

# ***Feminism and the organised subjectivity of change<sup>1</sup>.***

Helen Dixon

## ***Starting from the self as subject***

To begin with I must clarify that I am not representing anyone other than myself, and if I slip into a “we” once in a while it’s because I have had the privilege to share spaces with other women in the feminist movement in Nicaragua, Central America and Latin America, learn from them, feel their acceptance and embrace, and then go on to contribute my own efforts as part of this impressive diverse movement.

Before writing my first notes, I consulted with several people about the subject of this presentation with a range of feminist friends from different countries, to sound out their thinking, get my own mental juices flowing and have a broader vision from which to work. Some of their responses were in the form of hard, direct questions, some left their questions more implicit, but those who responded took time out to share briefly some of their thinking about issues of “gender and development” in the present context. Translations of their short responses to my request are included at the end of this piece. But I will start by presenting myself.

I am a feminist writer, translator-interpreter, practitioner and consultant. I was born in the UK, left 37 years ago when I was 16, lived in Canada for 14 years where I became involved in Latin American struggles and feminism and ended up going to Nicaragua in the eighties to work with feminists and on participatory radio. I have just recently come to the UK with my daughter after 23 years there. Between 1988 and 1991 I worked in Nicaragua with urban feminist radio, teaching radio at the UCA for a short period, after which I worked in a participatory radio project with rural women living and working in agricultural cooperatives. In 1991 in the northern city of Matagalpa, I co-founded a women’s collective called Grupo Venancia - a feminist popular education and communications group that has a non-hierarchical organisational structure and uses participatory methodologies. The centre of our vision and aims was and is the individual and collective empowerment of women and building feminism as a movement for social justice and change. My work over the years has included feminist participatory research, education methodologies, organisational development, media and cultural work. I am also a writer and poet and have worked in freelance journalism, in the written press, radio and TV drama as well as working in photography and arts projects. I have been constantly involved in debates, thinking, campaigns and other actions including feminist performance as part of an enormously rich, intense and creative feminist movement in Nicaragua and Central America from the local up to international levels. As I said, a privilege.

I start with myself, as a feminist principle, because we often get lost when we forget to pass our knowledge and theory through ourselves. Passing what we observe, share and theorise through our own sense of self and our own experiences mean centring yourself in an “I” which among other things, helps us to avoid falling into the patriarchal habit of self-sacrifice reserved for women. We are taught always to be the carers - and to assimilate our “**being** in the service of others”<sup>2</sup>. Including ourselves in change, rather than the “development” of “others” with all the contradictions mentioned by Andrea and Tina, means challenging our own coherence and trying to establish a more balanced and holistic vision starting from our own lives.

This principle has been extremely important for me as a guide for both ethics and method – that is, working on myself and deepening my learning on the different aspects I am working on with other people. This is especially important in a globalised world that is reinventing colonisation. It helps cure some of the arrogance learned as part of being brought up in a coloniser nation. It involves trying to be sufficiently aware of the way that order is inside of us, so that we are able to transform it and no longer to place women with whom we are working into the role of “other”. It means joining with them side by side as a collective body, each of us a part of this “we”, without losing sight of *who I am* or who we are each as individuals with diverse histories, background and lived experiences and all the unequal power relations that this implies.

---

<sup>1</sup> A brief version of this paper was presented to a meeting of the Gender and Development Network and the Development Studies Association in London on Thursday November the 3rd 2011

<sup>2</sup> See Marcela Lagarde, Los cautiverios de las mujeres: Madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas , Colegio de México 1990

In this sense, I think feminism's greatest contribution to methodologies for social change and participatory education in particular, has been the inclusion of the subjective - psychology, sexuality, philosophy and culture- in methodologies that historically were more influenced by politics and sociology. Starting from the subjective self means recognising that in any attempt to develop collective empowerment, individuation processes as well as individual autonomy and personal stories are key.

In Spanish the word for power can be both a noun and a verb, and I prefer the verb *poder* – to be able. Power is not really as it is represented in English as a noun. It's not an object you can have, or give, or take, it is the ability to act, to transform yourself and the world around you. No-one can "empower" anyone else, empowerment by definition, and certainly in its origins, means to affirm and take responsibility for one's own power and autonomy. And for me, collective empowerment comes about through voluntarily joining with a chosen community of people- and not fusing with a monolithic collectivity that imposes its will and uniformity on the individual<sup>3</sup> in exchange for a dependent sense of belonging.

I also feel it is important to question the label "activist" for people working in social movements around the globe. It feels to me to be somewhat insulting. In part, this is because in Nicaragua we discussed activism as a weakness in our movement because it means when someone is constantly active and doesn't take enough time to study and theorise. But it also sounds a bit like the global "north" owns the academic knowledge and "development" expertise and the global "south" the action. Even in other contexts these traditional or institutionalised divisions between academics, NGO "experts" and "activists" invisibilise the fact that in feminist movements and most social movement globally, there is always a necessary combination of theory, expertise and practical action in which we are all collectively involved as "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals and active agents in practices for change<sup>4</sup>.

This is why I think that the methodologies for change that work best, involve organising processes for reflection-action-reflection which generate new theory from practice as well as combining this with, or critiquing, diverse written theoretical sources and practical experiences from all areas around the world. Latin American feminist movements have an astounding collective body of knowledge, creativity, philosophical thought and theory of all kinds derived from the diverse cultures and struggles in the continent.

### **Brief context**

In the present context in Latin America, and I speak especially about Central America, feminists are working against enormously difficult odds and stark conditions, that I can only briefly and imperfectly summarise here.

The poorest population of the region, as in other parts of the world, is footing the global and national bill for north's recuperation from its banking crisis, with major reductions in all social services, especially education (strategically) with the corresponding layoffs and unemployment, widening the already outrageous gap between rich and poor while introducing consumerism for the upper middle class and even more expensive luxuries for the rich. This is causing major debt on all levels in relation to the real productive capacity of people and of the country under present conditions.

The unlimited invasion of multinational interests in multiple forms, especially in energy systems, telecommunications and water<sup>5</sup>, means that people are paying a huge percentage of their monthly income to large foreign-owned international companies, who cut off basic services without a care for those affected.

Central America and the Caribbean as a region -along with Latin America as a whole- is becoming seriously deteriorated by climate change<sup>6</sup> as well as by the exploitation, contamination and destruction of the environment by multinational agricultural chemical, mining and forestry companies. There are mafias involved in deforesting the second "lung" of Latin America after the Amazon in NE Nicaragua and SE Honduras, who

---

<sup>3</sup> See Agner Heller, *Everyday Life*, 1984 and in contrast, the excellent German film *The Wave* about the real experience of a German secondary school teacher trying to teach about authoritarian political culture with a group of students.

<sup>4</sup> See Antonio Gramsci *Prison Notebooks 1929-1935*

<sup>5</sup> Including privatised companies selling water to domestic grids and as bottled water, as well as major hydroelectric projects taking over the ownership of the water in complex river systems

<sup>6</sup> Especially with the increased numbers and strength of hurricanes, rainfall, and unpredictable weather patterns producing drought, landslides and flooding at different times.

have threatened and even killed judges trying to stop them. This is all producing not-so-natural disasters and diverting large amounts of money into short term humanitarian and emergency aid, some of which falls into the hands of corrupt predators working in the state and government<sup>7</sup>.

The rural economy is increasingly in crisis with major problems of internal food security affected by the free trade agreements, GM foods and dependence on bought inputs, as well as the environmental changes mentioned above. Agricultural models increasingly focus on ensuring large scale farming for the export of cheap and diverse food for the north. This is creating problems of all kinds in the basic sustainability of local food economies, as well as deteriorating national markets as a place to exchange basic foodstuffs produced with higher production costs, when there is unfair competition from foreign-subsidised tariff free imports for sale in the cities. Even so, food prices in the capital cities are very high in relation to salaried labour, because of the chain of commercial intermediaries and also transnational supermarket franchises that cater to different levels of domestic “buying power”.

This lopsided situation for agricultural production benefits the dessert and holidaying economies of the north as well as in-country tourism (including increased sexual tourism linked to people trafficking for sexual exploitation). By creating greater internal migration from the countryside to the cities, it also guarantees sources of cheap labour especially for the “special economic zones” where women are fighting for the basic right to organise, in maquilas that feed throwaway clothing consumerism. Some of this production returns later to Central America in enormous packs of second hand clothing, the cast-offs of rich consumer economies.

Migration is increasing, families are being fragmented and forced to re-group and women are being pushed to the brink, either as undocumented migrant workers unable to see their children growing up, or as the ones who stayed behind to guarantee survival. As research has ratified, women are usually last in the pecking order for food and other resources in situations of impoverishment, and as a result women are becoming increasingly pushed in self-sacrifice and exhaustion. This situation is produced by the triple working day in which, along with domestic work and voluntary community work for basic services, women assume the economic stability of their extended families with the repeated waves of migration, crisis and emergency<sup>8</sup>. Families tend to re-group around an older adult woman relative when the men are unemployed or have migrated, often forming other families. There is an increasing informal market for subsistence, including all kinds of precarious commercial strategies, very small-scale creative production, sex work and the drugs economy. A large percentage of women prisoners in Nicaragua, for example, are incarcerated for selling drugs on a small scale, especially crack, or for trafficking from coastal and rural areas to urban centres as a way to ensure their family income.

A new wave of foreign intervention (from the US/Canada, UK/EU and Japan/China/Taiwan) is being carried out through the creation of the Free Trade Agreements<sup>9</sup>, the domination of global corporations and other interventions such as the Drug Enforcement Agency of the US (instrumental in Plan Colombia, as a rehearsal for intervention in the whole Latin American continent). These interventions go hand in hand with the expansion of religious fundamentalism – suspiciously not unlike the original forms of colonisation- from the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church, certain, mostly US-based, evangelical churches, and religious-economic organisations that have served to console, pacify or co-opt potential forces of opposition. One of these last organisations is the so- called *Hombres de Negocio* (now with the auxiliary *Mujeres de Negocio*) in Nicaragua, a US based organisation that has links key “middle cadre” of the FSLN and member of the previous and present state security forces all the way up into Daniel Ortega’s inner circle.

The state is increasingly being reduced to administering the national economy in negotiation with massive international corporations who have great influence over agendas and the evaluation of their results. These

---

<sup>7</sup> Se El Nuevo Diario Nicaragua November 1998 to 1999. In Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch, funds destined for emergency relief were traced to spending by Present Arnoldo Aleman’s closest friend Byron Jerez who was then head of the National Customs and Taxation Office (DGI in Spanish). Jerez built a massive extension and terrace onto his private beach mansion with these funds. He was prosecuted, but after a pact between Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Aleman, Jerez was freed from all charges and then went on to claim his “rightful belongings” that had been seized. This is only one of many similar stories.

<sup>8</sup> As women our willingness to shoulder the burden, often alone, or with other women and children in the family, is due a learnt gender identity that places no limits on our time or the type of work we are willing to do, as a way of proving our love. The history, theory and practice of love is central to any process of reflection about gender.

<sup>9</sup> Or the euphemistically named European “Association Agreement”

companies make pacts and deals with national power brokers behind closed doors. Many politicians are competing for the spoils, forming national investors' groups and alliances with these corporations. With this new investment business and marketing style of politics there is a marked rise in political clientelism, and heavily funded, often sophisticated uses of media for campaigns. There is a clear re-emergence of *caudillo* "strongman" figures, committed, at least privately, to neoliberal economic policies sometimes with a populist face, who concentrate power and money in their own hands and those of their families. There is an evident return to authoritarianism in some places as a product coup d'état (Honduras) in others from manipulated and skewed electoral processes, that are either enabling the re-electing of the same figures over decades, creating the potential for new dynasties, or restoring power to the political and military leaders from past dictatorships, for example in Guatemala.

There is an increase in military and paramilitary activity, along with "private security" forces and gangs connected to organised crime and the corrupt political, economic and military elites. This is undermining any attempt to ensure transparency, democracy, participation and the rule of law, seriously limiting any access to justice. These complex mafias are competing for power, conducting drug wars, people trafficking of all kinds, drumming up fanatical support and exploiting especially young men and to a lesser extent, women, who have felt excluded from the economic and education systems. The result is the deepening of war culture with highly male supremacist thinking and behaviour, sometimes with religious fundamentalist overtones. With it comes femicide, ruthless anti abortion policies, the assassination of journalists and feminist human rights defenders.

As powerful finance capitalism in the rich northern countries reels with the financial crisis resulting from the elite culture of greed, the global logic and multinational interventions needed to feed the constant expansion of profit of all kinds - the need for mineral, energy and water sources; and the consumption of luxury foods, drinks, drugs, commodified sex, fashion clothing and recreation- are pushing places like Mexico, Central America, and parts of the Caribbean and South America back into spiralling cycles of war. And this is probably not only the case for these regions.

### **Institutionalisation, mainstreaming and "development" funding**

It is not surprising that capitalist globalisation with its "trickle down" theory, produces a top down development model that foments fragmentation, dependency and privatisation, while motivating social organisations to "legalise". This tends to result in depoliticising key social movements and people with leadership abilities, and/or watering down discourses that question structural power relations of all kinds.

In the most impoverished countries, the trickle down hierarchy means the most excluded social sectors, and especially the women in them, end up competing for "development" crumbs. Women's organisations in particular, as AWID has pointed out, receive a tiny percentage of funds compared with other development "investments". In order to claim their right to redistributed resources, feminist organisations often face implicit or sometimes explicit threats from top-down funders representing themselves as the "owners" of the money - "if you're too political you won't get financed".

Because of this, the original concept of "gender", developed by feminists as a tool to criticise unequal power relations based on the sex-gender divide, is being gutted of meaning and is often included only superficially as a token requirement like slick "mayonnaise" on the surface of development project "bread". Most national NGOs that I have come across, work in vertical structures and tend, in order to get funds, to reproduce the language, visions, fads and habits of northern development models. These top-down models tend to reproduce themselves in NGO "clusters" with "beneficiaries" that actually reinforce dependency, along with paternalistic and anti-democratic models of organisation that have privatised and unelected political leadership representing "civil society". These same models can also be reproduced in social movements, when taken on without critical reflection.

Many feminist organisations and networks in Central and Latin America, in order to ensure economic resources, ended up legalising themselves as NGOs in the 80s and 90s, and had to report to governments. This became a useful mechanism for political control on national levels. On the other hand the more radical parts of the feminist agenda tended to be softened and translated into policy requirements of northern governments either through the creation of state institutions for women's rights, direct project funding of

women's and feminist NGOs or in filtered versions through more gender-friendly international NGOs who try access funds for women's rights. However, as well meaning as they may be, most international NGOs have money with strings attached, and find themselves conditioning support based on the expected results of their funders, be they governments or corporations, and these inevitably influence the agendas of the organisations and social movements "implementing" these funds. In addition, as organisations and social movements we are encouraged to focus on doing political advocacy to influence the state or local authorities as the best way to achieve our goals, which may or may not be the case. However, we often don't perceive how the state and the status quo it represents, influence and change *our* vision and strategies.

Smaller, less hierarchical feminist or community NGOs have sometimes been more successful than large hierarchical ones in capturing economic resources and distributing them in strategic projects to reinforce collective spaces, voices and actions rather than creating the top down almost neo-feudal or populist relations emerging from some large traditional NGOs. In many communities these large NGO projects sometimes create disincentives for women and their communities to create or consolidate their own autonomous organisations with their own agendas and sustainable production systems, by reproducing development based on political dependency through the creation of "chapters" or "leaders" of the NGOs in the communities. Their models are often disempowering because of being based on "need" - that is lack- rather than on the recognition of women's power and resources; and on external financing rather than the creation of solidarity value chains and economic networking based on what is already known and produced.

Obviously there are cases where the close identification and collaboration between more strategic funders of feminist organisations or movements has managed to translate successfully into processes and actions that challenge the hegemonic power structures of inequality. In Nicaragua, when our actions against the abortion ban and as a movement have faced a violent reaction or intervention from the government, those international organizations with a physical presence in the country that support us with funding, find themselves cornered by their own political interests tied to their nature and diplomatic relations as "development" institutions. The feminist ambassador for Sweden, who spoke out about the total abortion ban, previously had been forced to resign and leave the country. The international NGOs that funded several feminist organisations and spaces before government intervention, ended up "toning down" their response to clampdowns. It had the effect of making us feel and seem more isolated than we really were in facing and standing up to government violence.

In my view, one of the best potential alternatives for funding feminist action and women's rights are through women's funds that engage in another kind of relationship with their feminist contemporaries. The women's funds that are contributing to changing traditional hierarchical "development" relations are those that refuse to impose specific spending policies on other feminists, but instead respond generally with an attitude of solidarity in the framework of global feminist interests. In my personal experience, the best organisation to fund Grupo Venancia when I was there, was the Global Fund for Women, who after ensuring we were feminists with an autonomous political agenda, channelled funds to us for three years with no policy strings attached, asking us only to report back with transparency on how we spent and what we achieved with these funds. This made an enormous difference to us in consolidating our collective and strengthening our own internal processes while we worked with other women on building personal growth and articulating spaces for action, study and debate. Another important form of support is to engage in solidarity campaigns and the international denunciation of crimes against women.

As corporations rear their ugly heads and look to join in and dominate the "development" industry<sup>10</sup> through using their vast amounts of money and their business and marketing "expertise", I believe it is more important than ever to make a major shift towards strengthening feminism as a global movement and looking at completely new models for re-distributing economic resources among women, as well as improving communication and the exchange of the others forms of other wealth that we have. This wealth consists of knowledge, experience, abilities, methodologies, theories, philosophies, cosmovisions and learning of all kinds; the wealth of our knowledge about organising, participating and democratic decision-making including ideas for action, collaboration, coordination, alliance building and ways of creating articulation amongst

---

<sup>10</sup> See Yarman Jiménez's questions relating to this at the end of this paper.

ourselves and with other social movement. It also includes our wealth of strategies for defending the rights of all women everywhere and creating cultural change, with economic alternatives that are sustainable for ourselves and the environment.

This also means that if monies are to be invested in feminism and women's rights in a particular place or within a particular struggle, those who know that place or struggle best must be the ones to decide<sup>11</sup>, not those who claim to represent the "owners" of the money, most of which is from profits continuing to be made from the old money of colonialism and its globalised Frankenstein-like great grandson.

### **Embodiment and movement**

The institutionalization of feminism into "gender and development" agendas has meant that in many places on both sides of the development fences, we have gone through a certain "loss of body". High tech in many capital cities and the globalised virtual world that excludes millions seems to be leaving behind the body, and perhaps even the desire to make the effort to move.

The institutionalisation of people interested in contributing to movements for social change has meant for many, becoming immobilised in offices, frequently concentrated in the capital cities, in front of a computer communicating almost exclusively via email and the internet, increasingly isolated from grassroots organising and usually working "for others", while working the limitless hours expected of politically aware women, to write projects and tedious technical reports on much less radical agendas that hardly touch of the structural nature of unequal power relations and the symbolic and institutional forms of patriarchal violence. This disembodiment is physical and real, as well as symbolic. It is the disembodiment of both individual and collective movement, in which people have the time and energy to meet and know each other more profoundly, act together and experience collective moments or processes that contribute to shifting paradigms. It also contributes to the disembodiment of discourse by fragmenting communication and limiting our possibilities for mutual "contagion" in groups and for discovering shared theories in multiple dialogues.

Of course not all feminist NGOs have lost their balance as much as this, and one of the most important issues have been with defining more clearly the difference in roles between NGOs and feminist movement. An especially important moment in Nicaragua was the debate and decision to base member in the women's movement on individual rather than organisational representation. This means that the more horizontal feminist NGOs, while ensuring internal democracy and debating proposals for spaces in the women's movements, ensure that each woman, while sharing collective proposals can represent herself, in the space in which she is participating. The hierarchical NGO model was creating distortions in networking spaces in the movement, due to top down labour relations and internal decision-making, which meant that sometime a women would not be able to have her own opinion in debates and decisions in networks, thus only "representating" her workplace in order to report back, because she was not given a vote of confidence or even the right to make decisions when these were determined by women with "superior" positions in the NGO.

The decision to draw the line by ensuring individual participation, in my mind clarified this situation and created a more palpable "body" for the women's movement as the main "hat" we were wearing was our own, and any other forms of representation became important tasks and/or methods for sharing and building participatory and collective proposals, actions and debates with others not in the room.

One of the most marvellous shifts in the paradigm of the "office-based" movement occurred for me when I met Ana Milena Gonzales one of the leaders of the Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres from Colombia<sup>12</sup> (the Peaceful Route of Women). The central identity and action of the Rita Pacífica as Ana Milena described it to us, was to mobilise women in peaceful protest, often across immense distances in Colombia to accompany women and their communities where massacres had occurred, as well as in national mobilisations in the capital city. The Ruta Pacífica has managed to keep a clear public feminist identity while making alliances with different kinds of women's organisations. They have moved women in bus processions to small communities as a show of strength, and have combined symbolic art and protest with local rituals and traditions. Many women sharing

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.rutapacific.org.co/>

these important moments have spoken about how they have helped them to defeat the fear imposed by the merciless and dehumanised agents of war.

The fact that the women of the Ruth Pacifica and their allies are in movement together, makes them much more visible and enables them to take on the enormous symbolic and embodied power necessary to confront the undeclared war in Colombia, while taking on critical positions from women and feminists who refuse the binary logic of war.

On this topic of mainstreaming, I have been surprised to observe that here in the UK there is frequently a gap in pro-rights discourse when reference is made only to individual and institutions. This completely invisibilises in the collective imagination, the existence and strategic importance of social organisations and movements everywhere. In these times of neoliberal agendas, crises brought on by speculative capitalism and greedy bankers and brokers, along with political parties with capitalist marketing strategies and corporate discourse that look increasingly like each other and continue to be eternally patriarchal and male-dominated, the feminist movement and other allies in movements for social justice and a sustainable planet are clearly the most interesting alternatives in creating new forms of political culture and decision-making among diverse social subjects. And if we made our collective selves more visible we would probably find that there are more than us than we think.

As organised dissidence is made visible, we all become more daring and have great pleasure, as Andrea has insisted we recuperate, in confronting the stigma and conservatism of the status quo, and the patriarchal nation state that is becoming globalised. As feminists this means taking on and enjoying being what I might call “creative and hybrid deviants”. It’s also a way of confronting the symbolic violence that we experience every day, by living and exercising the real and symbolic power we have. This is the re-invention of gender as performance, in which we can turn gender and female subordination inside out. Not flip over the tortilla, but change the recipe as Nicaraguan feminist Milu Vargas once said smiling, in an early 1990s panel on women in politics. As we act up and act out of our scripted gender performance we are shaking of the superficial binary and locked genders scripts and also the traditional ways we have learnt to do politics, or political struggle. Our anger has not disappeared, but we are able to channel it through our self-esteem rather than the impotent position of ourselves as victims, even faced with the horrendous holocaust of violence that has been done and is continues to be done. In many places in Latin America, and certainly in Nicaragua, this is producing new energies and is being taken forward by younger and older critical feminists with very diverse identities and very innovative and refreshing forms of re-positioning ourselves.

This performative concept of re-inventing ourselves outside of the traditional gender script, is not simply an issue for urban feminists or academic intellectuals, although obviously we all know of key thinkers and artists who have named and explored it. But I have also seen it in practice in a very conservative northern town in Nicaragua where the local women’s network – the Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa- has become more and more daring and creative in challenging tradition values by directly confronting stigma through cultural representation on the streets. But this has also been done consistently all over Latin America by feminists of all shapes, sizes, colours, classes, and ages. These highly pleasurable confrontational moments that convince us of our own power, combined with the slow and patient rhythm involved in investing time to discuss, strategise, share experiences, study and theorise, is what I believe makes change possible in very concrete ways. This process enables us together to break the social stereotypes of what is a feminist, what it is to be a rural woman, an indigenous or black woman, a young urban woman, a working woman, a lesbian and more, by confronting the names we are called and creating collective conditions in which each of us can finally name ourselves, and develop other spaces for economic, social, political and cultural resistance and transgression. As we do this, the changes we make are connected directly, rather than mainstreamed, into the imaginary of our communities. This way, over time, we chip away at the foundation stones of existing paradigms for exclusion and discrimination.

In this sense, I think feminism in Latin America has gone way beyond the previous currents of feminism identified by categories such as socialist feminism, liberal feminism etc, because of the different forms of analysis of oppressions and freedoms that have been built into a holistic integrated whole. On the other hand we are emerging from the categorisation and liturgies of gender victimisation to confront domination with

gleeful insubordination and open ourselves to the huge diversity of visions and actions that mutually influence one another. This is richness of it I believe. No-one is 100% right, no-one can speak 100% of the time for all but as each of us act and speak we are often able to identify with one another between non-identical selves and so each can give voice to aspects of a shared vision, it seems to me.

### **Brief notes about what seems to have worked best when it has worked**

(Obviously not an exhaustive list, nor a recipe, just an attempt to point out some key elements)

- **Starting from the self**, including sexuality as the centre of the self, beyond the gendered “being in the service of others”, thinking through yourself, de-colonising your mind and the concept of “other”. Let yourself make mistakes and learn. Taking time to study, taking time to act- reflect-act-reflect.
- **Holistic, integrated vision**, beyond “women’s themes” but placing women as subjects and recognising their **capacities, histories and leadership in different contexts of equal value**. Combining diverse strategies, not losing sight of women in the communities where we live.
- **Aiming for coherence, critical consciousness...** Individuation, transforming the self and the world around you, joining in a chosen community. Developing abilities and creating habits in revising oneself and collective practice. In order to renew and grow.
- **Focusing on methodology** importance of psychology, anthropology and art revitalising the mix from progressive politics and social sciences. Thinking outside of traditional boxes, participatory methodologies with room for different kinds of inputs, spontaneity, and divergence of all kinds, questioning and shedding the uniforms, avoiding stages with too few figures, circulating the power of speech.
- **Using participatory research** not only on the “objective” social reality of the community, but as an instrument for self-awareness as a group and of the self, the subjective processes of individual and collective empowerment. Combining research with action, participatory processes of reflexion with study, exchanges and debate on all levels
- **“Organic” ways of working and organising** processes, not trying to force things one way or another. There are no recipes or magic formulas; no-one holds the absolute truth. Being open to changing yourself and your own thinking and actions.
- **Focus on culture:** not reduced to rights and citizenship but contains it also...applying women’s lived experience and thought in all circumstances and making this visible. Counteracting symbolic and institutional violence. Using our own stories, space in media to break through invisibility and place a) our thinking on the table and b) creating and consolidating our own worlds of the like-minded from the local up and down dynamic process.
- **Risk taking and confronting stigma.** Enjoying becoming a creative hybrid deviant and not worrying about it, but laughing about it, building a community around this. Daring to be for peace in violent situations and war. Overcoming fear of all kinds while caring for ourselves.
- **Concept of autonomy.** Keep sight of the importance of individuation processes in the balance of collective leadership, and integrating into organisational networks respect and a desire for individual, collective, geographic and cultural autonomy . Organising and coordinating beyond “themes” to enable an integrated vision (e.g. abortion bans, economic cutbacks and soft porn newspapers as forms of institutional and symbolic violence).
- **Clarity re roles.** Characterising different types of NGOs, defining limits and roles in relation to social movements. Visibilising social organisations and movements and ensuring that individual membership of people who desire change are the motor of social movements and take on responsibility for ensuring the circulation of information and decision-making
- **Daring to experiment and evaluate with new participatory forms of decision-making** (finding ways to do this that untie hierarchies, while ensuring people take responsibility) decentralising leadership, diverse, participatory democratic models, intergenerational relations, creativity. Ability for both individual and collective synthesis.
- **Embody ourselves and enter into collective movement.** Institutionalisation, Ensuring and prioritising regular spaces to communicate exchange and take the time to listen to one another and think through things together as a permanent process. Also letting be the un-encounters. Learning not to create

enemies, not feel forced to be friends without ignoring feelings. Differentiate affinity and alliance. Issues around loyalties, the need to belong that sometimes distort the loyalty to principles.

- **Make the diverse faces of feminism visible**, intercutting, as we ourselves live them, gender politics with other forms of oppression, struggles and desires for resistance, transgression and freedom.
- **Mobilize solidarity in action through physical presence and symbolic power** makes a huge impact not just on media but on people themselves. Examples: the Women's network of Matagalpa<sup>13</sup> in a conservative small town, the power of women from the Ruta Pacifica on buses collectively refusing to speak to soldiers who end up being intimidated instead of being able to intimidate. Pulling together so we feel (women and communities) less alone and vulnerable, faced with pain, stigma, discrimination, war, criminality, gender, racist and state violence etc.
- **Combine different rhythms, carefully thought out planning with flexibility and room for spontaneity:** fast moving cutting edge symbolic, transgressional and/or confrontational actions with slow moving careful processes to grow and learn together. Organise plans as a result of collective decision-making, but without becoming so rigidly attached to plans so as to miss key moments for action, or changes that need to be made to the planned process. Work in ways that are sufficiently familiar but also challenging for all concerned.
- **Remember there are always more of us than you think or see at a given time.** There doesn't have to be always huge numbers to make an impact in the media and the popular imagination, to bring people together and give existing paradigms a good shake up. **We must remember always Gandhi and salt.**

### Stories and works in progress

Feminists are developing amazing initiatives in a huge array of situations and conditions way beyond the "women's rights" topics or stereotypes associated from the outside with feminist practice and who we are as feminists. ***Some interesting examples from Central America to break the moulds...***

- Mayan feminists in Guatemala dealing with reactions in their own communities, disentangling colonial inheritances in identities even in resistance, recuperating a Mayan cosmovision coherent with feminism and working through the inside (intense processes of personal development, rituals and collective reflexion) into the community and major issues of state violence, femicide, land, sustainability and memory among others.
- Young feminists from all over Central America (organised as young lesbians, young Indigenous and Afrocaribbean women, young women against violence, doing radio, music, art...) coming together with the Central America Women's Fund (FCAM in Spanish), to participate in deciding policies and financing for themselves and other young women. An important precedent in transgressing previous paradigms on decision-making.
- Maquila workers telling their stories and participating in consultation and validation processes as part of a TV drama series in Nicaragua involving a story involving their labour rights, which will then be used as training material.
- Feminists in a remote rural area of Nicaragua (Bocana de Paiwas) with a health centre and an international award winning radio collective organising with cattle farmers and indigenous populations to resistance violence in their communities and also a massive hydroelectric projects – planned with multinational through international agreements and national investors from big private capital, government politicians and the Army– to protect their feminist organisation, their communities, land, the river, water and ecosystems, and the archaeological remains of ancestors.
- Salvadorean Feminists creatively reinventing sustainable economic systems from local levels... beyond microenterprises and credit but re-thinking the system and rebuilding principles reconstruction of chains of value (not just monetary) among women developing solidarity economies as forms of resistance to globalised economies and new forms of colonisation.
- Feminists against war - in Colombia, resisting coup d'état in Honduras, ensuring memory against the historic massacres in the dictatorships of the continent, creating resilience and resistance, placing the responsibility where it lies.

---

<sup>13</sup> Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa

- Climate change and emergencies ... Feminists in Central America, the Caribbean and Colombia, unrecognised by governments and many humanitarian aid agencies, but in the forefront of disaster risk reduction and emergency response, using feminist networks to share solutions. Work on trauma from violence, has been key in helping create resilience after disasters and that in turn has helped to unearth other traumas in people's life stories before the "natural" disasters
- Rural feminists in the Women's network of the north in Nicaragua (including those who have religious backgrounds) mobilizing to defend abortion rights and in marches against femicide, violence and in favour of respect for sexual diversity...

Feminists all over Latin America and the Caribbean are breaking through all kinds of walls created and imposed by their societies' exclusive concepts of nationhood and citizenship.

### **Questions to be debated:**

In spite of these advances, there are still major questions left to be discussed , such as:

***What can we do from where we are and also together to strategise about how to challenge and change the structure of bad development imposed by the new model of globalised corporate capitalism?***

***How can we build feminist alternatives to circulate economic resources and other forms of wealth amongst ourselves, ensuring the right to decide for all people living in post-colonial or re-colonising contexts.***

***When will there be a Central American, Latin American or world feminist conference to be convened for women to speak to each other on these issues, speak out collectively to the development industry and the so-called developed world on these issues?***

I think all these questions and the ideas I have raised in this paper, that have come mostly from debate shared among feminists in different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, need to be asked and applied here, not just in the "global south", or "east". They are questions for all of us as feminists interested in social change.

I am convinced that women's organising and the feminist movements outside of North America and Europe would be a lot stronger if these issues of "gender and development" were more organised and articulated as part of the feminist movement here.

As feminists we are part of a larger dynamic of change that is on the move, shifting many of our previous assumptions, at a time when political parties are in decline and for many people there seems to be no alternative other than despair, resignation or escape. All around the globe women are creating critical mass in reinventing ourselves and transforming the world around us. If each of us is willing to take part in this change, beginning in our own worlds, side by side with others, perhaps we can contribute to changing such damaging historical patterns and move ourselves into a better healthier cycle of life.

## Inputs from Feminist networking

### **Marlen Chow, ex-Sandinista guerrilla and Chinese Miskita feminist originally from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.**

- International co-operation ends up reproducing dependency and depoliticizing women. Turning some women's initiatives into receivers of funds who then become institutionalised and end up emphasising a gender rather than feminist focus. Some of these groups develop corrupt practices; employ family members and last as long as the financing does. This is unsustainable dependency at its best.
- Many women's NGOs financed by aid money don't even have feminist processes for reflection and/or are simply dealing with violence in local communities on a day to day basis.
- We need to get out there more and ask women all around us what they want and what they are angry or concerned about.
- We need to work towards building more feminist spaces that contribute over the long term to the formation and development of feminist collectives from the community up and between communities and regions.

### **Eyra Harbar and Samirah Armengol are two younger generation Panamanian feminists active in social organization. Eyra is also a published poet.**

The process of **institutionalization** is creating the following situation.

- Members of organisations that today are part of the governments mechanism, or are steering that way which means they lose much of their belligerence as part of a social movement
- The actions of these organisations are aimed at areas where there is aid money available. [Donor: United Nations for issues of HIV /security/economic agenda and political participation, Spanish Aid Agency AECDI for gender based violence, domestic violence, shelters (infrastructure), USAID for violence and youth issues].
- Actions, demands, policies and visions are being depoliticised
- There is insufficient action to question the macroeconomic issues at the root cause of the current financial crisis.

The women's movement in Panama aims at achieving specific goals when some proposal for law is threatened with being rolled back or when there is a protest about a current issue. The movement is not articulated in order to develop any kind of process and after having undergone ideological fracturing it has weakened internally and until now has not managed to consolidate itself as a movement.

On top of this, similarly to many movements in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are serious distances between generations, because some leaders are ensuring their quota of power gained thus far. Their participation in spaces for action and discussion is absolutely institutional without them speaking of themselves as part of the feminist movement. Although some members talk about being part of the movement they don't say that this is a "feminist movement".

The issue of institutionalization began to arise after Beijing with the discourse of "empowerment" in designing public policy and participation in spaces for debate". On this point, I am questioning what is being defined as women's empowerment, since I think it has been translated into "power for certain women". This has pushed people into proposals for programmes and social action that are heavily biased towards certain party political interests aimed at accessing financing from the state and international aid agencies by choosing those issues that the donors are interested in funding.

In terms of advance in Panama there are no spaces for debate, analysis or discussion at present, nor an adequate use of technological tools that could be used to gain greater influence in civil society. It seems that the financial issues that are presently having a strong impact on the world are translated into hardening national fiscal policies and these are outside of the movement's agenda.

The National Council for Women doesn't have the capacity to demand improvements for the national mechanism responsible for this – the National Institute for Women – INAMU.

At the moment, **however there is an interesting movement of women emerging** as subjects and who are producing proposals to break with this situation and place once more on the table issues related to sexuality. They are trying to get beyond violence against women, to emphasise sexual violence and they are interested in raising issues such as abortion and sexual diversity. But the endeavours towards re-articulating the feminist movement are not supported nor validated by the women's movement. Only certain publicly feminist figures support these new initiatives for action.

**Adriana Gómez, Journalist, member of the Feminist Articulation for the Freedom to Decide in Chile, and the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network (RMSLAC)**

**The challenges of the context, the challenges of sustainability**

As Women's and feminist organisations we need to think about and define strategies faced with the new world context, in which the crisis of the neoliberal capitalist model of economic development is evident. This model for decades has systematically excluded large sectors of our population from the benefits of development, sinking them into poverty and marginalisation, where women, girls and boy children have been and continue to be drastically affected. This context of crisis impels us to organise more, to articulate our movement with others, to be propositive and not only reactive. That is to say, significant political actors.

The global crisis places new challenges before us every day, since in the agendas of the social movements (that today are more active than ever in the streets of our cities and fora for discussion), the women's agenda is not always so clear, so precise. The demands for education, health, for the environment, for the human rights of all women and men, for housing, don't always take into account the specificities that as women we want to make visible. This is the case for sexual and reproductive rights, and especially voluntary motherhood and the right to abortion, which don't seem to have gained the necessary social recognition and that of course, are not supported by national legislation in our countries.

But at the same time, we must create awareness about the different kinds of violence that women face, including sexual violence, people trafficking, sexual tourism, violence against women in armed conflict and displacement symbolic violence, institutional violence, violence in the workplace (today more marked than ever because of the new modes of production and the precarious work than women end up doing to survive), obstetric violence (the way in which the medical system's hegemony is imposed on women's health, especially in reproductive processes).

And as the culmination of all this: the increase in femicide and hate crimes against women (and men and transgendered people) for their different sexual options. All of this cannot remain outside of the agendas of the social movements that today are demanding changes to the system. They have to be in the first line of denunciations.

As feminists we are obliged to revise the way in which we have developed our work in influencing the political agenda and in advocacy in relation to public policies and legislation. Also we need to examine and renew our strategies in terms of action and alliances. Feminism, as a political movement should situate itself in the first row, not in the rearguard of this wave of active citizenship.

And this as well forces us to revise the way in which the women's and feminist organisations have been working over the last few years, on occasion with governments or with the institutions of the United Nations, because this, however strategic it may have been, may have mediated our discourse and our own ability to be radical and expose root causes.

Something similar occurs with our relationship with donor agencies, since in the search for making our work sustainable; this has perhaps forced us to adapt ourselves to their thematic focuses, leaving to one side those aspects that were crucial to us.

Have we become de politicised? Probably not, but somehow we have become more technical than political. I'm not saying that this is the reality of all feminist and women's organisations, but all of us have probably had to enter, at some moment in our histories, into the "bureaucracy" of state or international entities to be able to sustain our work a little longer. And this has a price. Maybe the present circumstances, bubbling over with active citizenship, will force us to re-think our future steps and repoliticise our discourse.

### **Jessica Sanchez, Honduran feminist writer and consultant, involved in research, education and action**

In Honduras, the same as in the rest of the world, the crisis has become acute, and in our case after the Coup d'Etat any vestige of democratic institutions or democracy and access to justice has been seriously debilitated with dramatic consequences for women. This has meant a sharp rise in femicides by almost 100% in 2008 and 2009 and a percentage increase per year since then of 20%, crossing gender violence with militarization, arms and warfare etc.

The sources of financing are very few, as Honduras is not yet considered to be a "post conflict" country (it's based on I don't know how many deaths), but the violence that has located us as one of the most violent countries in the world speaks to the contrary. On the other hand, the organisations of the feminist movement have taken a qualitative leap in terms of the recognition of feminism by the social resistance movement, recognition that has come from ordinary people and not so much its leadership. There is a renewed movement for hope, even in the face of conflict and violence. Both leadership and discourse have been renewed.

### **Yarman Jiménez, Cuban Costa Rican feminist journalist**

- What will happen with so many women's projects that are closing because they don't have access to aid money? (issue of dependency created)
- Who will be the ones to cede to the tons of requirements they are asking for in order to obtain some minimal level of funding?
- Who decides where to place aid?
- When will the north stop mounting its discourse and money on Latin American groups and those of other continents, in order to round up money for its own institutions? When will the northern organisations make their own agendas instead of continuing to define our development agenda?
- What has happened with the women's programmes and the supposed increase in support from organisations like UN Women? The UN Women and Coca Cola signed an agreement called 5 and 20, a corporation that is doing big business with our water supplies, and is contaminating them and has even been expelled from India for this as Vandana Shiva has denounced
- Who does the Fiduciary Fund reach, for example? In Costa Rica, the President signs the campaigns for Non Violence and then continues to dismantle state programmes, the health system etc. and then between them they write a report on CEDAW, that reads like it's been written by the Pope himself..
- And what about this one: How are we going to work on the toughest and most difficult issues if we have to resolve the most basic stuff: how to feed ourselves, have a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs? And because of this, many women will be immobilised and with this what? Long live the Tea Party, and Sara Palin?
- And even without mobilization and financing, we have to re-group and we're doing it.

\*\*\*\*