

*In Search of a Meeting*

# ARGENTINA

# Fifth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting



ENCUENTRO FEMINISTA  
LATINOAMERICANO  
Y DEL CARIBE

SAN BERNARDO

This retrospective - and certainly incomplete - article about the Fifth Meeting attempts to give an overall feeling, because what can be written about a meeting of 3000 women? Certainly not a wise or "intellectual" commentary, but rather an outline of what this happening was, at least from the perspective of one participant.

The organization of a meeting of 3,000 women is a feat to be proud of by any group and any country, especially a country like Argentina where the Feminist Movement has no structure to support it. This was therefore a recurring theme. For some participants this Meeting was too disorganized; for other older participants this disorganization was typical of the meetings; for the most demanding this was not a meeting at all. In the end, when the hopes of those who came were measured against reality, the very size of this meeting of Latin American and Caribbean feminists and the variety of interests of the women who arrived caused concern about the future of such meetings and of the Feminist Movement itself.

### Arrival

From Saturday November 17 delegations started arriving to enroll at the Hotel Presidente in the center of Buenos Aires. Quite unexpectedly, the computer system broke down so all the preparation had to be redone by hand. Speed was of the essence as some ran the risk of waiting four or five hours until they were found in some list lost in the mountain of paperwork

organizers were trying to cope with. However, this unexpected wait gave many of us the chance to catch up with old friends, give each other a warm hug and tell each other our latest news.

The evening left us free to entertain ourselves; many of us enjoyed a walk in the center of town, stopping to savor steaks, take in a movie and generally live the myth of the "Great Buenos Aires". Unfortunately, we discovered just how unfavorable the exchange rate was. Argentina was terribly expensive, (which meant that the 100 dollars we had paid for a week's board and lodging was very reasonable). Other women spent the night picking up the threads of conversations started in other areas of the planet, and updating common views. And for a few, the Meeting's organizers, that night was the beginning of the end of their work. After two years of preparation the Meeting was actually taking place and we, the women, had arrived.

### San Bernardo

The following morning seventy buses full of feminists left for San Bernardo, a seaside

resort about 400 kilometers south of Buenos Aires near Mar del Plata. The experiences on the journey were very varied and depended, among other things, on the spirits of the travelers and the condition of the vehicles.

Shortly after leaving the capital, we came upon a crowd of people gathered around a stationary, scorched bus. One of the buses belonging to the group had caught fire; among the passengers were some Chilean women from "La Morada" who were carrying the notes from their Literature Workshop. The writer Raquel Olea was the heroine of the day as she succeeded in entering the bus in flames to salvage the suitcases. Meanwhile in our bus the Brazilians taught us to dance lambada, and a Peruvian singer with a voice of velvet sang "La Flor de la Canela", while others argued about the importance of

Latin America's external debt and its effect on women.

### Welcome

On that Sunday November 18, a warm, humid day, residents of San Bernardo and Mar de Ajo watched as the 3,000 women got off the buses to occupy twenty-eight hotels spread over the forty blocks which make up the two cities. The organizers had tried to group together the majority of the participants in one place but this arrangement had fallen through shortly before the Meeting. Unfortunately this then meant we had a long walk to attend the workshops. Another important reason for trying to change hotels was transport at night. The most "experienced" had already told us that the nocturnal celebrations were great fun and not to be missed.





The opening night's party took place in the San Bernardo square, where delegations from thirty-eight countries in Latin America, from the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Spain, France, Turkey, South Korea and Ethiopia chorussed their greetings and attended an emotional act of welcome by the organizers. Afterwards we went to eat for the first time all together. No-one could imagine what it would be like and it turned out to be very agreeable. We ate in the square, sitting on the grass, after having quietly formed a very orderly line. Kilos of salad, bread and wine accompanied the main dish of the night: a mixture of boiled corn and vegetable stew. From then on the opening night would be named after the typical dish we had eaten: the night of the "locro".

### Workshops

The central theme of the Fifth Meeting was "Feminism as a Transforming Movement", so it had been proposed that

we should evaluate the Movement over the last decade, allowing us to share experiences and incorporate each region's reality to try and get closer to formulating a Latin American feminist identity.

In response to the demands made by participants on enrolling, the organizers suggested tackling the theme of a Latin American identity from four different angles: "Construction of Collective Identities, and Conflicting Values"; "Organizational Variants and Areas of Development"; The Relation of the Feminist Movement to Other Social Areas"; and "Political Proposals, Perspectives and Strategies".

To analyse these subjects fifteen thematic areas were identified. Workshops were then set up to deal with areas of Work, Sexuality, Health, Violence, Culture, Law and Patriarchal Institutions, Everyday Life, Communication, World Visions, Education, Information-building, the State and Public Policies, Marginalized Areas,

Relationships of Power and Feminist Ethics, and Mechanisms of Political and Social Participation.

As the organizers knew the style characteristic of the Movement, they made it clear that all these proposals were only suggestions and asked to be advised of any changes so as to incorporate them into the daily reports: "our intention has been to organize the demands according to the viewpoints (angles) and methodological areas which we proposed, with no intention of imposing rigid nor academic structures", they declared cautiously in the information bulletin.

The daily mechanics of the Meeting were in fact very simple: one theme per day, for four days; generally, mornings were used for discussion, afternoons for workshops. Any conclusions, proposals or syntheses reached were read out at the final plenary

session on Friday, or included in the Memory of the Fifth Meeting to be published afterwards.

Before the closing party, the long farewells, and warm hugs before getting on to the bus which would take us back to Buenos Aires - where a large march in celebration of the "Day of No More Violence against Women" would take place,- we had to decide on the location and the date of the next Meeting. As a general area we decided on Central America, leaving the exact place to be decided by a regional commission.

### Discussion

This wonderful system, translated onto diagrams, maps of the city (with the meeting points marked with numbers and addresses), down to the smallest details, was not sufficient to contain the excess energy which the 3000 women brought with them to the Meeting. Suddenly, everything seemed to overflow. On some days there were eighty-four workshops proposed for one single afternoon. The cafes (and here let's pay homage to the magnificent cakes at Toto's), reception rooms of hotels, gardens, cinemas, commercial galleries, squares and naturally the beach, were all invaded by groups ready to discuss the most diverse themes.

The central core of discussion on the Monday was the existence of a collective feminist identity. That day there were twenty-seven free workshops officially programmed, among them, "The World which Women of the 21st Century Want" and "The Relationship of Women with Money and Power" (coordinated by Clara Coria). In the workshops involving presentations, one of those read was on "The Contribution of Deep Psychology and the Archetypal Feminist Theory to Literature". In the Odeon cinema a fifteen-minute video showed the relation of the housewife and madness, and another dealt with black adolescent women. In the



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meetings of the networks a discussion lasting several days was started on the documentation centers in Latin America and the Caribbean, and DAWN initiated a discussion which led to one of the final documents on perspectives of the Movement for the 1990s (coordinated by Gina Vargas).

Among the fifteen workshops corresponding to the thematic areas were the following: one on Pleasure and Eroticism related to Sexuality, and another on Leadership, Stratification and the Distribution of Power among Women and among Feminist Groups.

And so we passed the first day, settling in to the places, the names, the emotions, the walks, the exquisite food, in short to the prevailing spirit of the Meeting. That night we went to the theater, and the "shows" programmed for after dinner. Later the discotheques opened their doors exclusively for us. So on Tuesday to the confusion which already reigned would be added the lack of sleep which was accumulating.

### The Storm

Tuesday was marvelous. A storm lit up the sky for hours, but at the same time wiped out the city's electricity system and produced a fire at the computing center. Everywhere was flooded, but the excess water dried with such speed we could have been in the Tropics. Myriam, one of the Isis documentalists told us that several women got together in the street with water up to their ankles and faced with the prospect of finding the workshops suspended due to flooding, decided to organize another among themselves. That day many activities were cancelled and some of the participants stayed in their hotels, spending the time getting to know each other better. In any case, the second area, Organisation and Areas of Development, held up. (relatively speaking, of course.....)



By Wednesday we were more settled in but more nervous as Friday was fast approaching, the day fixed for the Meeting to end. The central theme that day was the Relation of the Feminist Movement to other Social Fields. One of the most popular free workshops was that of the lesbians who raised, among other issues, the subject of discrimination within the Movement. Another of the most popular workshops was on the Environment and Participation, in which voices were raised in favor of peace and in favor of urgent tasks such as illiteracy of women and the protection of indigenous peoples. The networks discussed the Prevention of Violence in the Southern Cone, Mental Health and Reproductive Rights. Communicators and journalists worked in the readings' workshops. There were more than forty activities on offer.

Thursday was the day of Political Proposals, Perspectives and Strategies. A lot of work. Francis Kissling spoke on the right of Catholic women to make decisions concerning their own body; Charlotte



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Bunch and Roxana Carrillo referred to the Human Rights of Women; Haydee Birgin (among others) spoke on the development of public policies since the Lima Meeting; the film and video makers got together. Among the free workshops many stood out including that of "The Erotic Women" about sexual fantasies (coordinated by Graciela Sikos); Women and the Church; Lesbophobia; Nicaragua; the Prevention of AIDS and many others.

### Fear of Diversity

There wasn't enough time to attend everything and we didn't even try to as it was impossible. But we were left with the impression that there are subjects which

cry out for serene and deep reflection. We are no longer just dealing with "tendencies which are more or less obvious". For example, how should we structure ourselves in order to strengthen our internal links - both at national and at regional level - while at the same time avoiding the old authoritarian and bureaucratic models? Without doubt, there is still a fear of manipulation and democracy which has prevented the Movement from better organizing itself and from recognizing its leaders. On the other hand, how can we balance the coexistence of lesbians and heterosexuals without facing up to the fear of one or other tendency taking over as representative of the whole Movement? This feeling veils another old fear of a possible rupture in the Movement for this reason. At this Meeting it was also important to recognize the influence of women who came from party politics, government bodies and from local administration, and who have consequently not developed within the Feminist Movement. So, how can we capitalize on these contributions and lose our fear of diversity in terms of structures of the Movement.

It seems that only after the Meeting in San Bernardo could we look at ourselves and weigh up these issues, which had not been possible at the time. Those of us who attended for the first time were better prepared after having listened, despite it having been in the middle of such fragmentation. It is quite possible that without this fragmentation we would not have had the chance to meet so many women who do such different things and who spoke, in the most unexpected places, of incredible situations they have experienced, and which led them to set out from such diverse places in search of this Meeting.

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