and political discourses.

How much effort have we invested over the past 20 years?... how many objective gains have we achieved?... what limitations and obstacles have we come up against?... along this complex path of learning and unlearning, and often contradictory feelings and sensations –hopelessness, uncertainty and fear, but also certainty and firm

conviction about the need to continue contributing to the transformation of unjust and inequitable social, cultural and political relationships. Having come through this maze of ideas and proposals about the purpose of the “guide”, we came to the conclusion that the most important thing was to take –give ourselves– the opportunity to encourage a process of intense reflection on the lessons we have learnt. Current global and regional scenarios oblige us to pause for a moment and, as in any much-needed break, catch our breath and face the challenge of visualising the paths to follow in the future.

Challenges are not easy, but they are an unavoidable task to be faced, met, and worked upon; in these first steps we were accompanied by 14 feminists from different regions of the world. Our thanks to them:

Bethânia Ávila, SOS Corpo, Brazil

Carol Barton, WICEJ, USA

Everjoyce Win, Action Aid, Johannesburg, South Africa

Fanny Gómez, REPEM, Colombia

Gigi Francisco, DAWN SEA, Philippines

Gloria Careaga, ILGA LAC, Mexico

Line Bareiro, Centro de Documentación y Estudio, Paraguay.

Salma Maoulidi, Sahiba Sisters Foundation, Tanzania

Sonia Álvarez, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA

Sonia Correa, DAWN, Brazil

Sunila Abeysekera, INFORM, Sri Lanka

Ximena Machicao, REPEM, Bolivia

Yvonne Underhill, DAWN, New Zealand

Zo Randriamaro, WEDO, Madagascar

We also wish to thank:

Niki Johnson, who gave shape to this publication and enriched it with her input and careful reading.

Peggy Antrobus and Gina Vargas, two formidable women and feminists.

Everjoyce Win and Action Aid, for their support.

María Cecilia Fernández, Alejandra Scampini, Hortencia Coronel and Ana Agostino, who participated in this initiative from the beginning, moulding the idea, conducting the interviews, and contributing in a myriad of ways to bringing this endeavour to fruition.

And finally, to all of you, for giving us a moment of your invaluable time to join us in these reflections, and to contribute to and enrich this proposal.

Celita Eccher
Secretary General of ICAE

Ximena Machicao Barberly
General Coordinator of REPEN

I. MAPPING THE MOMENT

This first section is dedicated to an analysis based on interviews with fourteen feminists from the global women's rights advocacy movement, who were asked to reflect on the implications of the current global political scenario for women's human rights advocacy, the lessons learned from recent initiatives in the global arena, and challenges for the future.¹ The interviewees come from different regions and countries in the world –Southern Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the United States. The aim was not to paint a picture that claims to be representative of “dominant” currents of opinion within the movement, rather, it is an attempt to map *some* of the coincidences and differences, both in terms of conceptual analyses and organisational strategies, and the tensions and dynamics between advocacy at global and regional or national levels.

¹ The interviews were structured around the following three questions: 1) In the current global context, could you please indicate two or three factors that facilitate and two or three factors that hinder advocacy for women's human rights? 2) Based on your own experience, particularly during the last year (2005), could you identify two or three effective or successful advocacy strategies? 3) If you had the opportunity to re-elaborate the women's rights agenda, how would you organize it? Or, in your opinion, what are the key points for women's human rights advocacy today? Or, do you believe that the women's/feminist movement should consider or incorporate new advocacy strategies?

Women's human rights advocacy: Obstacles, opportunities, and challenges for the future

Niki Johnson

Niki Johnson is a researcher, lecturer and Coordinator of the Gender Politics Working Group at the Institute of Political Science, Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay, where she also carries out research for feminist organisations on different aspects of institutional and movement politics.

The following analysis aims to provide a panorama of some of the visions present among women's human rights advocates regarding the obstacles, opportunities and challenges for the future currently facing the global women's movement. In their responses to the questions on obstacles and facilitating factors, and on successful strategies, the interviewees made reference to factors that can be broadly divided into two categories. On the one hand there are those relating to the external context, principally the political structures and relations with which feminist advocates must necessarily engage in order to press their agenda. On the other hand, there are a series of internal factors linked to relational, substantive and organisational issues within the global feminist movement itself.² The first and second parts of this article correspond broadly to this division between external and internal factors, and look at both obstacles and facilitating elements in each category. The final part of the analysis explores what were identified in the interviews as the main challenges currently facing the global movement for women's rights advocacy, and which bring together both internal and external dimensions.

The world outside

Global political trends

It comes as no surprise that the principal external obstacles facing

² This classification is borrowed from Antrobus 2004, chapter 8.

women's rights advocacy identified by interviewees relate to the closing of political opportunities in the current global scenario. Following the end of the bi-polar world of the Cold War era, global politics in the 1990s was marked by the consolidation of the United States' (US) position as the dominant superpower. Under the presidency of Democrat Bill Clinton, while US dominance translated into intransigence with respect to the global political economy, with the promotion of neo-liberal corporate-led globalisation, a policy of multilateralism with respect to social development issues opened up space within the global arena, in particular the United Nations (UN) system, for the elaboration of an international human rights framework and the signing of a series of agreements on social development issues, through the UN summits and conferences of the 1990s.

However, the rise to power of conservative forces in the US, under the presidency of the Republican George W. Bush Jr, marked a significant shift in the world order, characterised by US hegemony and unilateralism. At the same time, there has been a resurgence of conservative forces in other parts of the world, together with a flourishing of religious and political fundamentalisms, and an increase in militarisation and interventionist policies, especially post 11/9. This consolidation of reactionary forces and authoritarian political practices in the new world order, which has also reaffirmed the apparent indomitability of the neo-liberal economic paradigm, has created a disabling environment for the promotion and defence of all progressive social justice agendas, and in particular for women's rights advocacy.

The interviewees pointed to certain key characteristics of this "neo-conservative" era,³ that have particularly negative implications for women's rights advocacy. In the first place, the turn-around in US policy on women's rights, from the support given under Clinton's presidencies for the extension and defence of women's human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, to a vicious backlash led by the Bush regime against those rights, including resistance to accepting

³ See Sen (2005) for a detailed analysis of the shift from the neo-liberal to the neo-conservative era in global politics.

the very concept of gender equality and concerted attempts to reverse the gains made in the 1990s, especially with respect to sexual and reproductive rights.

Another major obstacle is the undermining of the UN itself, as a result of the progressive abandoning of any pretence at multilateral decision-making on global policy issues. The unfolding of the US's so-called "war on terror" clearly illustrated the UN system's increasing irrelevance in "policing" international relations and in deciding the course of global policy-making. The realignment of forces at global level has provoked shifting patterns of political alliance-building between national states in multilateral decision-making arenas that frequently have more to do with geopolitical considerations than with the specific policy issues on the agenda. In this context, feminist activists have seen women's rights become mere bargaining tools for states seeking to shore up their position in the new world order. And, as one activist pointed out, this makes it increasingly difficult to interpret the political climate: "You do not have your usual black and white situations, where this is the enemy and this is what we fight for. Every time you have to duck and dive and see how the alliances are shifting."

Moreover, the UN system's gradual loss of legitimacy and effectiveness as a multilateral global policy-making arena means that the key victory won over the course of a decade by civil society actors, including women's rights advocates, in permeating this arena and claiming within it formal spaces and mechanisms of representation, is now appearing rather hollow: "The UN opened up to social movements at the very time that it started to lose political power, and when national governments, especially the US, began to withdraw their support from it." This erosion of the policy-making role and significance of the UN also has implications for national level-advocacy, with an increasingly evident decline in governments' political commitment to implement or continue to defend in international arenas agreements already signed. In short, for feminist activists, the geopolitical realignments marking the first decade of the twenty-first century have transformed what

was a complex but essentially effective space for women's rights advocacy into a "new chaotic space of contestation", that has prompted discussions within feminist movements about its continuing validity:

"Are we advancing or are we simply legitimating a process and staying put in the same place?"

"From the outside, it appears that much energy was invested with little gains in terms of summit outcomes. Getting more gender language into flawed documents may not be a victory."

Although raising critical questions, the interviewees did not advocate completely abandoning initiatives to press the women's rights agenda in global arenas, but they did express reserves about how much of the global feminist and women's movements' energies should be directed at this level and emphasised the need for a process of strategic evaluation and reflection to see how to move forward (see below).

Prospects at national-level

Shifting the focus to national-level advocacy, in some respects the prospects appear no more promising than those at global level. Activists from Latin America in particular highlighted the adverse implications of the very meaning given to politics today, which is related both to the broader world order and to regionally-specific developments: "Politics is not about seeking to satisfy the needs of the people, of the majority of the population, but rather is basically conditioned by private interests, especially those interests linked to capital or to political interests beyond national borders". This has led to a generalised discrediting of institutional politics that has negative implications for women's rights advocacy as part of a broader project of social transformation.

However, other voices from the same region stressed the fact that, despite the constraints imposed by globalising political and economic trends, both regional and national contexts differ in many ways from

the global context, and may currently offer more “breathing holes” for women’s rights advocates. One example cited was the recent rise to power of progressive governments in a number of Latin American countries,⁴ which raises the prospect of greater regional integration and “heightened expectations with respect to the fight against poverty and the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights”. This shift to more left-wing governments in the region may not only provide a counterpoint to the conservative power bloc dominating the global arena, but also halt the advance of reactionary forces in the region itself, such as the Catholic Church, which continues to be the most powerful political opponent to women’s rights advocacy by feminist movements in most countries.⁵

Another example of the difference in political opportunities that may be present at global and national levels comes from Fiji. There, the existence of a progressive Constitution facilitated women’s and gay rights advocates’ “sustained and smart systematic engagement in the legislation process”, leading to the approval of the civil union bill that gave legal recognition to same-sex relationships, an issue which the current global political climate makes it virtually impossible to raise on the international agenda. Similarly, while the spaces gained by civil society within UN processes may no longer appear to be effective entry points for advocacy, as the UN continues steadily to lose political clout on the global scene, and there is an evident contradiction between the discourse and practice of other multilateral organisations (especially the international financial institutions and the World Trade Organisation) with respect to civil society participation, at regional and national levels other windows of opportunity may be emerging. In the words of one African activist,

“[T]he dynamics are quite different, because at the international level women’s organisations are claiming the space but they don’t get it, while at the national level the spaces are opening up but I think

⁴ This includes Ignacio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and the re-election of the Concertación government in Chile, now under the presidency of Michelle Bachelet.

⁵ Nonetheless, as Gina Vargas points out in her article in part II of this publication, the equation between left-wing governments and a progressive position on women’s rights issues is not necessarily a given.

women's organisations are not claiming enough that space for themselves."

Inter-movement advocacy spaces

Finally, feminists from all regions saw the emergence of alternative spaces of articulation *between* social movements as a positive external factor for women's rights advocacy. In this respect, most mention was made of the World Social Forum (WSF). According to one interviewee, the confluence at the WSF of a series of different currents from within the global feminist movement has led to "a certain revitalisation and potential re-radicalisation of feminism, in that they are seeking to influence the Forum", as an alternative –or complementary– advocacy route to that directed at UN processes. The Inter-Movement Dialogues held within the context of the WSF were evaluated as a particularly useful forum for exploring the interlinkages between different forms of social and economic injustice. Despite consensus among the interviewees regarding the importance of engaging with these spaces, as forums in which to explore new alliances and new ways of doing politics, some also pointed to certain characteristics of these spaces that may hinder the promotion of a women's rights agenda within them. With regard to the WSF, the fact that what was originally conceived of as a space for articulation between exclusively civil society actors is becoming increasingly tainted by political factionalism. In the case of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) –which was referred to much less, and in much more ambivalent terms in the interviews– one respondent pointed to the continued resistance by men to accepting shared leadership with women.

How, then, did interviewees assess these new spaces of inter-movement articulation in terms of the global feminist movement's capacity to influence a broader range of social movements? Participation by feminist actors in the WSF and in other inter-movement spaces, such as GCAP, was seen to achieve greater awareness among other social movements of their need to include women's voices and to engage with

the women's rights movement. In this sense, "the Feminist Dialogues provided a vital space both within and outside WSF processes to demonstrate our presence and open up space for us to engage in more practical way with men from broad social movements", while the "Inter-Movement Dialogues helped to put the issue on the map at the WSF: the need to take seriously identity issues and rights within economic justice agendas".

Another relational strategy identified as facilitating women's rights advocacy was what one interviewee referred to as the "decentralising strategy", implying alliance-building directly with women present in other social movements or in institutional structures. However, evaluation of the degree of success of this strategy in the latter case varied. One feminist from the Pacific region highlighted the growing number of gender-aware women in positions of power who were facilitating advocacy. In contrast, a Latin American interviewee felt that feminist movements' efforts to provide support, training and leadership capacity-building for such women had not paid off.

The world within

If we now look at relational issues at the level of intra-movement dynamics, interviewees highlighted what they saw as positive advances in several areas. One spoke of the greater degree of recognition of the internal diversity within the global women's movement: "There is now recognition among women's organisations and networks themselves that you cannot talk about women's rights without also recognising that women from wherever they are in the world have the right to speak for themselves." The question of how, then, to articulate this internal diversity within the global feminist movement was an issue touched on in many of the interviews. While intra-movement alliances around single issues may have been an effective strategy in the 1990s, in terms of making more rapid progress in specific areas within a context in which the women's human rights framework had achieved

legitimacy in the global arena, it no longer appears so promising in the new global political context, in which the framework itself is under attack from conservative forces. There is a generalised sense of a need to invest more energy in intra-movement alliance-building in order to consolidate the strength of the global women's rights movement as a whole vis-à-vis the powerful opposition it is facing. In this respect, the Feminist Dialogues were signalled as an important space for exploring possible coordinated advocacy strategies to block the three interlinked global trends of militarism, fundamentalism and neo-liberalism. However, for most, the movement continues to work in "a very fragmented way", despite sharing a common human and women's rights framework:

"We are full of a political discourse that emphasises diversity, respect for difference, yet we have enormous difficulty in recognising the full implications of that diversity and difference. [...] It isn't just a matter of chance that we have black feminists, indigenous feminists, lesbians, transsexuals, institutionalised feminists, autonomous feminists, and all the others... This situation, which should reflect our diversity, what it is actually reflecting is fragmentation, due to our inability to recognise these diversities in a possible political agenda shared by us all."

Truly recognising internal diversity, therefore, implies much more than simply coordinating advocacy strategies. It necessitates the construction of a common political project within diversity – a substantive, rather than a relational issue. The Feminist Dialogues provided an unprecedented space for a "feminist discussion of the goals and suppositions" of the global women's rights movement, reflecting recognition of the fact

not just that different visions exist within feminism, but that those “different viewpoints should be discussed, visualised and contribute knowledge so that these strategic and diverse visions may make the feminist movement more democratic”. An interesting point made by one activist about the difficulty of giving substantive meaning to the recognition of diversity relates to the linguistic discrimination deriving from the predominant use of the English language in such spaces, parallel to its primacy as the official language of global advocacy:

“I believe that as long as there does not exist real equality of conditions for discussing politically in spaces like the Feminist Dialogues we are going to see a preponderance of networks and organisations from the North, and not from the South. This repeats a historic inequality that exists between the South and the North, among feminists.”

While some activists mentioned instances of effective cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration within the women’s movement, these have not necessarily led to integrated analyses.⁶ For several interviewees, one example of successful alliance-building both within the global women’s rights movement and between it and other social movements –LGBT and HIV/AIDS groups– has occurred around the concept of sexual and reproductive rights.

With reference to organisational issues, the steady growth of the women’s human rights movement worldwide around the rallying points of the conferences of the 1990s certainly facilitated the development of multiple advocacy initiatives. Nonetheless, questions were raised about the movement’s capacity to renew itself, in particular in terms of attracting more young women activists. Although initiatives such as the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) Training Institute and the Association for Women’s Rights in

⁶ This point is explored further in the next section.

⁷ The material on which this section is based comes mainly from the responses to the third question, regarding how interviewees would restructure the movement's agenda given the chance. It is interesting to note that in no case was "agenda" taken to refer simply to a laundry list of demands or thematic issues. As the analysis shows, in all cases the movement's "agenda" was seen to include conceptual frameworks and strategies as well as specific objectives, all of which are seen to be partly conditioned by the political opportunity structures offered by the global, regional and national contexts within which the movement is embedded.

Development's (AWID) Young Women's Leadership programme were highlighted as strategies that are achieving this objective, one activist from the Pacific region felt that there had been little conscious attempt to ensure turnover specifically among the ranks of global women's human rights advocates. And the reference by another to the need for "sharing *power* with the next generation within our movements" (emphasis added), reveals that this is a much more complex issue than simply a question of numbers.

In terms of resources, an African feminist highlighted the importance of increased connectivity through access to information and communications technologies (ICTs) that "keeps us abreast of developments at a mouse's click". However, she also highlighted the fact that the costs of installing and maintaining ICTs, the lack of ICT infrastructure in some regions, and the need for language and technology-use skills "keeps many activists and constituents in Southern and non-urban localities marginalised". Another important resource for effective advocacy has been the accumulation of knowledge based on solid research and theoretical production grounded in lived experience. Many consider that this has proved a valuable advocacy tool that has helped generate greater acceptance of the women's rights agenda. Finally, innovative use of the media, and actions that "creatively aim for the public eye" were also identified as strategies facilitating advocacy work in that they generate public awareness and help mobilise support.

Present challenges, future visions

Given the panorama of evident political constraints at the global level, only partially counterbalanced by political opportunities emerging at regional or national levels, what do feminist activists see as the main challenges that need to be addressed in order for the global women's rights advocacy movement to move forward?⁷

Global advocacy –where to now?

There was a generalised consensus among interviewees that the global women's rights advocacy movement needs to take a step back from the spaces and processes within the global governance system and break with the

“action syndrome that reigns in the movement, and implies responding to demands, and more demands, and more emergencies and more urgent issues, which prevents activists from having sufficient perspective in order to revise strategies, visions and the definition of strategic spaces”.

In part, then, there is a need to disengage the movement's agenda from the logic imposed by the international agenda:

“As a movement we have to resist being co-opted or swallowed by prevailing agendas, as we spend our energies responding to them or trying to mitigate their impact.”

“[T]he feminist movement cannot be a movement based around events, dates, a fixed agenda.”

“[W]e can't just chase after [international] agendas.”

This disengagement does not imply withdrawing from the global arena entirely, but it does involve adjusting the goals of advocacy to fit with a realistic analysis of the closed political climate. In a context in which the chances to influence actively the international agenda are fairly limited, “the act of resisting and practices of resistance become both important and necessary”. This resistance may continue to take place in global arenas, or it may involve defending at national level the gains made at global level over the last decade and a half, by drawing

on the feminist advocacy movement's capacity for mobility between the different levels and for "grounding" advances at international level in local contexts. For one interviewee, the movement's ability to disengage from the logic imposed by the international agenda, and then re-engage on its own terms depends partly on abandoning the "activist, diplomatic, very calm, and in truth not particularly transgressive way of doing politics" it has employed until now. She believes that women's rights advocates must "become better political operators", while recognising that this may be a tough challenge: "Being a political actor implies confrontation. The confrontation and dispute over power is very harsh, and one has to learn to grin and bear it, and enjoy the victories."

Another dimension of the process of stepping back involves looking at the wider picture, as well as examining closely the current conjuncture. This need to "locate our strategies in relation to the long-term cycle" includes anticipating possible future changes in political opportunity structures. In this respect, both the end of Kofi Annan's term as Secretary-General of the UN in 2006 and the 2008 US elections were signalled as contextual factors that may alter considerably the prospects for global-level advocacy in the future. This short- and long-term evaluation of the opportunities and limits offered by the multiple contexts in which the movement is embedded, then provides the basis for rethinking the movement's conceptual frameworks and its organisational and relational strategies:

"I don't think it means leaving behind [the international human rights system], getting out, abandoning that space altogether. We need to get to work silently, less visibly, recognise the difficulties, have the capacity to withdraw, step back, consider other spaces and elaborate an agenda that should be mature and ready for when the context changes."

Several interviewees stressed that while the closing of windows of opportunity in the global arena has prompted calls within the movement to evaluate and rethink its position and strategies, this should in fact be “an *ongoing* process of critically reviewing our strategies” (emphasis added), or part of a permanent cycle: “out of our actions comes reflection, and out of our reflection emerge new points of view, and from these new visions emerge new actions”.

Another interviewee suggested that rethinking global advocacy implied recognising other dimensions of the concept that did not involve engagement with institutional structures of power:

“A large part of the concept of advocacy has to do with advocacy in people’s heads, because public policy, at the end of the day, has an impact on culture, and sometimes, when policies precede cultural changes, they are not implemented, they have no effect”.

This activist, then, argued for a reconceptualisation of advocacy that implies

“popularisation [...] in terms of popular culture, massification, of translating the different feminist agendas into terms and in ways that ensure that they reach a maximum number of people, through the primary school curriculum, TV and other media, the Internet”.

This would not only prepare receptive ground for “top-down” changes through public policy, but, she believes, is the best way to counter the right-wing and fundamentalist offensive against feminism. Relevant to this approach are the experiences of life-long citizenship education signalled in several interviews as an effective strategy implemented by feminist movements.

Movement-building and framing processes

This proposed shift of focus to the base also speaks to one of the main critiques of global women's rights advocacy to emerge from the interviews –that it had diverted energy and attention away from activities that seek to broaden the movement's reach at its grassroots:

“Much effort has been geared and continues to be geared at national and international policy structures, where we spend a lot of time, money and energy trying to break into ‘exclusive’ spaces, whereas with similar investments we can build a foundation for a pro-people's agenda locally. The idea is not to abandon either but to balance the two.”

“There is no work done on appealing to the movement, on strengthening it through agenda-setting. The agenda is drawn up and then the movement is called upon –that's not going to get results anywhere. Many people and groups have lost their capacity to mobilise the movement because they have cut themselves off from the place where the movement organises.”

There is, then, a perceived need for the advocacy movement to reaffirm its contact with the social realities and grassroots structures from which it emerged, primarily through participatory agenda-building at the local level. This process is, moreover, seen to serve a second purpose, beyond simply building the movement's base, in that it implies “investing in the articulation and implementation of feminist agendas which can provide proof of the ‘alternative’ beyond rhetoric”. As we have already seen above, the question of how exactly to articulate the different dimensions of the various feminist agendas into an inclusive and shared political project is one that many feminists are

currently pondering:

“The question of how to tackle the intersections between the different dimensions is another unresolved problem. We continue to work together around a laundry list of issues, rather than real intersections that would allow us to have a common political project, an inclusive vision. We continue to reproduce discriminations and exclusions to a significant degree.”

Some interviewees spoke of the need to build “political pacts in diversity” or “a temporary strategic agenda” around the interlinkages between the different issues that feminist activists are working on. In short, many voices within the global women’s rights advocacy movement are calling for a process of internal reflection in order to construct a shared cognitive frame⁸ that gives real recognition to the movement’s internal diversity while consolidating its unity. The Feminist Dialogues and the process of collective reflection within DAWN were both cited as examples of how to move this process forward, but the general feeling was that the movement still lacks sufficient “places to talk politically about what our vision of social change is [...], how we understand power, how we understand organising, and what we actually want”. But perhaps even greater emphasis was placed on the need to construct a frame that would link feminist visions of social change with other political projects centred around social justice issues. This intersectionality approach seeks to link in a common normative framework the different dimensions of gender inequality with the range of other social inequalities,⁹ which in turn means that the pursuit of justice in one area must necessarily imply a commitment to pursuing justice in the others, not simply out of solidarity, but because gender injustice and other social injustices are interlinked and interdependent.

⁸ This term is used in social movements studies to refer to “the conscious, strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al. 1996: 6).

⁹ Race and class were the two other social cleavages most mentioned by interviewees as having important points of intersectionality with gender.

“For me, feminists always carry a dual agenda. We must be part of larger social movements to transform current political, social and economic structures of injustice, and we must also challenge patriarchy in all its manifestations. One agenda cannot exist without the other. Yet in many places they are bifurcated, and feminists are isolated from the other social movements.”

The ultimate objective of this approach, then, is an alignment of the frames of different social movements that will lead to collective action and strengthen all parties involved. For this to happen, there is a need for the development of an overarching cognitive framework that will allow the analytical and political articulation of the different agendas. One such possible framework mentioned was the concept of the social contract, another, “reflection on the kind of democracy we want to construct, the kind of power we want to construct”.

The greater engagement of the feminist movement with other social movements in the context of the WSF, and most specifically at the Inter-Movement Dialogues, represents a crucial advance in this respect. Nonetheless reserves about the intersectionality approach were expressed in several interviews. One activist mentioned the possible risk of “evaporation” of the feminist agenda in this articulation with other social injustice agendas:

“I think that when we start to work against poverty, or against other aspects, there is a danger that we may lose our bearings. I believe that we need to keep a strong hold on the central axis, which is the struggle against sexism, and from there analyse how that sexism expresses itself in different spaces. But without losing sight of the central axis.”

Another interviewee held the opinion that intersectionality provides a useful analytical framework, but has less value as a mobilising framework. While a third's assessment of the GCAP is a good illustration of both this and other difficulties with such an approach:

“For me there is still a huge question mark [...] around the choice of issues [...]. Aid, trade and debt certainly are big ‘international’ issues, but when I ask myself in terms of those issues appealing to mobilise and galvanise ordinary women into action, we did not have the language in which to do it. We needed a lot more time to spend with them, making the connection for a woman in Kwa Mashu who is struggling with home-based care of six people on HIV.”

One critical question regarding inter-movement alliance-building, therefore, that emerges from the experience of GCAP is “how to do it on our terms”. Another relates to the need for careful and grounded elaboration of the frame that articulates the different agendas, in all their dimensions. The extent of the challenge implied in adopting the intersectionality approach was summarised by one activist's reference to it as a “process of self-transformation” that involves “reconstructing our subjectivities, our utopias” and accepting the fact that “we will all have to break out of our mindsets”.

27

Conclusions

The preceding analysis has tried to mirror the wealth of reflections, critiques and visions to come out of the interviews, reflecting a diversity of views both between and within regions, and in relation to feminist advocacy at national and global levels. Out of this rich patchwork of opinions there emerge several points of consensus, at

least with respect to what are the big issues facing women's rights advocates today, if not on how the questions should be framed or what the possible answers are. Returning to Antrobus' classification (2004), two key *substantive* issues were identified in the interviews. The first concerns the meaning of advocacy and its relation to the broader feminist project of social transformation, and the second is about how women's rights issues relate both analytically and politically to other social justice agendas. The latter point in turn is linked to one of the main *relational* issues facing feminist advocates – how to engage with emerging cross-movement spaces and build alliances with the broader range of social movements. The other relational issue that is generating current debate is how to give substantive meaning to the recognition of the internal diversity within feminist and women's movements. Finally, in terms of *organisational* matters, the question of how to expand the movement's base and consolidate or recover its connection to the wider society in which it is embedded and which it aims to transform appear as the central pending issues. In some ways these issues are no different from those with which feminist movements were concerned ten, twenty or thirty years ago. What has changed however, is both the size, nature and reach of those movements, as well as the social and political contexts within which they operate and which give the old questions new meanings and new urgency.

References:

Antrobus, Peggy (2004). *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*. London: Zed Books.

McAdam, Doug; John D McCarthy and Mayer N Zald (1996). *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements. Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, Gita (2005). *Neolib, Neocons and Gender Justice: Lessons from Global Negotiations*. Geneva: UNRISD, Occasional Paper N° 9.

II. LOOKING FORWARD

The texts included in this second section are reflections by two leading feminist activists from the Caribbean –Peggy Antrobus– and Latin America –Gina Vargas– prompted by their reading of the preceding analysis of the interviews and their own experience as women’s rights advocates. Rather than respond to the same questions or tackle all the points that emerged from the interviews, the authors were asked to reflect freely on whatever they consider to be the key issue(s) to be addressed at this current moment of stocktaking for women’s rights advocates. As it turned out, both texts focus on the issue of power, although from very different angles. It is hoped that these texts will encourage further dialogue and debate within and among feminist and women’s movements, and contribute to the search for ways to move women’s human rights advocacy forward.

Peggy Antrobus

*Peggy Antrobus has been involved in women's organising since 1974 when she established the Jamaican Women's Bureau. She is a founding member of many networks such as the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) and DAWN. Her book *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Strategies and Challenges* was published by Zed Books in 2004.*

“Advocacy to secure justice for women as a marginalized group differs qualitatively from advocacy undertaken to further a less obviously value-laden goal.” (Kingma and Sweetman 2005:2)

The above insight understates a major problem in advocating women's rights: for some this advocacy is like flying in the face of the “natural order”.¹⁰ To make matters worse, it is not only most men, but most women too, who oppose such a challenge to the natural order. Whether this advocacy is undertaken in the domain of the state or in relation to non-state actors in social movements or elsewhere, whether at global or local levels, whether we view our work as advocacy, or counter-power,¹¹ women's rights activists need a closer examination of power to assist in devising and selecting the strategies that might be most effective. Specifically, feminists must pay more attention to the invisible power that operates to make advocacy in this area particularly difficult. This difficulty includes the internalisation, by women no less than by men, of traditional notions of the perfect wife and mother. As Lisa VeneKlassen puts it:

“It is not just the externally enforced social roles and expectations that perpetuate women's subordination and male superiority, it is the insidious way

¹⁰ Many would use the term ‘God’, ‘Jah’, ‘Mohammed’, or any of the prophets.

¹¹ See discussion of this issue by Gina Vargas below.

that culture shapes a man's psyche about 'proper' gender roles and the way it forms a woman's sense of self to ensure that she is often her best keeper. This is true in industrialized countries of the North –where the conflicting images of glamour and domestic nurturer set impossible standards for the ordinary woman to achieve– as much as it is true in nations of the South, where many women cannot dream of leaving their home or participating in public life, let alone have aspirations for the future. The role that culture plays in perpetuating inferiority and the imbalance of power is profoundly political.” (VeneKlasen 2001: 4)

In this article, therefore, I want to focus on issues of power and empowerment.

Power

In advocating for women's rights it is important to distinguish between formal and informal power and to recognize that in this arena the latter is often a greater obstacle to change than formal power –the more so because it is invisible.

As many of the interviewees recognized, the context in which advocacy takes place today has been made more difficult by the strengthening of patriarchy through the spread of religious fundamentalisms, militarism and neo-liberalism. This makes it all the more important to recognize the pervasiveness of this invisible power. Too often advocacy on behalf of women's agency and rights addresses itself to power structures that are visible and formal, and takes the form of the presentation of 'rational' arguments. This ignores the fact that resistance is

deeply embedded in the culture of patriarchy. A more careful analysis of power would provide clues to a wider range of strategies that must be employed if advocacy is to be effective.

Writing about women's empowerment, some feminists emphasize types of power that are different from the formal, visible power that is normally considered when thinking of influencing power structures. These include power within, power to act, and collective power/power to act with others. These types of power "expand the possibility to create more symmetrical, equitable relationships of power between and within people and groups and to foster human agency." (Miller 2001: 4-5).

To address resistance at the level of informal power, women's rights advocates must pay more attention to the power within each of us and the power of collective action. This calls for the integration of a counter-cultural approach to social change along with the more traditional political, professional and technical approaches.¹²

Power within/power to act: Empowerment

Each of us is imbued with power –although most of us do not recognize this. The process of empowerment is one that allows us to find, acknowledge and nurture this power to act on one's own behalf.

What is the source of this inner power? We are both spiritual and sexual beings. Spirituality and sexuality are sources of power that lie deep within women. In her essay "The erotic as power" Audre Lorde (1984) saw these as linked; however, they are seldom acknowledged in discussions among feminist activists. A counter-cultural approach that pays attention to cultural elements through spiritual growth, consciousness-raising, solidarity and networking would validate these sources of power (Antrobus 2004: 133).

¹² See Antrobus 2004 for a discussion of these different perspectives of social change.

Why is it important to identify and nurture this internal power? There is increasing recognition of a subjective element in processes of social change and the need for personal transformation as part of social transformation. However, the need for identifying and nurturing internal power is more fundamental than this. Empowerment –agency– is the ability to make definitions about our lives and to act on them; it is therefore a prerequisite to action.

There are also other compelling reasons for nurturing the power within: advocacy on behalf of women’s rights is fraught with difficulties. Women engaged in this work need the support of close friends and colleagues to validate their work. Activists need groups of trusted friends and colleagues to serve as a sounding board for ideas and analysis. Finally, feminist activists also need space for rest, retreat and renewal for the next round of struggle.

In their references to the links between global and local advocacy, the interviewees recognize the need for global advocacy to be grounded in local realities. Working on power within takes us back to our base, to build close relations with trusted friends and colleagues. Women’s circles and consciousness-raising processes provide spaces for validating our inner power and need to be recognized as important elements in women’s organizing (Antrobus 2004).

Collective power/power with others

Most feminist activists would acknowledge the importance of collective action: networking, alliance and coalition-building are hallmarks of feminist advocacy. Collective power is underscored by the diversity of the global women’s movement.

Yet, as some of the interviewees pointed out, diversity is not always reflected in the practice of “single issue” advocacy. Although the

linkages between gender justice, economic justice and democracy in the analysis that informs advocacy has been acknowledged, too often the women who experience the injustices and exclusion most sharply are not sufficiently engaged in shaping the analysis, or present at the forefront of advocacy.

If diversity is to stop being merely a characteristic of our movements, and become a major strength, it must be valued and sought after. Intra-movement alliances must start with respect for differences in agendas, perspectives and approaches to advocacy. We cannot build intra-movement alliances by “inviting” women with different agendas, perspectives and styles to “join” those groups that have been in positions of leadership for the past 30 years! Alliance-building must start with respect for the differences in the experiences of women with different life stories.

Diversity also provides the opportunity for deepening the intersectional analysis that strengthens collective action. Over the past 30 years, the hegemony of “Western” women was challenged variously by “Third World women”, “women of colour” and “poor women”. The critiques of feminist analysis through the –by no means complete– inclusion of analyses of colonialism, racism and class by women from these groups, speaking on their own behalf, served to enrich our understanding of patriarchy.

Today, the new sites of struggle in the Muslim world and in Latin America with the emergence of indigenous rights movements, pose an urgent challenge to women’s movements to draw on the experience of feminists within these communities. These struggles can shed new light on the interlinked global trends of militarism, fundamentalism and neo-liberalism. We need further opportunities for feminist dialogues involving more women from these groups if we are to

understand the forces currently confronting women's rights, and to formulate strategies for collective action as we struggle to cope with today's uncertainties.

So finally, along with our political strategies and the technical and professional tools developed over the past 30 years, we need to pay more attention to the cultural elements of our struggle for women's rights –not just in terms of the diversity of culture within our movements, but also in terms of what unites us across boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, nationality and religion. Women's cultural values of caring and sharing, along with our concern for relationships, can lead to the solidarity needed for collective action. Common experiences of "difference" –exclusion, powerlessness and alienation– within our own groups, along with the experiences of empowerment that propel us to challenge our own oppression and subordination can provide a bond that facilitates collective action.

References:

Antrobus, Peggy (2004). *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*. London: Zed Books.

Kingma, Koos and Caroline Sweetman (eds) (2005). *Gender, Development and Advocacy*. Oxford: OXFAM.

Lorde, Audre (1984). "Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power". In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

Miller, Valerie (2001). "On politics, power and people: Lessons from gender advocacy, action and analysis". Paper presented at a Symposium on Democracy and Active Citizen Engagement, held at Coady International Institute, St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada, August 2001.

VeneKlasen, Lisa with Miller, Valerie (2005). *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*. Oklahoma City: World Neighbours.

ADVOCACY OR COUNTER-POWER?

Virginia Vargas

Virginia Vargas founded the “Flora Tristán” Centre for Peruvian Women in 1978 and is active in feminist movements at national, regional and global levels. She has published widely on feminism, democracy, citizenship and globalisation, as well as lecturing in universities in Lima, Latin America and Europe. Vargas was the Latin American and Caribbean NGOs’ Coordinator to the NGO Forum held on the occasion of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, where she received a UNIFEM award. She currently is the Articulación Feminista Marcosur’s representative on the International Council of the WSF.

The article “Women’s human rights advocacy: Obstacles, opportunities and challenges for the future”, based on interviews with feminist leaders, is stimulating and well-conceived because it raises a series of complex issues and dilemmas currently facing feminist strategies. In this article I propose to engage in a dialogue with the text about the new contexts and issues that arise from this critical view of advocacy strategies, placing them within the framework of the paradigmatic changes brought about by the shift in the dominant model, from industrial to globalised capitalism –characterised by neo-liberal hegemony–, and the substantive changes in the play of global power, sparked off symbolically by the fall of the Berlin wall. Likewise, I shall reflect on the paradigmatic changes in social movements’ resistance strategies linked to the emergence of multiple new subjects, which has the effect of broadening the sites of emancipation struggles, both at national and global levels.

Advocacy strategies versus counter-power strategies?

As the article shows, the meaning given to “advocacy” varies from deeply conservative views, serving the needs of the current hegemonic economic and political model, to visions that highlight other dimensions

of advocacy, geared towards civil society and urgently needed cultural changes, and a citizenry that is increasingly active in exercising its right to negotiate interests and influence the relations of power between the state and society. But if we adopt the latter position, is it actually advocacy that we are doing? Convincing society that the feminist project is a good thing? Or are we generating practices that transgress the limits of really existing democracies and that are subversive of the current model of domination? If this is the case, then we are generating counter-power strategies, in place of advocacy strategies, broadening the notion of the public arena beyond the spheres of the state to locate it as a public citizen construct, expanding the subversion of existing codes and provoking changes in the logics of domination and exclusion, and in the social relations that underpin and “normalise” them.

The bases of counter-power

The bases of current counter-power, that are orienting the new paradigms under construction, can be found in the uncertainties inherent in these processes of change. I want to reflect on just some of the dimensions of this counter-power already present in feminist practices, which can be drawn out of the text.

a. The ethics of discomfort: Learning from experience and questioning concepts

The processes underway in this period of globalisation show us that we are not just living in a time of intense changes, but that we are on the threshold of a “change of era”, with all that it implies in terms of certain ways of life, identities and subjectivities becoming obsolete. Within this context of change, the crisis of identities is so strong that

“[...] some discourses change their meaning, other opposing ones emerge, of a

diverse nature and with diverse objectives, to challenge the dominant ones, new discourses mounted on old narratives take shape. In short, there is an upheaval in the previously existing order" (Carou 2000).

In the face of this upheaval, in which the old paradigms appear deficient and the new ones are still under construction, uncertainties and ambiguities emerge. Several feminists have contributed to this analysis: Diana Maffia (2001) talks about the urgent need to invent new approaches and possible interdisciplinary models through what she calls "impertinent knowledge", which questions the legitimacy of traditional discourse. In this new scenario, also relevant is what Julieta Kirkwood (1986) called, at the beginning of the second wave of feminist expression, the "license to express", that is, a kind of attitude of irresponsibility towards the scientific paradigm and the concepts that its language entails, the audacity to mix everything up, producing a declassification of established codes, and an inversion of the terms of what is important. Nira Yuval Davis (2006) refers to an "ethics of discomfort" regarding what has been learned and established, which raises urgent new questions about reality and the actions taken, and about the practices of actors. Uncertainty thus becomes a powerful engine for change.

It is this ethics of discomfort that allows us to search for new meanings for old terms, or new ways of expressing the new meanings, re-thinking and generating new ways of understanding the political, giving new contents and direction to politics. In many ways, these new contents are already present in feminist practices. The ethics of discomfort is manifested in the action of disassociating ourselves from gender visions that de-politicise the transgressive content of existing social and sexual relations and make them mere objects of technical analysis; in the rejection of poverty as the main object of analysis and the shift of focus on to the inequity in the distribution of wealth, as the

only way of moving towards social justice rather than charity.¹³ But it is principally manifested in the construction of a new paradigm of politics, that restores its centrality, by rejecting the idea of the social and the political as subsidiary and complementary to the economy, and recovering and re-politicising democracy and citizen rights. This implies a double shift, one to deconstruct and de-politicise the economy and one to reconstruct and politicise politics, displacing the hegemony of the market over citizen wellbeing and articulating social change with subjective and personal change, by recovering transgressive proposals at the level of the private sphere and imbuing them with a new political meaning, thus revealing the close interrelationship between sexuality, production and reproduction. And this is not just a national struggle, but also –and urgently– a global one.

¹³ Fraser and Gordon (1992) review the historical process through which women's rights became "charity" –that is a unilateral concession resulting from the beneficence of those in power– rather than citizenship rights.

With respect to advocacy, this uncertainty is revealed in the profound review of the changes that have taken place in the space at which advocacy strategies have been directed over the last decade. In this context of change what role should feminist strategies assign to inter-state spaces –represented by the UN– and national states? The UN-focused advocacy strategies of the 1990s were successful owing to the improved opportunity structures opened up at the time by the UN and by countries with a commitment to democracy. Their success also owed much to feminist movements' capacity to organise and formulate proposals. In the present context, that opportunity structure no longer exists (suffice it to remember the immense difficulties and exclusionary practices faced at the Millennium Summit +5). As the interviewees pointed out, any advocacy practice or negotiation strategy has its limits in this era of neo-liberal hegemony, insolent and arbitrary US primacy, and growing conservative and fundamentalist trends, and considering the impact that all this has had in terms of undermining the UN and making it almost obsolete as a space from which to promote change. Is it possible to advocate successfully for women's rights within an institution, vis-à-vis which the only valid

demand is that it be re-founded? What kind of advocacy do we need to develop in order to have an influence on this long-term struggle?

Are things any easier at national level? Many of the interviewees seem to doubt it; others believe that it is easier to confront poverty and fundamentalisms at that level. The hegemony of the neo-liberal model, with the consequent triumph of the market over citizenship and of the economy over politics, has implied the development of low-intensity democracies and a profound transformation of the state, since for the market to triumph the state's intervention in citizen wellbeing must be neutralised and its functionality for capital must be heightened. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) says that neo-liberalism does not destroy the centrality of the state but reorients it better to serve the interests of capital, weakening its role as mediator of social conflict and also modifying the contents of its democratic action. Even though the state functions of domination and control over national territory persist in multiple dimensions, these, too, have been profoundly eroded and weakened, as a result of globalisation. On the one hand, the "national" character of the nation-state is strongly questioned by the growing and multiple affirmations and struggles for recognition of ethnic and cultural identities within its territory, which usually extend beyond territorial borders. On the other hand, national states seem too small to respond to big global problems, and too big to attend to the enormous range of diversities that they encompass and the citizen demands that arise from these diversities. This implies that they do not have the capacity or power to tackle and make decisions on macro issues, but also that they are unable to respond to the problems that citizens consider central in their daily lives, and least of all to see how macro and day-to-day issues are interlinked and impact on personal relations.

But the state is far from a homogeneous entity, whether internally or in relation to other states. There are powerful states that control not just

global economic dynamics but also tend to control, unilaterally, the international architecture; others that compensate their lack of power by aligning themselves with powerful states; still others that try to resist this unilateralism. They also differ with respect to the degree of development of democracy, which in most cases is reduced to the dimension of formal representation. The internal heterogeneity of states allows for and generates more sensitive spaces and processes. In many countries internal state reforms and decentralisation processes are underway that could open up greater possibilities for citizen advocacy.

It is within this heterogeneity that we can site the new democratic wave in Latin America, which undoubtedly is an interesting phenomenon. The wave is heterogeneous in that it coexists with a conservative trend in many other Latin American governments. But it is also heterogeneous itself as a democratic “wave”. Some of these governments are clearly committed to confronting the neo-liberal model (Venezuela); others are more complacent with it (Chile? Brazil?); some of these countries have more established democracies and rules for democratic coexistence, like Uruguay, while in other cases their democracies are less developed and there is a greater risk of authoritarianism (Venezuela); in Bolivia, the new democracy is an expression of the Quechua and Aymara populations, peoples historically excluded from political life, which means that their very presence democratises politics. Nevertheless, this democratic wave does not necessarily assume the defence of women’s human and citizen rights or those of sexual diversity. This difficulty can be illustrated by reference to Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez’s announcement, after meeting with the church hierarchy, that, were it to get through Parliament, he would veto the bill decriminalising abortion that had almost been passed in the previous legislature. This example takes us straight to an issue that governments –whether part of a democratic wave or not– are reluctant to tackle: the transformation of the “guardian” state and the defence of the state’s secular character,

as a fundamental condition for a plural democracy.

b. Counter-power as cosmopolitan imagination

A key aspect of the new political culture –in tune with the new times– and of a new political theorising is accepting that the transformation of reality presupposes a “transformation of vision”. This new vision implies in turn a **change of imagination**, from one focused solely on the nation-state to a cosmopolitan imagination that does not eliminate, but rather repositions the global-local scales, which are increasingly interconnected. And while the privileging of one scale is a political decision, taken in response to concrete political conditions and contexts, the cosmopolitan vision is, nonetheless, as Beck (2004) points out, the vision that comes closest to reflecting current reality because it opens up possibilities for action that the national vision, alone and of itself, closes down.

If we extend this cosmopolitan vision to the world of social movements, we find it expressed as global solidarity, containing a plurality of struggles and emancipatory impulses that are beginning to form a wide, diverse, plural field of actors, which are gradually producing and expanding new frames of meaning. This counter-power will be all the broader the more it manages to expand the views of the “field of actors” in new frames of meaning, globally and locally.

And in this respect privileged spaces have been opening up, where feminists have been investing energy and contributing ideas. Some spaces were opened up by networks or movements (DAWN, AWID, the World March of Women, the Campaign against Fundamentalisms, etc.). Others are global spaces opened up by the confluence of emancipatory movements, amongst which the WSF is today a privileged space. The diversity it contains obliges the actors within it to broaden their imagination and change their vision. For feminisms, this is a space of

¹⁴ An important example were the Feminist Dialogues in Mumbai, India, where feminists from India and Latin America engaged in a discussion on the legalisation of abortion, which in India, had resulted in the phenomenon known as female “feticide”.

¹⁵ Ramonet, in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, proposes to convert the WSF into the new revolutionary collective subject... This is like going back, under the guise of the collective, to the old concept of the proletariat as the only revolutionary subject, and to ideas that are in crisis, such as the notion of representation, precisely because today there are many more interests to be represented. As feminists we contest this vision and contribute to building a different one.

confluence and dispute, to which they are permanently contributing new frames of meaning, negotiating, disputing and allying with other movements. It is true that in spite of the disputes and of all the advances made, there has been no radical modification of the power imbalances within the WSF. Nevertheless, the WSF's capacity (that is, the capacity of the movements it comprises) to re-think itself permanently, striving towards greater democratisation, makes the disputes and controversies a contribution to the WSF itself and to the mutual learning and recognition processes taking place among the different movements and visions with which the global horizon and culture are being built. (The “Inter-movement Dialogues” organised within the WSF by feminist networks from different regions in the world, and mentioned by many of the interviewees, constitute without a doubt one such contribution and learning experience.) The Campaign against Fundamentalisms started at the WSF. It was also out of this space that the Feminist Dialogues emerged, which sought to politicise feminist visions starting from the recognition of differences,¹⁴ and to politicise the feminist presence at the WSF itself. It is also the space where world visions and new political cultures mature and come into confrontation,¹⁵ and where they also integrate local struggles. We cannot forget that what is global is also –somewhere on the planet– local.

c. Individualisation as a way of nurturing counter-power

In this process, extreme individualisation, fragmentation and particularisation of the different struggles also has an ambivalent impact. On the one hand these trends have produced, as Lechner (2002) claims, a political “uprooting”, as a result of the more tenuous and fragile social fabric and an “I” culture sceptical of getting involved in collective enterprises, that is so characteristic of neo-liberal culture. But on the other hand, at the same time there is Seattle and the series of historical mobilisations that alerted the world to the fact that the

dominant order was being questioned. It has also allowed the majority of citizens to recover a new way of experiencing day-to-day life, in terms of attending to their personal lives, and it has generated processes of “individualisation” and given new meaning to individual rights. Thus there is a tension between a reality that is exclusionary and an awareness of the right to inclusion and to recognition, which opens up the possibility of more horizontal and democratic relations.

The changes brought about by globalisation have also undermined archaic customs and traditional belief systems (Giddens 1999); amongst others, relations between the sexes –a plastic and flexible sexuality– and univocal family values. And although they have also nurtured growing fundamentalisms, people are much more exposed than before to ideas of autonomy, individualisation, freedom, equality, thus changing their self-perception and their condition as subjects of rights. The gender paradigm itself has changed because it is no longer based on the previous capitalist model, with its notion of the male breadwinner, a family wage, and women in the domestic sphere. Women politicised the domestic sphere; the male breadwinner no longer exists; there are multiple models of families, etc. The individualisation of women started to have broader frames of reference. Under these conditions, unless the notion of the collective is based on the appropriation of rights at the personal level, and on the modification of subjective citizenships towards an awareness of both the entitlement to rights and the responsibilities they entail, it could turn out to be deeply authoritarian and homogenising. If individuality is not the starting point for the expression of diversity, how can “evaporation” be avoided?

This could also be applied to the dynamics of articulation among movements. Several of the interviewees highlighted the current characteristic fragmentation of feminisms, and signalled the urgent need to generate a common project within diversity. There is no ready answer to this challenge, but there is a different reality: the symbolic

and discursive frameworks are now much broader and more mobile. In this reality, where diversity and heterogeneity prevail, it may not be so important to have a definitive and consensually agreed programme of political, social and economic transformations. What is necessary is that the different agendas emerging from diverse collective actors and from multiple autonomous subjects be made explicit and combined. What form of collective unity, then, would allow for differences to be respected and expressed? Organisational forms that are too rigid and cumbersome cannot respond to the demand for an open-ended individuality. In this context it is important to rethink social movements' new forms of expression and articulation, where new forms of collective action that are more flexible, streamlined and ephemeral, may be emerging (Celiberti 2001).

d. Diversity as the foundation of a multiple and expanding counter-power

In this respect, the radical split between old and new social movements perceived in previous decades is not so evident any more. There are other dynamics that start to have an impact, such as the transition that Waterman (2006) mentions from the organisational dynamic characteristic of the national-industrial epoch, to emerging dynamics based on the "relational principle", characteristic of the era of globalised capitalism, founded on information technology, finance and services. The relational principle –networking– is appropriate for social movements, and cyber space –beyond the question of whether it is a site of domination or freedom– appears as an infinite terrain where struggles can take place and from where utopias can be created.

This does not mean that the differences between these struggles cancel each other out. On the contrary, a plurality of meanings, of new forms of recognition and subjectivities emerge when the terrain of social experience expands, at local and global levels. It is this diversity and

plurality that must be recovered to underpin the various kinds of counter-power that are emerging. The relational principle can have multiple connotations: as a form of connection and articulation that opens up multiple nodes of meaning, producing a more complex vision and horizontally expanding individual and collective energies; and as a challenge to interlink the different dynamics and dimensions of counter-power. But the relational principle can also be applied to the diverse ways individuals and movements experience and struggle, linking the personal and the political, the public and the private, dichotomies that serve the interests of the neo-liberal model, which is based on competition, hierarchies of oppression and inequality, and an individualisation that lacks commitment.

There are risks, undoubtedly. Emancipatory movements also bring along to the spaces where counter-power is constructed features of dominant political cultures and everyday cultures, that are based on the dichotomous fragmentation of reality (the personal versus the political, the public versus the private) and on the conception of a competitive and hierarchical relation between struggles, instead of on the notion of their “equivalence”. If the processes of interaction/articulation (what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the theory of “translation”) between the multiple incipient counter-powers provides the foundation for a new political practice, this poses the question of how to go about it in equal conditions and without exclusionary leadership; that is, how to avoid imposing a hierarchical vision on the emerging struggles and counter-powers.

47

Impertinent knowledge, or disputes over how to broaden the expressions/construction of counter-power

It is clear that in order to exert influence and engage in dialogue in this new scenario, we must work to make our own contribution

visible and we must claim recognition. More than ever the capacity for negotiating with and effectively disputing existing powers requires the politicisation, radicalisation and active visibility of feminist agendas as part of a radical democratic agenda. The contested terrain does not only refer to hegemonic powers and spaces, but also to the recognition and redistribution of power within the field of construction of counter-powers and counter-cultural signifiers. As Marta Rosemberg (2002: 5) states, for this recognition to take place, it is necessary to politicise differences, by celebrating the consciousness of equality as a vehicle of justice, and to protect the manifestation of the differences, as an act of freedom.

For feminists, this act of freedom implies revealing the new signifiers with which they are building their counter-power, both interacting with and disputing the different visions of change. Today one counter-cultural dimension that uses new signifiers to nurture counter-power involves the articulation between personal change and processes of social transformation, thus generating “alternative subjectivities” that are not just manifested at a conscious level but also impact on subjective, personal and social frames of imagination. With respect to this dimension, feminisms contribute with analytic categories that are not only deeply personal, but also have a highly significant social and political content: the **body** is one such example of “impertinent knowledge” that broadens the frames of reference for the process of transformation.¹⁶ The notion of the body allows us to recover women’s (and human beings’) diverse forms of existence and to articulate the dimensions of race, class, gender and sexual orientation as all part of the same system of domination. For this, the body must be re-conceptualised as a “political space”, which is impacted on by exclusionary forces such as the neo-liberal economy, militarism and fundamentalisms. The notion of the body as a political space entails an emancipatory framework, since it locates it not just in relation to the private sphere, or the individual, but also integrally linked to place

¹⁶ The body was the centre of analysis of the 2005 Feminist Dialogues in Porto Alegre, examined in terms of the impact of the three global forces most destructive for humanity: neo-liberalism, militarism and fundamentalisms.

–the local, the social, the public arena (Harcourt and Escobar 2002). This is why Betania Avila (2001) claims that the body has become a “field endowed with citizenship”, through a series of available social experiences that produce multiple articulations.

And here the itinerary is vast: without doubt, the negation of people’s sexual and reproductive rights represents a space where the body is disciplined; in response to this a counter-cultural dimension has emerged that reaffirms the right to decide over one’s own body, the right to pleasure, to diverse and multiple sexualities, different from heterosexuality. All over the world this has generated powerful feminist and sexual diversity movements around the rights to freedom and recognition, as well as struggles around the redistribution of power and resources. Another space is occupied by the bio-medical dimension, most brutally expressed in the AIDS epidemic and in the policies it generates, and which is a target of pressure and resistance by churches and states. At the same time, it has produced a paradigmatic movement that struggles against the monopoly of transnational laboratory patents. But the itinerary of the political body goes beyond this, confronting the disciplining of the body by terror and militarisation, which has already been expressed with indescribable cruelty in armed conflicts and wars, where women’s bodies are regarded as “booty” by all sides. In this itinerary, the devaluation of the body depending on skin colour perversely feeds processes of social, cultural, economic and emotional exclusion, and in the case of women especially impacts on their sexual body. Another dimension concerns the impact that the hegemonic economic model is having on the bodies of the new generations –with all the associated consequences of exclusion, inequality, hunger, reduction of capabilities– usually with an irreversible effect.

This is a long-term cultural struggle. Undoubtedly it requires pressure and negotiation with states and with regional and global inter-state spaces. The question is, what position do we adopt?¹⁷ If we should

¹⁷ The Campaign for an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights is an example of constructing advocacy practices based on radical feminist proposals around sexuality and the body.

not let the agenda be set by states or the UN, as the interviewees say, then we must define it ourselves from our counter-cultural position, committed to a radical democracy. And if the body mediates people's experiences of lived social and cultural relations and is a part of their daily lives, in its multiple expressions, then it should also be present in the vision of national and global societies and in an expanded vision of democracy at global and national levels, locally, at home and in bed. This way of conceiving the body turns it into both an instrument and a goal of subversive, transversal advocacy.

Finally...

Feminism is not merely a struggle to obtain equal opportunities laws or recognition of citizenship; it is, above all, a counter-cultural proposal, because the materialisation of its vision requires a new democratic political culture that is permanently expanding its limits. Our utopia –my utopia– is to think that another world is possible, with justice, democracy and solidarity; that in this historic moment, of a change of era, our struggles contribute to the construction of new paradigms. We act on multiple fronts and with differing emphases, but we are asking ourselves the same questions and experiencing the same uncertainties. One of the most evident dimensions of this agenda is based on the conviction that another world will not be possible without another economy, and another economy will not be possible without another democracy (Agenda Posneoliberal 2006). And another democracy will not be possible without both women and men engaging in a personal, subjective revolution, nor without the active recognition of our diversity, which in itself constitutes a profound counter-cultural change.

References:

Agenda Posneoliberal (2006). *Miradas y Reflexiones: Bases para la Construcción de una Agenda Posneoliberal*. Auspiciado por: Attac Brasil, Instituto Rosa Luxemburgo, Articulación Feminista Marcosur, Planeta Porto Alegre. Rio de Janeiro: IBASE.

Avila, Betania (2001). *Feminismo y ciudadanía: la producción de nuevos derechos*. Lima: Flora Tristán/AGENDE/Equidad de Género. *Mujeres al Timón*, Cuadernos para la incidencia política feminista, N° 2.

Beck, Ulrich (2004). *Poder y Contrapoder en la Era Global. La Nueva Economía Política Mundial*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Cairo Carou, Heriberto (2000). "Jano desorientado. Identidades político-territoriales en América Latina". *Leviatán*, N° 79.

Celiberti, Lilian (2001). "Retos para una nueva cultura política", *Lola Press*, No. 15, May-October.

Fraser, Nancy and Linda Gordon (1992). "Contrato versus caridad: Una reconsideración de la relación entre ciudadanía civil y ciudadanía social". *ISEGORA, Revista de Filosofía Moral y Política*, N° 6, November.

Giddens, Anthony (1999). *Consecuencias de la modernidad*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Harcourt, Wendy and Arturo Escobar (2002). "Mujeres y política de lugar", *Desarrollo*, N° 45, Lugar, política y justicia: las mujeres frente a la globalización, pp. 5-13.

Kirkwood, Julieta (1986). *Ser Política en Chile. Las Feministas y los Partidos*. Santiago de Chile: FLACSO.

Lechner, Norbert (2002). "¿Cómo reconstruimos un nosotros?". In *Las Sombras del mañana. La dimensión subjetiva de la política*. Santiago de Chile: Ediciones LOM.

Maffía, Diana (2001). "Ciudadanía sexual. Aspectos personales, legales y políticos de los derechos reproductivos como derechos humanos", *Feminaria*, Vol. XIV, N° 26/27, July.

Rosemberg, Martha (2002). "¿Qué otro mundo es posible?", *RMMDR*, Bo-

letín N° 75/1, abril.

Santos, Boaventura De Souza (2003). *“Para uma Sociologia das ausencias e uma sociología das emergencias”*. *Revista Critica de Ciencias Sociales*, N° 63, October.

Waterman, Peter (2006). *A new world view: Globalization, Civil Society and Solidarity*. Forthcoming.

Yuval-Davis, Nira (2006). *“Human/women’s rights and feminist transversal politics”*. In Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Tripp (eds), *Global Feminism: Transnational Women’s Activism, Organizing and Human Rights*. New York: New York University Press.

