

Feminist Agendas
—
and Democracy
—
in Latin America

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International Feminisms ¼

THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM

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The “content of transnational action by social movements transcends the content and contexts in which national dynamics take place, although they are closely linked to them, influencing each other, empowering or disconnecting each other, exchanging strategies, reinventing others, broadening or narrowing the spaces of action.”

JAMES GOODMAN, “Transnational Integration and ‘Cosmopolitan Nationalism’”

Since the beginning of feminism’s second wave, Latin American feminists have developed rich regional and international patterns of interaction, the content, successes, and contradictions of which reflect the increasing complexity of feminist goals and practices and the tensions or “knots” that have accompanied them since the beginning. The different approaches to development in the region that have succeeded one another over time have also produced changes—economic, political, and subjective—influencing feminist strategies. The most dramatic and visible of these is the shift of the development paradigm from industrial capitalism to a global information capitalism, which has had profound economic, social, and cultural effects.

Latin American feminisms have taken multiple forms, through numberless organizations, collectives, action networks, themes, and identities. These networks and collectives have given rise to a rich internationalist dynamic, generating new forms of thought and expression. On the regional level, the

most important are the feminist *Encuentros*, held first every two and then every three years from 1981 to 2005, the latest in Brazil. The dynamics of the *Encuentros* reflect feminist advances, shared strategies, conflicts of perspective and meaning, and different discourses that have produced multiple and intense linkages between the national and the international.¹ However, feminist awareness of the potential of this international space and the capacity to reflect on it was slow to develop through the decade of the 1990s.

During the 1980s, when Latin American countries were under dictatorial or authoritarian governments and then moved toward democratic governments that proved to be far from fully democratic, feminist political strategies did not connect very well with the institutions of governance, either on the national or on the global level. Instead, feminisms were oriented more toward politicizing the conditions of women in the private sphere (Tamayo 1998), recreating collective practices, and making the invisible visible. Latin American feminists devised new categories of analysis and even new language to name things that had thus far gone unnamed—sexuality, domestic violence, sexual assault, rape in marriage, and the feminization of poverty, among others—and put them at the center of democratic debates. The symbolic dimension of change, a kind of cultural ferment, formed part of feminist action, creating new dates to celebrate and recovering leaders, histories, and symbols. These transcended national boundaries and gave regional feminisms a broader, Latino-Caribbean significance.

Feminist dynamics on the regional and international levels changed dramatically between the 1980s and the 1990s. The return to democratic government created new and complex political contexts, with varying effects on the development of feminisms and feminist strategies. It became impossible to speak of feminism in the singular, not only because of the movement's expansion across the region but also because of the differences in strategies, in positions, and in the ways in which feminists confronted the new uncertainties that began to emerge within what had previously been considered classically feminist positions. The successive United Nations (UN) world conferences of the 1990s—on the environment (1992), human rights (1993), population (1994), and women (1995)—opened new arenas for action and debate at the global level and helped shape the new feminist perspectives and strategies that were taking form in the region. The democratic context also brought a new risk: that the relations between feminists and national gov-

ernments, as well as between feminists and international institutions, might become too intimate (Waterman 2005).

During the first years of the 1990s, as networks became more specialized and institutional strategies took precedence, there was a tendency toward fragmentation, along with the emergence of the “me culture” promoted by the competitive and consumerist values of neoliberalism that had begun to install themselves in the social imagination. The UN conferences, especially the one on women in Beijing, opened a new space for feminist expression. A fresh and rich international praxis began to emerge. Latin American feminisms were confronted not only with the need to create a regional feminist space but also with the construction of, and contestation within, a global arena.

In the 1980s contacts among Latin American and Caribbean feminists had largely been directed toward constructing a regionwide movement that would connect civil-society groups across national borders around thematic and identity networks. In the 1990s regional and global relations drew on two streams: one based on civil societies (primarily represented by the *Encuentros* and the expansion of feminist networks) and one based on the interactions of feminists working in official state capacities. In Beijing both groups were able to cooperate while also confronting each other, making similar demands yet following their own distinct dynamics. The feminists who came to Beijing arrived with experiences gained in key civil-society organizations and secure in the gains achieved at previous UN conferences, especially the human rights conference in Vienna and the population conference in Cairo, where expert organized networks had helped shape the conference agendas and platforms.

Beijing brought together expert networks as well as identity groups and NGO feminists who came with little experience in lobbying governments and even less in lobbying transnational institutions. Beijing provided an enormous opportunity for learning, but it also revealed the new tensions arising from NGO-ization as feminist organizations became increasingly institutionalized.

The consequences of the paradigmatic shift to neoliberalism, which had become clear by the new millennium, altered the possibilities for feminists as much as they did for other groups facing the challenges of neoliberal hegemony, turning feminist attention toward issues of class, diversity, and

sexuality. The increasing power of conservative and fundamentalist groups provided a new challenge, as these sectors deepened patterns of exclusion and directly challenged women's rights and sexual diversity. The UN, which from the start of the Women's Decade (1975) to Beijing (1995) had provided ample space for debate and negotiation to global feminisms and broadened the meaning of women's rights, is no longer the organization it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Its autonomy is now severely weakened, overtaken by the scandalous unilateralism of the United States and the domination of global politics by the powerful economies. It has lost credibility. At the same time, strong new movements of global solidarity are emerging to seek an alternative globalization to the one promoted by neoliberalism. Many feminist groups are playing active roles in this effort.

Feminist Dynamics for a New Millennium ↵

Peter Waterman writes that, in the "series of levels and spaces" of the international world today, "women's movements of Latin America have a permanent and challenging presence." Their commitment and the seriousness of their reflection on globalization "have lessons for other radical democratic movements, theories and ideologies" (Waterman 2005).

As Millie Thayer observes, in the past, inequalities among women in different classes and cultures "seemed like unchanging facts to be mediated through the political system and the economy." Today, however, "the increasing density of transnational connections has transformed the grounding of social movements." This is converting the "apparently hard and fast 'facts' of inequality" into "sets of direct experiences with relations of power among allies, male and female, who are part of a larger pattern of global inequalities and geographic disturbances" (2001:106).

In the new millennium, diverse feminist streams are experiencing fundamental modifications in their ways of thinking and acting and are becoming more complex and nuanced in the struggles they take on. There are new interpretive frames for action (Jelin 2003) that have affected both the content of feminist agendas and the spaces from which feminists choose to act. This has broadened their global transformational horizons.

This new political cultural climate is more flexible and inclusive. The historical conjuncture that brought the hegemony of global neoliberalism has

also produced the disintegration of old paradigms (Waterman 2006). There is an urgent need to create a new reality by envisioning radical new approaches to address global change. This can be seen in new ways of thinking about the state and capital on both national and global levels—ways of thinking that oppose the messianic, universal narratives of past movements. Conditions are ripe for the emergence of new forms of political culture or, better yet, for countercultural proposals that challenge the neoliberal logic of power now extant at the global level and strongly influencing the local.

One fundamental aspect of this new political culture is its assumption that the transformation of the world depends on a transformation of vision (Beck 2004). For me, this new way of looking at the world implies changing one's imaginative focus from the nation-state to a more cosmopolitan view. This does not limit but relocates the global-local opposition, avoiding the loss of social experience characteristic of abstract models (De Sousa Santos 2006). In contemporary international society the levels of local, national, and global sociability are interconnected, and privileging one level over another constitutes a political, not an empirical, decision. For his part, Ulrich Beck assumes that these levels are complementary, which allows us to dissolve the fiction that any one of them represents "reality." Instead, the cosmopolitan vision comes closest to reality because it opens up possibilities that a national perspective, taken alone, excludes.

This cosmopolitan vision offers the key to understanding the new ways in which social movements are acting and interacting in global-local space, with a range of struggles and emancipatory concerns. Critics have claimed that these movements have produced fragmentation and localized conflicts; they have been accompanied by what Norbert Lechner has called the "privatization" of social conduct, which is seen in the resistance of people to involvement in collective action (2002). It is also true that new forms of interaction are occurring in what Manuel Castells calls the "networked society" (1999). These are expressed not by unified actors in a well-defined social or even multicultural context, but rather as dimensions of a broad "field" of social interaction, one that is diverse and constantly expanding and transforming itself (Jelin 2003), producing new frameworks of meaning. In this field, the radical break that many have posited between "old" and "new" social movements no longer emerges very clearly. There are other dynamics that have just begun to be felt: campaigns for global justice arising from new

and different sources, and efforts to free ourselves from obsolete paradigms without yet knowing what will replace them.

These struggles do not erase the differences among groups; on the contrary, what emerges is a multiplicity of meanings as the social space of experience expands both locally and globally. And all these struggles, except for those that arise from an essentialist viewpoint, shape only a part of one's identity. In the case of feminism, the classical campaigns calling for a different view of sexuality and for changing the relations of power between men and women are merged with other struggles in a global process of transformation that opposes neoliberalism, militarization, and fundamentalisms of various kinds.

In relation to the question of the spaces from and in which feminisms now act, one can observe two significant and promising changes. The first is the possibility of recovering a politics not located solely in "the state" but also in society and in daily life. The second is the prospect of transcending one's own location to connect and debate ideas with other groups oriented toward change, which broadens the emancipatory horizon and has the potential to create a counterpower to confront (and offer alternatives to) the hegemonic power and discourses we face.

As for the content of feminist agendas, feminists have begun to widen their political categories, such as democracy, and to make them more complex. The search for a concept of democracy that is plural and radical remains central to their thinking and attempts to recover the diversity of experiences and aspirations that the neoliberal model, which emphasizes elections and minimizes the redistributive responsibilities of the state, denies. It nurtures democratic, secular, untutored visions that are transcultural rather than Western and works on different scales and dimensions, incorporating subjectivity into the transformation of social relations and generating multiple sites from which emancipatory democratic agendas can emerge. In this process, struggles *against* material and symbolic exclusions and *for* redistributive justice and recognition create a new politics of the body. Dialogue among diversities constitute one of the ways in which feminist and women's movements are seeking to have an impact.

This perspective has also expanded the human rights paradigm, incorporating new rights to respond to new risks, subjectivities, and citizen demands. Countercultural strategies put the recovery and broadening of

economic rights (those most devalued by neoliberalism) and sexual and reproductive rights (those usually resisted by official governing bodies) at the center of feminist praxis. At the same time, various feminisms seek to impact the many dimensions of global transformation, resisting the neoliberal model, with its exaggerated individualism and consumerism, and opposing the growing militarism increasingly attributable to actions of the U.S. government. There is a sustained battle against fundamentalisms.

One critical effort means to show how discriminations by race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation are linked as constitutive elements of a nucleus of domination. To achieve this, feminists seek to understand and draw attention to the interpretive frameworks used by other social movements, but also to engage them in dialogue to raise issues insufficiently incorporated into their transformational agendas. Women's "impertinent forms of knowledge" (Mafia 2000) can undermine traditional discourses and must be present in the efforts to bring about change.

Many feminisms interacting internationally share the goal of fighting fundamentalisms. In their multiple expressions—whether in the name of God, the market, or tradition—fundamentalisms defend a set of immutable ideas about the world that are held up as norms for society, often with horrendous consequences for the bodies and lives of women. In the struggle against fundamentalisms, the body serves as one of those "impertinent forms of knowledge" that can broaden the terms of transformation. The body has become an "endowed space of citizenship" (Ávila 2001). The rights of the body mark the disputed element in the struggle for sexual and reproductive rights; in the battle against HIV/AIDS (which is also a battle against patents and transnational pharmaceutical companies); in the fight against militarism, which makes women's bodies war booty on all sides; and in the resistance to racism, the real and symbolic discrimination based on skin color that has perverse consequences for women's sexual bodies. It is the battle against injustice and hunger, which permanently limit the bodily capabilities of new generations.

The body thus conceived recovers the connections between the public and the private; it confronts capital and the state, as well as national and international institutions. The body is a concept with democratic potential,² challenging commonly held beliefs and supporting those who wish to reclaim personal politics as integral to global emancipatory strategies. Examining

the impact of global forces on bodies provides a central fulcrum of analysis, although it has not yet produced a shared transformatory meaning for all groups.

The World Social Forum: Contested Space in the Construction of Counterpower

Cándido Grzybowski has argued that feminism has a critical role to play in the World Social Forum. "Another world is possible" is the motto of the World Social Forum," he writes, but "seen from a feminist perspective, the task is much larger than it appears." The wsf is "making the dominant ways of thinking uncomfortable," but also, he asks, "Are we also making ourselves uncomfortable with our machismo, racism and other forms of intolerance?" The dialogue among diverse perspectives in the wsf "gives the Forum its originality and power in the construction that globalizes the various citizenships of Planet Earth," he argues. "But the road is long and full of obstacles. I hope that women will make us radical, acting as they have up to now: asking what is due and making us uncomfortable" (2002).

The World Social Forum (wsf) constitutes a new global space that slowly has turned into an arena for the construction of linkages, knowledges, and global democratic thought among social movements. As Betania Ávila writes, this is a space where feminism finds a fruitful place to weave its alliances and connect with others who are seeking change and to contribute to the democratization of politics. Movements and this global space are in "a dialectical relation, in which the movements produce a process that reconfigures the shape of each movement and of all movements together" (Ávila 2003:3).

Feminisms have contributed to this alternative process of globalization. With a long and rich history of international solidarity, which has grown cumulatively out of the feminist *Encuentros* and involvement in expert networks and identity groups, feminisms express themselves at regional and global levels. Many interactions began at the UN conferences, weaving the fabric of international connection. As Peter Waterman suggests, the support of feminist thinkers in the 1970s and 1980s undoubtedly proved critical to what is now considered a global movement for social justice. Their roles in new movements today can be traced back to earlier feminist practices on the international level (Waterman 2005).

Many feminisms come together in the wsf, which opens spaces for a variety of approaches and emphases in confronting neoliberal globalization. In the forums held to date (six world social forums, three polycentric forums, innumerable regional, thematic, and national forums), feminists have shown different kinds of presence and expression. They have been active in the organization of workshops and panels, in exchanges and alliances with other movements, in the development of global campaigns, and in the management of the wsf, including work on the International Council (ic).³ Feminist networks, from Latin America and elsewhere across the globe, although few in number, have been active since the first wsf in bringing broader perspectives to bear on the processes of transformation that the Forum is designed to bring forward and debate.

At the wsf, regional and global networks of women connect with each other and with other movements. They have supported important global campaigns in each of the Forums, including that of the Marcha Mundial de Mujeres (Women's Global March) calling for a "global women's map." A campaign named Against Fundamentalism, People Are Fundamental has been brought forward by the Latin America-based Articulación Feminista Marcosur (AFM) to broaden the concept of fundamentalism to include "all religious, economic, scientific, or cultural expressions that deny humanity its diversity and legitimize the violent mechanisms by which one group subjects another, or one person subjects another" (AFM 2002).⁴

The wsf puts fundamental aspects of women's struggles onto democratic and transnational agendas. Feminists have organized panels including "Abortion in the Democratic Agenda," "The Effects of Neoliberalism on the Lives of Women," and "Women against War; War against Women." Special mention should be made of the panel "Dialogue among Movements," organized by a group of networks from different regions in the most recent Forums,⁵ beginning in Mumbai in 2004 and repeated in Porto Alegre in 2005. This panel brought unionists, untouchables, peasants, gays, lesbians, and transsexuals into dialogue with one another to discuss their differences but also to share reflections on how to expand each group's perspective on transformation and thereby enrich their common ground for action.⁶

In 2007, at the Sixth World Social Forum in Nairobi, the feminist organizing group Feminist Dialogues (or Diálogos Feministas), comprised of twelve regional and global networks, organized several actions. A march co-

organized by the Women's March for Freedom and various African feminist groups constituted the Forum's largest and most visible demonstration. The Young Feminists, along with the African Committee and African feminist organizations, coorganized the "Central Panel of Women" (a series of large thematic panels); organized the "Panel of Dialogue and Debates" that brought feminist antiwar and antifundamentalist perspectives onto the agenda; and presented proposals to the wsF for actions to be carried out during the rest of the year.

Are there aspects of the feminist presence that make the wsF more radical, as Cándido Grzybowski has argued it should be? The wsF provides an umbrella for a multiplicity of movements whose common concern is the struggle against the catastrophic consequences of neoliberalism for the world's people. However, a univocal vision of the impact of neoliberalism, or of the dynamics of social change more broadly, can exclude important debates and contestations over meanings and cultures and obscure the subversive ways in which democratic change occurs locally and globally. A univocal vision can also deny recognition to new social actors who have the capacity to carry on the struggle in different arenas. These are the visions that various feminist and other movements (youth, gays, and lesbians) have been disputing and debating since the first wsF. There have been important gains, but also some resistance.

Resisting Diversity ❧

The statements of Fray Beto, a well-known progressive theologian committed to social movements, offer an example of a problem the wsF faces in this regard. At a panel at the Fifth World Social Forum in Porto Alegre he argued that the feminist movement rose and fell in the twentieth century and that feminists should no longer be considered international actors or as committed to the transformations called for by the struggle against neoliberalism. In response, Brazilian feminists presented an open letter, objecting that Fray Beto had arbitrarily condemned a vibrant movement, one active in the wsF, to oblivion. "To make a political subject invisible is a serious sign of an enormous arbitrariness, and goes against the democratic practices of social struggle" (Articulación de Mujeres Brasileñas 2005).

Perspectives that disregard the existence of movements like feminism

claim power for some groups at the expense of others. But Fray Beto's narrow viewpoint cannot erase the experiences of feminists, gays, lesbians, and transsexuals, or dismiss the specific struggles that, for example, the black feminists of Latin America have carried out in their own communities and cultures. To think in exclusionary terms is to employ a view of emancipation that profoundly contradicts emancipatory goals.

Against these exclusionary dynamics, feminists within the wsF and its governing International Council have carried on a tenacious struggle to increase their visibility, democratize participation in wsF's panels and activities, and reinforce gender and diversity as basic principles. Their vision is not partial but global. Openness to diversity identifies new dimensions of struggle, not for a better *world*, in the singular, but for other better *worlds* that will reflect many emancipatory perspectives.⁷ Confronting exclusionary viewpoints is important to feminists, but it is also important to other actors. This became clear, for example, when the Youth Camp of the 2005 World Social Forum brought forward issues and perspectives not anticipated by the wsF's coordinating groups. They objected that youth was given little space in the way the wsF had been organized and that the Youth Camp itself had been located on the margins of the Forum's meeting space, symbolizing the lack of interest in the ideas and concerns of youth on the part of the older generations, from whose ranks the wsF leaders were drawn.

Differences also exist in regard to the place from which one speaks. If many groups and social movements agree on the need to struggle against neoliberalism and militarism, then reflecting on how neoliberalism and militarism affect women and gender relations will yield better ways to approach this agenda.⁸ Women are affected by global economic change and suffer in wars by being displaced from their homes and families. They are often victims of rape and constitute many of the civilian dead. Feminists can take up the issues of globalization and militarism, but some feminist issues are not as easily taken up by other movements. The struggle to have their issues recognized therefore requires opening spaces for further discussion and communication. The struggle against fundamentalisms, which finds the relations among sexuality, production, and reproduction relevant at both the symbolic and the material levels, offers a key example. These movements may form part of the opposition to neoliberalism, but they are also examples of social relations of exploitation and domination on other grounds (Ávila 2003). The

struggle against fundamentalisms recognizes a diversity of connections, life experiences, and subjectivities, and feminists have important perspectives to offer.

But these perspectives have not been fully recognized as important dimensions of the transformative proposals put forward by both men and women in the wsf. A statement to the press by the afm on January 31, 2005, addressed this issue. Speaking from the "Women's Ship" (Barco de las Mujeres), afm declared:

The fight for sexual freedom and abortion is one of the most advanced forms of opposition to fundamentalisms within the framework of the wsf. . . . Until now it has not succeeded in making the Forum equal; the focus on the "important" activities of the "important" men shows how necessary it is to make the Forum more democratic. . . . The afm believes that the wsf should be a place of lived radical democracy, with equality among diverse people.⁹

At the 2007 wsf in Nairobi, which boasted an unusually large presence of church groups from Africa and around the world (including a United States-based pro-life organization), a dramatic confrontation occurred. Several of the church groups had organized an antiabortion march. In addition, during the closing ceremony, a verbal attack occurred against a speaker who was a lesbian activist. This produced diverse expressions of resistance from both men and women on the International Council (ic), some noting that the Charter of Principles affirmed the wsf as a nonconfessional space. After the wsf, in response to the situation, a group of networks and institutions sent a statement to ic, which read in part:

By this document we affirm that the struggles of our sisters (nuestr@s herman@s) for sexual and reproductive rights throughout the world are also our struggles. And therefore, calling on the principle of diversity that we believe is fundamental to the goal of constructing other possible worlds that are more solidary and just . . . [and] given that the struggles to create these other worlds can only be successful if they recognize the diversity of identities and political positions, we affirm that the wsf is open to all who recognize this diversity. Organizations and individuals who promote the marginalization, exclusion, or discrimination of others cannot be part of this process. . . . We call upon the International Council, and on the

various organizing committees, to promote and support the integration of the struggles for sexual and reproductive rights in each Social Forum that takes place around the world. We understand the diversity of cultural and political contexts, but the right to fight for the autonomy and liberty of nuestr@s herman@s is not negotiable. (En Diversidad, Otro Mundo Es Posible 2007)¹⁰

Diversity and Democracy ¶

Providing space for debate is one of the most precious founding principles of the wsf. The tensions and contradictions and the different levels of their expression are fundamental to the recovery of the range of sensibilities and challenges to new stages of globalization. Inequalities perceived and named become the basis for more daring proposals that can broaden and connect particular viewpoints.

Such debates have expanded our understanding of democracy. Boaventura de Sousa Santos speaks of "demo-diversity" as a useful antidote to rigid and univocal conceptions of democracy. Demo-diversity is "the peaceful or conflictive existence, in a given social field, of different models and practices of democracy" (De Sousa Santos 2006). To have an impact on this new conception of democracy, it is necessary to make one's own position clear. Multiple feminist strategies arise from difference as we support and commit ourselves to the struggles that have given rise to other social movements as part of the process that drives the wsf. Feminist political visions of democracy and change must be incorporated into this debate, creating a space for dialogue that is sensitive to differences and seeks points of convergence. This democratic vision incorporates struggles for recognition. For recognition to have space, Marta Rosenberg maintains, it is necessary to politicize differences, celebrating equality as the vehicle of justice while protecting expressions of difference as acts of freedom (Rosenberg 2002).

For this conception of feminism, democracy in diversity implies the recognition that multiple forms of struggle for justice and freedom are valid, and that their expression broadens the democratic base. Once we accept this idea, the subjectivities and recognitions vital to diversity can be transformed. Differences perceived and named, rather than ignored or repressed, become the raw material for audacious proposals. The acceptance of diversity through recognition can subvert the fragmentation neoliberalism produces, even

while maintaining a coherent alternative to the neoliberal view of the world and its future.

Feminist Dialogues from Difference ❧

A group of feminist caucuses (*articulaciones*), and organizations from different regions of the world have taken on the task of organizing a space for recognition and dialogue among feminists in the wsf. A meeting under the trees, organized by AFM during the 2003 wsf, led to the Feminist Dialogues initiated in 2004 in Mumbai and continued in Porto Alegre and Nairobi. Women from all over the world meet for three days prior to the forum: we were 180 in Mumbai, 260 in Porto Alegre, and 180 in Nairobi. Although we all had regional or transnational feminist connections, few of us had engaged in such discussions before at the global level. One of the constants of the Feminist Dialogues is finding feminist ways to approach the basic goals of the wsf—confronting neoliberalism and militarism—while also emphasizing the importance of opposing all fundamentalisms. Making the body an analytical focus has the potential of integrating disparate views and inspiring a radical democratic vision.

This idea is expressed in the following “Conceptual Note” from the 2005 meeting:

Conscious as feminists that our bodies are full of cultural and social significance, we also experience our bodies as key sites of political and moral struggles. Through the bodies of women, the community, the state, the family, fundamentalist forces (state and non-state), religion, and markets define themselves. These forces and institutions, using a plethora of patriotic controls, transform the bodies of women into expressions of relations of power. The bodies of women, therefore, are at the center of authoritarian or democratic projects.

In 2007, the Third Feminist Dialogue issued the following “Note on Political Perspectives for a Radical Democracy”:

The feminist movements of the new millennium are committed to the enrichment of the radical political-democratic project, in which diversity must be recognized, internalized, and negotiated in ways that create subjects, rather than be considered something merely to be tolerated. We look

for spaces where women can express and enrich themselves by a process of learning and experimenting with change, giving rise to the mutual recognition of and relations among other local, national, regional, and global democratic struggles. This in turn will enrich the emerging democratic cultures, which will express themselves in an explosion of new themes, identities, and social actors. . . . A different world will not be possible without a different conception of democracy. And a different democracy is possible only through a process of personal and subjective revolution, involving both men and women, which actively recognizes diversity and takes the intersectionalities of these different struggles as a collective end. (Diálogos Feministas 2007)

Feminists who participate in the wsf, from their multiple differences and without any prior relationship among them, share a referential horizon expressed in their choice of the wsf as a place of participation and action. With different emphases, they share a commitment to struggles for redistribution and for recognition and to interacting in pluralist spaces with other social actors, male and female. They want to “strengthen feminist political organization beyond borders,” in the words of the Global Report of the Second Feminist Dialogue in 2005 (Diálogos Feministas 2005). In the wsf, feminists are in dialogue and debate to transcend their own limits, democratizing their interactions and avoiding their own “fundamentalist” or single-minded versions of what is possible.

Those who participate in the Feminist Dialogues are active in many networks and organizations in addition to the wsf. Yet the wsf offers a distinct space for ongoing learning and interchange that can create new visions of democracy and strengthen global democratic forces. Women’s interactions in feminist spaces before coming together in the wsf facilitated our discussions and aided our vision, but it has also made our dynamics more complex. The reflections that nurture the Feminist Dialogues form part of a critical repositioning within feminism.

Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah (2007:2) have argued that for those who participate, “feminism goes further than the popular liberal understanding of equality between men and women.” In the Feminist Dialogues, feminism sees oppression and women’s agency both within a patriarchal structure and “within neoliberal economic, social and political systems.” It is a feminism “against fundamentalisms, global capitalism, and imperialism,” which “allies

itself with the marginalized and indigenous," "develops its practices every day of our lives," and "seeks to work collectively and democratically." The point is not to "privilege" either the particular or the universal, "but to universalize our visions and goals as women's movements."

We recognize that the past few decades have rendered the old paradigms obsolete and that it is necessary to recreate or construct new concepts and connections, working with others to construct an alternative globalization from a radical democratic standpoint. Gender identities must be seen in constant interaction and articulation with other identities. Forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and geographical location are all expressions of global systems of domination.

We must be clear: there are many struggles. Rather than make differences invisible, we must use them to provoke a multiplicity of responses that can expand the space of social experience at the local and global levels. The old distinction between local and global has lost much of its meaning, and this in turn requires a change of perspective, as Beck argues, from the national to the cosmopolitan. As he observes, conflicts over gender, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference have their origins in the nation, but they have long escaped that frame and now overlap and interconnect globally (Beck 2004).

For Latin American feminists who participate in the wsf, the Feminist Dialogues have added a new dimension to their international experience, which has moved from the regional level of the Latin American and Caribbean feminist *Encuentros* to the global spaces of the UN world conferences on women to this new arena of interaction with feminists and with other social movements at the global level. Their strategies are shifting from advocacy to the creation of counterpower and counternarratives against neoliberal ideology. Both strategies were present at Beijing, but advocacy, not opposition, characterized the second half of the 1990s.

In contrast to the regional *Encuentros*, however, where all feminists who wanted and were able to participated, these new global spaces do not manifest as strong a feminist presence as other forums, nor as strong a one as possible. We are a small group, which is due as much to the low levels of activist interest in global issues as to the cost of international travel. The advances, new understandings, and new questions gained from our wsf experiences still lack channels of expression and analysis at the national-global level. It is important for us to infuse our actions with insights from these multilevel discourses. Seen from any particular point on the planet, the global is always local.

In the past four years, the Feminist Dialogues have changed. From the beginning it proved difficult to find a way to proceed, and we learned as we went, helped by the criticisms of the feminist participants and the self-criticism of the organizing team. Seeing that the approaches used in previous meetings had failed to provide an environment in which we could express our similarities and differences and work toward future perspectives,¹¹ we proposed that the 2007 wsf in Nairobi give more attention to the discussion of feminist political agendas in relation to the goals of the wsf, and to the construction, from many perspectives, of global feminist agendas. The call to participate in the Feminist Dialogues was directed to "feminists with a strong interest in the political project of constructing a movement . . . recognizing, of course, that the notion of 'a movement' is dynamic and filled with diversity and contradictions" ("Methodological Note," *Diálogos Feministas* 2007).

In addition to discussions of democracy, citizenship, and neoliberal, fundamentalist and militarized states, the meeting emphasized the goal of creating global feminist strategies, hoping to generate critical perspectives and diverse reflections from the different feminisms represented by the participants ("Conceptual Note on Feminist Strategies," *Diálogos Feministas* 2007). Furthermore, for the first time the organizing team decided to take positions in the wsf, supporting some of the initiatives already discussed, including the Women's March for Freedom, the Feminist Youth Tent, and the opportunity to collect and propose ideas for the list of actions the wsf as a whole would agree to carry out during the rest of the year. One of these initiatives was to participate in a so-called Global Day of Action in the third week of January 2008, organizing actions, mobilizations, panel discussions, and other events around the three common issues of militarism, neoliberalism, and fundamentalism.

Significant changes also occurred in the wsf itself, which moved toward greater democratization and the more effective inclusion of different perspectives within the framework of the Charter of Principles, making strategic spaces like that of the Feminist Dialogues and others more relevant. Feminists reacted to the active presence of participants linked to conservative churches by entering into dialogues on many issues; they challenged conservative agendas using their feminist focus on the body to argue their case. Various panels were organized by the AFM to focus on "the body in the democratic agenda." Participants with religious beliefs were invited, and they accepted—a positive expression of the type of dynamic the wsf facilitates.

But the new presence of people who came to the forum primarily as representatives of church organizations brought a narrow view of human rights to the WSF, exhibiting a moralism positioned against humanistic and emancipatory thought and a commitment to denying the rights, liberty, and autonomy of women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals. This affected not only women and homosexuals but also diluted the spirit of democratic pluralism that had marked the WSF. For the first time, there was a pro-life exhibit and an antiabortion march. And for the first time, a speaker suffered verbal attacks in the closing ceremony because she was a lesbian and opposed by a significant number of Forum participants. The visible presence of African groups supporting sexual diversity in Nairobi constituted a welcome counterbalance, but it is clear that sexual and reproductive rights have become one of the disputed divides at the global-local level represented by the WSF.

Conclusions ¶

The Feminist Dialogues have proven an intense learning experience for the group that first promoted them, and that group has grown larger.¹² Political and practical lessons have been learned: the discovery of other perspectives and knowledges, of new ways to interrogate reality, and of the awareness that the same strategies can produce different effects in different situations. A telling example, which emerged from discussions in Mumbai, is the contrasting ways in which the right to abortion is seen in different contexts. Latin American feminists tend to see the right to have an abortion as the strongest expression of the struggle to broaden the margins of choice women have in their lives; it constitutes an important political goal as abortion remains illegal in most of the region, although estimates suggest that several million illegal abortions are performed, endangering the health of women, particularly of poor women. In India abortion has been decriminalized, but Indian feminists must confront the fact that this opening of greater space for choice has been used against women, because families overwhelmingly choose to abort female embryos. Reproductive rights are recognized by law in India, but they have given power to the state—which uses them to impose far-reaching policies of birth control—and not to women.

Other cultures, other resources, and other “lacks” mean different problems; and with regard to problems that women have in common, there are

often different solutions with different risks. It is enriching to know that the common goals of justice and liberty cannot necessarily be pursued using the same strategies, and that similar strategies often produce quite different results. This knowledge extends the limits of what we can imagine as possible, but it also complicates feminist proposals at the global level. Finally, it raises the fundamental question of whether there can ever be universal solutions—or universal ways of thinking about them.

Notes ¶

- 1 The regional-global connections and interrelations have become more complex to the degree that the number of feminisms in the region also multiplied. Initially feminists were relatively homogeneous, with similar perceptions of the importance of autonomy. As time passed there were more differences among feminists, less in their strategies and more in the ways in which they incorporated diversity. These reflected the different periods when groups became active, and also subregional differences, including those between South American feminisms, which were more developed and hegemonic, and the Central American movements that emerged from the region's civil wars. Feminists are increasingly differentiated by their opportunities and access to political powers; by their urban or rural bases; and by the degree to which they recognize diversity (e.g., lesbian feminists began to hold their own *encuentros*, often preceding the regional ones). The tensions seen at the end of the 1980s between “institutionalized” (NGO) and “voluntary” feminists foreshadowed more serious conflicts in the 1990s.
- 2 The campaign for an inter-American convention of sexual and reproductive rights forms part of this strategy, reflecting new forms of interaction and dispute with international organizations, as the initiative does not come from the UN but from organized feminist groups.
- 3 The IC boasts the active presence of feminist networks that support democratization and the permanent broadening of the World Social Forum. Among these feminist groups are the Articulación Feminista Marcosur, la Marcha Mundial de Mujeres, Red Mujeres Transformando la Economía, Dawn Network, Red de Educación Popular entre Mujeres (REPEM), Red Ashkara, and Red LGBT Sur-Sur, among others.
- 4 Initiated in the 2002 WSF by the AFM, the campaign against fundamentalisms is now a global one.
- 5 The organizations and networks that initiated this panel are: Ashkara, from India; Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) and AFM from Latin America; Feminist Network (FEMNET) from Africa; DAWN, red global (global network), and inform from Sri Lanka.

- 6 This experience is in keeping with the new approach of the WSF, which seeks to put different networks in dialogue and to cement relations among groups interested in the exchange of strategies and proposals.
- 7 This dispute has been evident since the first WSF, where women outnumbered men and yet few more than ten women participated in the panels. In the second WSF some feminists succeeded in organizing panels, but the responsibility for organizing the themes or "axes" (groupings of six or seven large panels) remained in male hands. At the third WSF two of the five axes were organized by feminist networks: the AFM and the Marcha Mundial de Mujeres.
- 8 In the case of militarism, besides confronting a warlike culture that privileges war, women point out what the logic of war implies for women's bodies. Neoliberalism not only increases part-time and outsourced domestic piecework, but also makes the private sphere responsible for social-welfare obligations that states ought to provide, which in turn increases the burden of women's work and their responsibilities as caretakers.
- 9 The ship was organized by the Campaign against Fundamentalisms, providing a space for diverse activities, workshops, discussion groups, and presentations about topics that ranged from water as a scarce resource to discussions with and about transvestites and transsexuals.
- 10 This letter, initially signed by the Program of Democracy and Global Transformation of the University of San Marcos, Lima, the AFM, the Flora Tristán Center, Asociación Brasileira de Organizações No Gubernamentais (ABONG), and the Paulo Freire Institute, has received a large number of additional signatories.
- 11 The fact that the organizing team did not want to seek consensus on actions or agendas helped produce this outcome.
- 12 To the initial group, which included the AFM, INFORM, National Network of Autonomous Women's Organizations (NNAWG), DAWN, WIECEJ, Isis Manila, and FEMNET, Akina Mama wa Africa (AMWA), the Latin American Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM), the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Young People for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (REDLAC), and the Popular Education Network of Women of Latin America and the Caribbean (REPEM), Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML), and Women in Development (WIDE) later added their endorsement.

Social Accountability and Citizen Participation ¶

ARE LATIN AMERICAN GOVERNMENTS MEETING THEIR COMMITMENTS TO GENDER EQUITY?

Teresa Valdés and Alina Donoso

In the past few decades, the countries of Latin America have lived through important political, economic, social, and cultural changes, ones marked by democratization and globalization. Along with new possibilities for growth, the current development model has created new tensions, inequalities, and forms of discrimination at the national and international levels. The search for equity has been left to public action by civil society as well as by the state. Governments have also shown an increasing concern for gender equality and the advancement of women. This newly gained awareness has resulted from pressure from women's movements, international agencies, civil society, and gender units within governments. It manifests itself in political mobilizations, in the development of binding international laws (through international conventions and accords), in the emergence of nonbinding norms (developed from summits and conferences), and in the design and implementation of social policies, constitutional reforms, and laws.

Monitoring how states fulfill the international commitments they have made has become an important goal for civil-society organizations, especially where the government has made a public commitment but is not legally bound. Meeting these commitments requires political will, which may not last after the documents are signed and the government representatives return to their countries. In addition, governments are likely to face resistance