

WSF Belem 2009 - globalizing gender solidarity

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On 29th of January 2009, the fully packed Belem's Rural University gymnasium was resounded with gender slogans by women activists when four male presidents of Latin America declared themselves as "feminists". Led by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafeel Correa and Paraguay's Ferdinand Lugo these men asserted that "no socialism without feminism" adding that we all are true feminists.

No body doubts the socialist credentials of the entire four left wing presidents, but few present in the gymnasium might have realized that the "Hope of Latin America" sitting on the stage felt itself in the dock by MST leader Jao Stedile from one side and a feminist group of women, standing right in front of the dais, from other side. The presidents had to face friendly firing of Jao Stedile as well as the feminist fire of the women activists.

Many viewed that claiming feminist is good but not to be enough by the four presidents who were brought to power through strong social movements in their respective countries. The whole Latin America as well as anti-imperialist world is looking towards to these men as harbinger of hope and waiting for a loud and clear alternative call against the crippling capitalism. "You have done things but you have to do more in your countries to make a real difference", said the popular peasant leader, Jao Stedile, while responding to speeches of the presidents. The powerful MST leader perhaps knew that no leader delivers on its own, unless continuously put under peoples pressure.

The women not only make their strong presence in presidents' meeting, pulling them to call themselves as feminists but also played great part in the forum by putting and sharpening gender perspective to all sorts of different discussions, debates and dialogues. It was really great to see women activists equally participating through out the forum. The prevailing financial crisis, climate change and issue of indigenous people remained dominant topics of the WSF.

It seemed that issues like; war on terrorism, militarization, patriarchy, religious extremism, feudalism and women political participation, were least concerned to this Amazonian forum as almost no discussion was held over these issues. Which is in fact more relevant to south Asian region. It was pleasant to know that women in Latin America were visibly emancipated, confident and politically conscious, having no south Asian-specific issues like; restriction on women freedom, gender inequality, curb on women rights, male domination etc.

Heloisa Halena, the female president of PSOL, (Brazil's socialist party) set the tune of the world social forum on the first day, by declaring socialism as the only viable alternative to the decaying capitalism. As a great speaker she went all the way castigating the capitalism, for being root cause of the global financial crisis and making life of millions of the poor hell. She was a great source of inspiration for thousands of women activists participating in the forum. Her socialist tinge was visible in various speeches delivered at different forums by different women.

Assembly of social movements on the fourth day was a rare show of women strength and solidarity. The event was chaired by women leaders from Palestine, Pakistan, Benin (Africa), South America.

Women representatives of various social movements shared their experiences and vowed to accelerate struggle for social and gender justice. The declaration of social moments was read out by Anna Maria, a young Brazilian woman. Inspired by the radical color of the social movements of Latin America, the women expressed commitment to galvanizing the struggles with gender visibility in their respective continents.

The women assembly on the last day was also a great event, participated by over 500 women from different parts of the world. They included young activists, workers, social movement's leaders and representatives. It was also fantastic show of solidarity with Palestinian women. Great applause was given to Palestinian women for their struggle against Israeli repression. A declaration of women assembly was also read out and approved by the assembly. The important thing about this assembly was the visibility of young women. They were in radical and festive mood. It was really wonderful to see globalization of gender solidarity on the occasion.

World March of Women, an alliance of world wide women organizations and movements made its presence quite visible through out event with its gender-based slogans, purple theme color, drum beats and songs (just wait... you imperialists! the Latin America going to be feminist). Through such activities they remained busy in motivating the women participants and rallying them around the cause of women global solidarity.

In many ways, WSF Belem was positively different from Nairobi experience; unlike Nairobi there was not much commercialization, food was available at comparatively cheaper prices, although the entry fee (30 Rias) for local people was quite high, but even then a huge number of local people, specially youth was present there. Out of 133,000 registered people 50,000 were youth, most of them young girls. Unlike Nairobi only few incidents of stealing or robbery were heard. Though the event remained peaceful over all but duplication of some activities created inconvenience for the participants.

Though the Lula government of Brazil had spent a lot of money, about 60 million Rias on the arrangements, it could not earn much appreciation of the participants. Despite the fact that over 6000 security guards and hundreds of volunteers made the event a success but real issue was the lack of language translation facilities. At number of Forums participants could not interact, intervened or take benefit from each other's views due to the language barrier.

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