

CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS FOR FEMINISTS IN THE '90s

This document, which was read out by Virginia Vargas at the final plenary session of the Fifth Feminist Meeting at San Bernardo, was written by a group of women who took part in a workshop of the same name.

This document was the product of two previous workshops leading up to the Meeting: the DAWN workshop and the Second Session of Feminist Workshops in Quito in 1989. *

The Feminist Movement has grown visibly and rapidly throughout the continent over the last ten years.

It has been a growth in the most diverse situations, in the transition to democracy, in limited democracies, amid war and violence, during attempts to build socialism, and in times of profound economic crisis.

It is a growth which has touched on social differences, which has brought into view and into our thoughts, slowly but with unquestionable strength, the reality of poor women, of indigenous women, of black women; colouring the movement with the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic characteristics of the continent.

It is a growth which has allowed us to learn much from life's experiences and rebellions.

It is a growth which has permitted, within national characteristics, a social and political legitimization of the Movement as a whole and of its proposal for change.

It is a growth which has enriched us with different views and different themes.

It is a growth which gives us strength and empowers our collective revolt, and feeds our audacity.

But it is a growth which has not always found smooth outlets for its expression;

which has been more quantitative than qualitative;

which has, at times, diluted our subversive character by being diverted into other movements and challenges;

which has raised problems of internal democracy, of leadership, of structures within the Movement, of the building up of new knowledge, of better channels of

communication, of the continuous challenges faced by the Movement in trying to turn its wealth of quantity into political vitality and quality.

As it enters the decade of the 90s, the Movement must again find ways to allow us to make our proposal stand out in the face of the new demands and needs of the women of our countries and our continent.

These will help us to consolidate a democratic, effective, efficient, warm, daring feminist movement in which we all feel expressed.

I. DIVERSITY

We recognize and look for diversity in dealing with the feminist perspective which we have adopted, and we are committed to its development and consolidation.

The feminist program develops and is expressed on two levels:

- (a) As a proposal to change society throughout the world. Here feminism expresses its political, cultural and symbolic knowledge, its opposition to and its total break with patriarchal logic, values and ethics. Starting from this proposal we begin a search for new answers to new challenges.

This proposal for change, which reflects the fundamental values of Latin American feminism, is formed and enriched by the historical and contemporary realities of each country and by the ethical system of each nation's individual feminism.

- (b) The feminist program also unfolds in thematic areas and in proposals for action which stem from this global purpose.

It recognizes the urgency and possibilities of individual situations and acts upon them.

The global purpose of the Movement grows, incorporating answers and recognizing challenges raised by the development of these thematic areas and in action plans.

Therefore the Feminist Movement is not just a collection of actions or themes, nor a list of claims. It is a political movement.

A diversity of views and proposals emerge in the process of building this political movement and enrich it constantly.

But diversity is conflictive and complex; there are diversities which complement and enrich each other, others clash productively, others are false differences and there are many we cannot even mention.

These unexpressed differences are the ones which hurt us most, because we do not always recover the historical truth or the connection between our different approaches. We do not always manage to express the different references we use as the base for our proposal. We do not recognize diversity as a principle but instead begin to act from such diversities in an immediate, pragmatic and sometimes arbitrary way.

We do not express these differences because we have witnessed painful and deep ruptures within the movement this decade; because we are afraid of losing emotional security; and finally because we surrender to the culture of intolerance.

These unexpressed differences weaken the subversive nature of the Movement.

How can we respect the differences which paralyze us, which are subjective and arbitrary and which prevent us from taking collective action?

Respect for diversity is only restricted when it comes into conflict with our political will to build an effective movement.

On this basis, we can approach diversity from two basic positions:

- from trust, assuming the existence of a common purpose, which we act upon through multiple courses of action.
- from clear and explicit confrontation, with clear ground rules with the participation of majorities and minorities without expecting consensus. Here confrontation is a way of growing and advancing.

Once diversities are acknowledged, freedom of action is a guarantee of progress and a right. The expression of diversity cannot be a strait-jacket which obscures initiatives and minimizes good intentions.

II. BUILDING THE MOVEMENT

a) *Democracy*

The Feminist Movement assumes internal democracy as an integral and vital part of its development.

However, democracy is not an abstract desire. It is the creation of clear ground rules which allow the expression and representation of the diversities of the Movement.

It is essential to create spaces for mediation where we can express our differences and agreements. By expressing the personal and collective problems of building a plural democracy we can face with maturity and solidarity the authoritarian distortions which repeatedly come out in our personal and collective behavior.

It is fundamental to find forms of working which express diversity and accept individual differences and skills, thereby overcoming the myth that we are all the same — a myth which ultimately leads to a collective inefficiency which paralyzes the Movement.

For a plural democracy we must build a movement with imagination and audacity using creative methods which can cut through the symbolic-patriarchal structures through which we see order and interpret the world.

To do this we need flexible structures which can forge links and ensure communication to permanently feed the Movement and its parts, and to avoid both the concentration of power and chaotic individualism.

These structures can be changed in line with the changes and needs of the Movement and its context. Changes in structure should help improve the quality of the Movement's political action and not just express passing fancies.

Structure is essential to create the Movement but the Movement should not exhaust itself in such structures nor should women portray themselves as feminists solely because they take part in organizational structures. The Movement is also made up of all the antipatriarchal initiatives which feminist women are developing. Therefore we must recognize each other and establish the links and connections we need to strengthen the feminist principle wherever it may be.

b) *Leadership*

Leadership represents, both symbolically and in fact, the different needs and characteristics of the Movement at each particular moment in its development. The progress and complexity of the feminist program must permanently produce new leadership to ensure historical continuity and to stimulate new and wider scope.

Feminism in Latin America and the Caribbean

However the Movement has problems in recognizing, accepting and awarding leadership. Our historical fears of being excluded, of wanting to decide for ourselves, of feeling we are not fulfilled continue to haunt the Movement. These ghosts can only be exorcised or controlled if we clearly establish democratic means of communication, of elections and of change, if we recognize specific personal abilities and needs and if we think of these as complementary and not exclusive.

This is easier now because the Movement's progress has created the possibility of a more collective leadership. No one woman has all the needs and requirements. Instead, many of us have within us and express at different times or in different situations the demands and initiatives of the Movement.

We all have different ways of leading; some brilliant and expressive, others more closed; some publicly and others in more restricted areas; some formal and others informal. The informal ones are the most dangerous as they do not express themselves openly and do not explain their acts to anyone.

The Movement should have the capacity to create, elect, and formally substitute its leaders to prevent outsiders from choosing as its representatives those with no commitment to the construction of the Movement.

It is necessary to ensure that our leadership is democratic. This is only possible after analyzing what kind of human beings we want to create, what is our starting point and what references and knowledge we need. Building new views of life which are global instead of partial is perhaps the Movement's biggest challenge.

But no progress can be made without acknowledging our history, and this also means recognizing the contribution of our historical leaders, who encouraged the creation of the movement with audacity and creativity in situations more difficult than those we face today.

c) *Building knowledge.*

It is a fundamental challenge to deepen and widen the nature and content of knowledge which informs the theoretical side of the feminist debate. We can only advance by recognizing and accepting the challenge of being bearers and interpreters of a new knowledge.

We must produce knowledge linked to the changes and to the new economic and political challenges of the continent, as well as the symbolic-cultural topics which change more slowly.

We must produce knowledge out of our personal and social experiences, which means turning our real life into a testing ground for theories.

We must produce knowledge by thinking about our methodology, looking for new ways of interpreting the realities which affect the Movement.

We must incorporate new specialities and skills into the Movement, to make our work more effective in the social and political fields.

We must ensure the free exchange of knowledge, creating new ways of linking practice and theory which are not based on hierarchical structures or value judgements.

d) *Feminist centers and their financing*

Feminist centers contribute to new knowledge about women's reality, strengthening and introducing democracy into society from a feminist perspective, providing support to the broad-based Women's Movement and offering an important place for women of different social sectors and experiences to interact.

But the different dynamics of feminist centers and the Women's Movement are not always clearly understood. Feminists from the centers face a number of problems in their everyday life. Their work, normally orientated towards the Women's Movement, has in some cases produced crises of identity. A gap has grown between the external effort and the process of personal and collective self-growth. A myth has grown up about the feminist pioneer in the service of the Women's Movement, through a confusion of the dynamics of the Feminist Movement with the Women's Movement or through an attempt to absorb the logic of one Movement in the other.

We have also faced the risk of fragmenting the program and our actions, by acting locally, in a self-satisfied and small-scale way, without making the necessary links between these actions and the Movement's political program. This makes it harder to consolidate feminism in other areas and make it effective. The areas of competence and the difficulties of coordinating feminist centers working on the same theme or area has often led to overlap, to repetition, to various disconnected actions which are too much and which damage the Women's Movement as a whole.

In turn, the Feminist Movement has been reluctant to accept feminist centers as an element of its growth and development. Demands have been made on these centers to transmit the feminist program to the Women's Movement without holding it back and without self-censorship on the part of centers in a bid to make progress on more feminist issues in their daily work with women. This has sometimes obscured the fact that the different sources which contribute to the Movement oblige us to create better and more fluid links between these sources and the Women's Movement as a whole, preventing at the same time a false contradiction between fights for survival and class oppression. The quality of life of women from the working and peasant classes has as much to do with their economic situation as with their dignity as people, with violence and abortion, with democracy and participation.

The problems caused by financing are another of the most visible problems of the movement. Getting funding requires effort and quality from centers, as it strengthens action and broadens their feminist character. But it can also create differences, by favoring some centers over others. These differences are dangerous and can damage the Movement. Only by expressing such differences, sharing contacts, seeking common actions which are much better at strengthening centers and institutions can we start to approach this problem seriously.

Funding gives us a better base and more strength to avoid dependence on financing institutions; to negotiate our own conditions and put forward our proposals; to establish an equal footing between centers from the South and agencies from the North, especially with the women from these agencies; to achieve a better and more democratic content in international cooperation. It is even more important since the percentage of financing destined to feminist groups in Latin America and the Caribbean in some cases does not reach three per cent of the total cooperation budget in the region.

III. STATEMENT

In the 1980's the growth of the feminist struggle and the expansion of its program filtered through into society and its political institutions. Now the demands of women have been taken up by other social movements, by governments and political parties. We must accept this as an achievement and a challenge.

The link between the body of knowledge of feminism and the concrete demands which arise out of women's experiences in society and its various parts is a permanent area for action and political creation which enriches the Movement. Not to open up this area for interaction reduces us to mouthing demands, weakens our fight and makes it harder for us to communicate with social groups, political parties and even the State.

The Movement's political action and its interaction with society require concrete and joint development in each country.

The restructuring of the State, the worsening effects of crisis, the deepening of democracy are some of the challenges faced by feminism in the 90s as much in its debate and confrontation with the patriarchal system as in the creation of revolutionary alternatives for women and society.

In the rich and varied kinds of communication the Movement has attempted in the last decade with other members of society, party organizations and State institutions, different positions have emerged as to how to begin dialogue and confrontation. There is more common ground in our interaction with some social movements and specific groups

such as ecologists, pacifists, homosexuals and ethnic groups. There are greater differences in deciding how to communicate with political parties and especially with the State. There are ways of communicating varying from negotiation to whatever kind of dialogue, using mediation and negotiation to win advances, right up to ways of communicating which end up absorbed in approaches which are not ours.

At the root of this debate lie different national realities and different ways of influencing or pressuring the State. This is a key area of patriarchal legitimacy, but we must also remember that the State is not always homogeneous or monolithic and can offer some areas which are more open than others to women's pressure and demands. It may be easier for women to get close to the State through local government or the legislature than other ways such as the legal system.

In any case it is necessary to formulate some criteria for debate and action such as:

- a. Explain differences in actual debate, taking responsibility for decisions.
- b. Analyze and evaluate the openings we find, the experiences which have emerged, their limits and whether they have contributed or not to finding solutions to some flagrant aspects of our subordination.
- c. Understand this relationship as changing and dynamic, as much due to the actual political scene in each country as to the Movement's capacity for development, which implies constant review of our forces and using this to decide the limits of our relationship with the State, trying at the same time to establish clear democratic rules.
- d. Give an ideological and political content to our proposals, seeking to avoid the demagoguery of contemporary politicians.
- e. Avoid the risks of a defensive self-sufficiency which limits the audacity and creativity of our politics.
- f. Recognize that in exercising feminist politics, our options and creations interact with various interpretations of reality. This means we are not only set apart by our behavior but also by the way we see a revolutionary utopia for all society.
- g. Accept that at the moment of establishing areas of communication with governments, political parties and social movements, limits, alliances and negotiations must be established in line with the Movement's interests.

* *This document was the result of a rich discussion between over 100 women who worked for three days developing these ideas. The meeting was coordinated by Gina Vargas and Estela Suarez. Carmen Gangotena, Elene Tapia, Cristina Martin A., Ximena Bedregal and Lilian Celiberti were in charge of reports. Editing was done by Gina Vargas, Estela Suarez, Lilian Celiberti, Ximena Bedregal, Cristina Martin A. and Neuma Aguiar.*