

# THE AUTONOMY WITHIN

All over the world where revolutions have been waged or are ongoing, women have dug deep into the trenches and fought side by side with men in winning their people's basic freedoms. But the women's enormous sacrifices and contributions, as many of the stories in this issue will show, have, for the most part, been invisible. Such is the life story of women.

But women are fed up with this story's plot, so much so that they have fought, not only for national liberation, but also for their own, not from imperialist or colonizing powers but from the traditionally male-dominated organizations that have been leading revolutions. And women have succeeded. They have defined their own spaces and places from where they struggle for causes they choose to own.

Today, that space is filled by "autonomous" feminists who don the label to mark their difference from "traditional" revolutionary groups. In this space has flowered a wide variety of crisis and healing centers, documentation and women's resource groups, networks, advocacy organizations—a whole plethora. Question is, in their effort to distance themselves from patriarchal revolutionary movements, have the women also distanced themselves from the grassroots?

In Latin America, the labels are used in a different way. Those who call themselves "autonomous" are the women who refuse to identify with large non-government organizations that they feel have "institutionalized" the Latin American feminist movement throughout the 1990s and have created "gender technocrats," feminist elites who, because of their organization's dependence on external funding, tend to compromise with the status quo and lose much of feminism's original rebelliousness and subversiveness.

In response, the women who are called institutionalized say that negotiating with governments and international institutions is a legitimate feminist strategy. They argue that they have helped bring their country and its people to a better place. The system is not yet perfect and that is precisely why women need to continue working at it.

In other parts of the world, in Asia for example, feminists have moved on from revolution to reconstruction. In Taiwan and in South Korea, many women are now in government and they continue to be in touch with the grassroots, constantly taking up and projecting the issues of the masses. But, in these places, the question is what mechanisms can be established so that powerful women continue to be invigorated by the spirit of the grassroots? How can the grassroots make sure that the women in power, who claim to be the poor women's representatives, remain accountable to the masses?

Of course, the dangers are great in this polarization. Instead of working alongside each other, complementing each other's spheres of work and forging ahead in our own ways, women can be divided into rigid groups that refuse to talk, listen to or have anything at all to do with each other. There was a time when this was the situation among feminists in the Philippines who, in faithfulness to political factions, did not seem to mind alienating each other. Fortunately, the walls are now crumbling and are beginning to break down.

Against this backdrop, the real goal for feminists is perhaps not autonomy from either the dominant system or from traditional revolutionary movements but autonomy within our own. This is easy to say. Often, individual politics makes respect for each other's work a lot harder to do.

## The Information Revolution

Women are also in the forefront of the information revolution. They are involved in the more creative design and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). But, at the same time, they are also the most adversely affected by technological advance. For one, ICTs cause unemployment, especially for older women who are threatened with technological redundancies, especially in manufacturing.

Swasti Mitter, Deputy Director of the United Nations University Institute for New Technologies, says that, given these contradictory trends, it is futile to formulate a generalized strategy for giving women access to education and training. The opportunities that have made it possible for women to contribute to technology and the barriers that have prevented them from gaining access depend on the historical specificity of their situation and their class backgrounds. Women's roles in the formulation and construction of information and communication technology is best understood not in terms of their essential differences from men, but in terms of the material conditions that include them in the market and institutions, or preclude them from these. Women's "technological innovations become commercially successful if and when the creator of the innovation could make use of political, economic and legal networks. Thus the dominant group in a society determines the shape and direction of a society's techno-economic order—and the image of an inventor has almost always been male."

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*Erratum: Last issue's editorial should have credited Sr. Mary John Mananzan for the definition of women's spirituality. We regret the omission.*