

Latin American Women's Liberation: Dynamics of mass movements and feminist currents

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Introduction

STARTING with a critical look at the 11th World Congress resolution, "The socialist revolution and the struggle for women's liberation", this resolution aims to be a guide to action for our organizations in their central task of organizing a women's liberation movement - alongside the masses of Latin American women, other feminist sectors and other revolutionary organizations - that can take its place and play a decisive role in the revolutionary process and in building a socialist society.

1. The Latin American peoples are subjected to imperialist domination, with the corresponding poverty and distorted development of our societies. But the relationship with imperialism is changing, continually creating more social, economic and political contradictions leading to the emergence of new movements and a rise in the consciousness and strength of the masses - among them women - about their capacity to change things.

The last 30 years have seen deep and sudden changes in our countries, changes that have transformed the face of the sub-continent and the life of its peoples, in particular those of women:

- massive migration to the cities has resulted from the structural crisis in agriculture and the uneven industrial development;
- semi-proletarian masses have emerged in the big cities as another group of the dispossessed;
- the model of capitalist accumulation based on import substitution has changed to that of secondary export and modernization;
- the debt crisis;
- the erosion of the populist state;

- imperialism has implemented a strategy of low-intensity conflict - controlled transition from military dictatorships to “democratic” civilian governments combined with repression;

- later, the invasion of Grenada and Panama and the growing use of US military bases directly on Latin American territory, often with the excuse of the “war against drugs”.

All of this has meant growing impoverishment, increasing violence and the exacerbation of social differences and contradictions.

At the same time, the triumph of two revolutions, in Cuba and Nicaragua, despite the problems they are experiencing, represent a possibility for change in the eyes of the masses in the sub-continent.

It is in this context, that of the 1980s, that Latin American women have entered onto the political scene of the sub-continent.

I. The crisis, the state, the church and women's oppression

2. In the context of the economic crisis the responsibility for family spending and domestic work, socially assigned to women, has increasingly become more difficult. Hyper-inflation means housewives in the cities having to go from market to market searching for the lowest prices, eating less so that their children can have a little more and facing the anguish of simply not having anything to give their family at mealtimes. In the countryside, domestic work is increased by the work involved in caring for animals and preparing products to sell.

The lack of basic public services in the Latin American countryside means that domestic labour has to be carried out in brutal conditions. It means covering huge distances to find water or wood, and chronic and endemic suffering from curable diseases, especially for children. In the poor urban neighbourhoods women carry out their domestic work very often without water or electricity, in insalubrious conditions, without enough schools for their children, without medical facilities. Women's workload is multiplied by these conditions.

3. The growing pauperization of the masses has forced women to seek an income so that the family can survive.

In the majority of Latin American countries, from 1950-1980 the percentage of women in the workforce went up. In addition, in the majority of cases where we have data, between 1975 and 1984 women's participation in the workforce increased in relation to the total active population.

4. The possibilities of peasant women finding paid employment have decreased, forcing women to become unwaged tenant farmers, day-workers or tenants at the same time as taking on the tasks in the home.

5. In some cases, for example Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay, women have gone into industry in significant numbers. But, even in these cases, women generally go into all-female departments where they suffer discrimination in work conditions, wages and promotion opportunities, while at the same time continuing to do “women's work” in the home (double work day).

With the sole exception of Brazil, women who enter the workforce swell the ranks of the active population mainly in the service and informal sectors. For most of them this means more work, but not a proletarianization in the exact sense of the word. These changes are very evident in many large cities, where in recent years the numbers of itinerant salespeople, beggars and prostitutes have

increased. With a dearth of stable salaried jobs, women have gone into the streets to earn their living any way they can.

Women and the state

6. With the economic and political crisis, the Latin American bourgeoisies and their governments are continually trying to create new bases of consensus to maintain their domination over society. Insofar as women have increasingly entered public life over the last few years, although the majority still find themselves locked away in the home, the bourgeois governments try to legitimize themselves in women's eyes, negotiating with the organized women's movements and presenting themselves as champions of women's democratic and civil rights. This has meant an ideological offensive from many governments and bourgeois forces towards women in general, demonstrated by their electoral discourse and in the appointment of women to state posts.

7. In some countries, like Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Uruguay, the ruling bourgeois parties have encouraged the creation of institutions and organisms whose objective is to develop programmes specifically directed at women as the oppressed sex. The majority are devoted to research, propaganda and proposing legal reforms, without having any executive powers as such.

8. Most countries adhere to the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This has been followed by the express recognition at a constitutional level of equal civic rights for men and women.

In addition, many governments have introduced legal changes on their own initiative concerning to formal equality and social rights, such as divorce.

The modernizing offensive of many states is reflected in the labour field, where they evoke "egalitarianism" with the aim of making it easier to exploit women even more, and thus helping to legitimize their economic policies.

9. It is at the level of their economic programmes that governmental policies are increasingly affecting women's lives.

In many countries the state has implemented programmes which tend to legitimate and institutionalize the informal labour market: training and loans so that women can earn additional income without leaving the home. This disguises unemployment, saves the bosses paying workers and makes it more difficult for workers to organize.

Some governments have introduced temporary employment programmes originally directed at men. But it has been women who have filled them, without any job security and receiving "emergency" wages.

Alongside their modernization programmes, some governments have set up plans "to combat extreme poverty" using voluntary female labour power to carry out public works.

10. In many countries, the state has carried out an aggressive population-control policy, using the indiscriminate distribution of contraception and forced sterilization. This policy is often directly tied to its dealings with international financing agencies and requests for foreign credit. The lack of left alternatives defending women's right to decide on having children makes it that much easier to apply this policy whose goal is to lower the birthrate and convince the population that its poverty is because "we are too many".

11. Some governments have established specialized police centres for dealing with battered and

raped women. The aim is not only to try and put over the image that they are champions of women's well-being, but also -and especially - to broaden and legitimize their repressive apparatus.

The church

12. The weight of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America is enormous - politically, socially and culturally. But during the last 20 years the church in Latin America has been thrown into crisis. This is shown by the existence of various currents within it, including that aligned with the Vatican and its theological and political orientation, and the current known as liberation theology, with its many tendencies.

The hierarchy linked to the Vatican in general supports measures tending to maintain the current ruling system, and thus has a very conservative position in relation to women - for example opposing legal changes on divorce, contraception and abortion. In various ways it promotes a policy of strengthening the existing family system and the submissive role of women within it.

The current identified with liberation theology is in general linked to the process of self-organization of the poor masses. As a general rule, a very high proportion of the members of the Church base communities and bible study groups are women. Because of this some priests are more sensitive to the specific oppression they suffer and the need to take political action around it. But their political vision is limited by the contradiction between their adherence to a traditional moral view from which they do not distance themselves and women's concrete and changing needs, especially concerning sexuality, motherhood and fertility control. There have been few theological contributions from women's point of view and its relation to the overall road to liberation envisaged by this current.

In the last few years there has also been an increase in the activity of different protestant groups in Latin America. There are liberation theology currents among them which have had an important feminist theoretical production, particularly in academic spheres. However, most of them are evangelical sects characterized by an extremely conservative social and political outlook, which is particularly reactionary in relation to women.

The family

13. All these changes in society have had profound effects on family life for the whole of the Latin American masses. There are strong pressures towards the disintegration of the family, with no material possibility of adopting the bourgeois family model in practice.

In the countryside, millions of families still make up productive units, generally with a rigid distribution of roles according to sex, placing women on the lowest rungs of the power hierarchy when it comes to decision-making, both formally and in practice. But women are nevertheless part of the productive community, although this is relatively isolated from the rest of the world.

At the same time, 26 million indigenous Americans, mainly concentrated in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala and Mexico, maintain their own customs, traditions and ways of communally taking responsibility for productive work to different degrees. The pressures on these nationalities to abandon their culture are enormous, but they are resisting "Latinization".

However, the structural crisis of agriculture and a relative capitalization of the countryside exercise a strong pressure towards the disintegration of the peasant family as a self-sufficient unit of production, without this meaning its transformation simply into a unit of consumption.

With the concentration of the population in the Latin American cities and the strengthening of capitalist relations of production, within the big and small bourgeoisie and sections of the industrial

proletariat a bourgeois family has formed. However the big majority of the emigrados do not form part of the working class properly speaking: quite simply, underdeveloped capitalism has no other use for its labour force than as a gigantic reserve army of labour.

But even in those families where one or more members manages to get a paid job (as a manual or white-collar worker), it is rare that the wage is enough for each worker to maintain their own nuclear family, even though they are obliged to face the labour market as individuals.

In other cases the pressures are such that the family simply disperses, giving rise to the mass phenomenon of abandoned children. In addition, women are increasingly becoming heads of household.

Alongside this, the crisis generates tensions at a social level, leading not only to an increase in the number of assaults and rapes but also to more and more violence within the family.

II. The dynamic of the Latin American women's movement today

14. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, the first organizations of women as such appeared on the basis of an initial identification between women in the same immediate community who shared immediate problems and common concerns. This led to traditions of:

- women organizing in support of workers' struggles since the last century.
- women's struggles for the right to work, particularly in "women's" industries which have produced thousands of experienced cadres for the workers' movement in general.
- local mothers' clubs to deal with specific community problems.

There is also a certain tradition of women organizing around their demands as a sex. Bourgeois women organized from the end of the last century around the right to education, access to the professions and, in some cases, around the right to vote. But in the framework of the general peaks of the class struggle there were mass women's organizations based in the working class which fought for demands like the vote, land, work and education for women in the popular layers.

15. In the 1970s and 1980s many feminist groups emerged of the type also emerging in Europe, the USA and Canada, and influenced by them. Although in Brazil there was the emergence of a mass feminist movement for a short period at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, in Latin America this process was not at all general and did not generate the building of an organically constituted movement with a mass character

The majority of these groups were characterized by ideological and theoretical discussion, and concentrated their activity principally in consciousness-raising and propaganda, introducing for the first time for many years the "woman question" into intellectual and left circles and society as a whole.

However, even though in some cases the work of the feminist and consciousness-raising groups was able to stimulate a mass response, it did not result in building general structures with a more permanent character among different layers of women active at the time, which could have maintained the continuity of a specific movement. The activities of feminist groups were also concentrated in the big cities or even, in some countries, limited to the capital cities alone.

The dedication to discussing and propagandizing around “themes” related to women’s oppression - housework, violence, sexuality, abortion - did touch on vital issues for all women. But because they had a fundamentally propagandist vision and of building the movement by the multiplication of small groups this made it difficult to establish a platform that could unite the groups, or that was attractive and accessible to the majority of women.

The vast majority of women were, and are, permanently organized around the question of the survival of themselves and their families and around the question of democracy, their situation determined by the semi-colonial character of our countries and the resulting poverty. In addition, the middle layers have not suffered from contradictions in a sufficiently massive way to provoke a louder response in this sector, which is relatively big.

This situation led to a crisis of political perspective for the “autonomous groups”, and in many cases to their disappearance or absorption in governmental projects.

16. But some groups and many individual women began to create other types of instruments to express their feminist concerns:

a) Aid and/or educational institutions, mainly financed by international agencies. Their central activities vary a lot. They do not always explicitly define themselves as feminist, but they have an important weight in feminist currents through their work, made easier by the funding they receive.

b) Non-funded projects of support/relations to women (centres providing various services, social activities, meetings, film clubs, local groups, or work with peasant or indigenous women, for example).

c) Groups publishing various journals.

d) Christian women’s groups.

e) Trade-union commissions or groupings.

f) Women organized inside left political parties.

All these expressions of feminism have prospered in the 1980s insofar as their work has been guided by an attempt to relate to Latin American reality today and women’s day-to-day lives.

17. The daily life and world outlook of millions of Latin American women have been transformed. They have been forced to emerge from the shadow of the home and throw themselves into public life, trying to sustain their families via activities they would never previously have contemplated.

A whole generation of young women has been raised in conditions of crisis, in general by mothers who have lived through these changes. For this reason, their frame of reference in practice is not the model of a woman whose life is confined to the four walls of the home.

At the same time, the extension of public education and the penetration of the means of mass communication into the countryside and the city in recent years has meant that millions of women’s horizons have been broadened- although sometimes in a distorted way.

18. With their growing participation in the labour market, millions of women have been forced to try to find a collective solution to deteriorating living standards and democratic rights - given the impossibility of finding individual solutions. Consequently, they are increasingly involved in political and social movements in general, which can involve millions of women, often giving them their first

experience of struggle.

At present, the majority of women are organized in relation to their social situation, around their living and working conditions (family survival, conditions of domestic and paid work), and around the most brutal political problem, the struggle against repression, for human rights and democracy.

In the last 15 years, new movements have emerged whose base of support and activists are almost exclusively women: the urban struggle and the fight for freedom for political prisoners and the disappeared.

The popular and civic urban movements fight for solutions to the problems of housing, services and high prices suffered by millions of people who live in extremely precarious conditions. Women, being responsible for all aspects of family care and mostly not having paid jobs - with its corresponding absence from the home - are both the most motivated and the most available to participate in this type of movement, which is centred in the neighbourhoods.

On the other hand, women are the rank-and-file driving force for the committees of relatives of political prisoners' and the disappeared, mainly from identification with their role as mother and wife and their responsibility for freeing their children, husbands and brothers from the clutches of repression.

The development of trade-union and peasant struggles has also involved many women. In sectors where there is an almost exclusive concentration of working women, thousands have taken to the streets for the first time.

Peasant and indigenous women, on the other hand, often organize as women to take up problems linked to the need for better conditions for carrying out domestic work and for the well-being of their families, such as fighting for their own rights to land and loans, and the need to have their own income to increase family revenue.

19. This entry into public life in distinct forms and at different levels creates a contradictory dynamic at the level of women's consciousness: the majority go into public life as wives and mothers; a minority, but a politically significant minority, enter as young women workers.

Leaving their homes and neighbourhoods, they come up against the government, the employers, the trade-union bureaucracy, the para-military groups and the local bosses in the countryside and the city. In sum, they do exactly what prevailing values say a woman should not do.

The central contradiction which millions of Latin American women confront is the need to fulfil the traditional role of women in the family, in the home, and in domestic work in its fullest sense, and the impossibility of so doing given general living conditions without breaking with this tradition. The existence of this contradiction is the objective basis for the perspective of building a mass women's liberation movement in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Conditions are being created at a mass level which open up the possibilities for an increase in women's consciousness of their oppression as women. When they take to the streets, motivated by both necessity and solidarity, this brings them up against obstacles for realizing their objectives. If they realize them, if they succeed, they have to change their behaviour, their conception of themselves, their conditions of struggle. To establish new conditions of solidarity, and thus improve the conditions of struggle, they have to confront their own oppression as a sex. There will be no positive solution to this contradiction without breaking with the social, political and personal conditions that create and maintain the traditional model of women - as mother, wife and housewife - on the basis of the political struggle of the masses, of which women are in the front ranks and the

leadership.

This contradiction is sharpened by:

- Today the mass of women have access to the means of mass communication and, despite its deficiencies, millions of women also have access to formal education. By both these means, they are aware of the enormous possibilities offered by today's world for individual development at the same time as the models which are presented for women - both traditional and "modern". This new knowledge, and the models themselves, are in open conflict with the reality of their lives.
- For the first time; millions of women have access to contraception, which makes it possible to envisage controlling their own bodies, and to make choices concerning maternity and sexuality no longer determined by procreation, despite all the risks implicit given that they have this access because of a policy of controlling births that is dangerous in its motivation, and undemocratic in its application.
- The establishment of governmental programmes on sexist violence, at the same time as being a way of broadening and even legitimizing the repressive apparatus of the state, also legitimize the social character of sexist violence, the testimonies exposing the brutality and high number of cases which exist.
- Bourgeois propaganda around women's equality - albeit to back up a birth-control policy, to win votes, to legitimize a regime in the eyes of the international community - introduce at a mass level as never before, and in some cases for the first time, the idea that women and men have equal rights before the law and in society. At the same time, within the independent mass organizations which struggle against state policy and the bourgeoisie, and particularly those raising the banner of the struggle for real democracy, women encounter discrimination and marginalization in most cases both from the rank-and-file and from the leaderships.

20. But recognizing these contradictions and overcoming them through a conscious struggle for liberation is not automatic. It depends on many factors in the social struggle, on the degree of organization among women and of the class struggle in general: the general relationship of forces between the bourgeoisie and the workers; the capacity of the bourgeoisie and its state to propose demobilizing and self-legitimizing policies to women; the development, strength and relations of the revolutionary and reformist organizations with the women's movements that emerge and their positions on the question of women. All these factors influence the development of a sector of the women's movement capable of linking up in practice the project of building a mass movement with a feminist character and the more general starting points of radicalization and mobilization of women. However the existence of this contradiction is the objective basis for the advances of the last few years towards building a political women's liberation movement in our continent.

21. In general, the central dynamic of the situation today in Latin America points to this contradiction being resolved favourably. Women are participating as never before in political and social struggles; they are organizing increasingly as women by social sector; there exists a growing and renewing feminist fringe or pole of the women's movement; and non-bourgeois political organizations are increasingly under pressure to confront their traditional anti-women's liberation positions. Taking into account the advances and setbacks in each country in terms of its specific situation, the general dynamic is towards the formation of mass women's movements with the emergence of a large number of groups of different types which, as part of their platform of struggle and basis of unity, increasingly tend to raise gender demands in combination with demands relating to survival and democracy.

22. In the course of the struggle for their immediate demands, the mass of women continually confront obstacles flowing from their specific oppression: they are restricted by “not having permission” to go out of their houses to activities, having nowhere to leave their children, feeling guilty for “abandoning” them, being insulted by men in meetings of the movement; their organizations are weakened by the competition among women and the lack of self-confidence and training of their members. All these obstacles are worse inside mixed organizations of women and men. Also they are even more despised and humiliated by the authorities than men, and they are raped by the police and military. These obstacles have to be overcome in order to go forward. Sometimes they constitute such an insuperable obstacle that there is a regression in the struggle. But at other times they lead to attempts to propose practical solutions in the form of collective demands.

In these cases the natural leaders of many women’s movements, and often the organized women’s groups themselves, search for elements which explain the existence and the dynamic of the obstacles in order to be able to overcome them. Moving closer to more feminist sectors in general gives them the possibility of understanding and building the necessary instruments of struggle and organization to confront their contradictions as women. At the same time, many feminist groups have been participating in the popular organizations. On the other hand, in the last ten years a significant number of feminist activists have emerged within the political parties who have succeeded in maintaining a much more organic presence in the women’s movement, over and above their struggle to change the mentalities of these parties on gender oppression.

All this has begun to generate a social and political recomposition of the feminist pole in the women’s movement. Undoubtedly many active women still mistrust feminism. But many others are beginning to identify with it as such, identifying with feminist ideas and recognizing their usefulness for understanding and changing their reality. On the other hand, the traditional feminist sectors can no longer deny the “feminist legitimacy” of women who combine their activity in the women’s movement with party activity, as they tended to do in the past.

Empirical proof of this recomposition can be seen in the increasing attendance by women from the popular sectors in the Encuentros Feministas Latinoamericanas y de Caribe (Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meetings) from 1981 to 1990. It has been this combined dynamic of contradictions in women’s struggles in the popular sectors for class demands and the interaction with feminist layers of the women’s movement - including more and more who are primarily mobilized around class demands or as party militants - which has made it possible in many sectors to put forward gender demands in the programmes of struggle and as the basis for the mass mobilizations of women in the last few years.

23. The forms of coordination between the different sectors of the women’s movement vary a lot in their objectives, scope and duration.

Sometimes permanent coordinations exist, fundamentally to provide a space for political discussion, contact and mutual support rather than around actions or campaigns, although these can result from the same coordinations.

Other forms of coordination, which at times combine clearly feminist forces with both political parties and the broader women’s movement, have emerged in the context of particular national political situations.

A series of working networks have also been formed both at national and sub-continental level around the campaigns or ongoing activities of their members. In many countries, contacts between feminist groups have been limited to local, regional or national conferences, sometimes resulting in information networks between groups being established without the existence of any common

political platform.

The majority of women who are involved in permanent coordinations tend to be so on the basis of their social situation.

Although at the beginning of the 1980s the initiative for events around March 8 or November 25 or other general activities was taken by layers linked to the small feminist groups, the social composition of these activities and the initiatives for them are much more frequently start from women linked to the popular and trade-union sectors of the movement.

On the level of the sub-continent, there have been various contacts and opportunities for discussion, basically in the Encuentros of Latin American and Caribbean feminists and the three conferences of the Continental Women's Front Against Intervention. There has also been a multiplication of international meetings and events which play the same role. It is in this type of event that the Cubans and Nicaraguans have had growing contact with the Latin American feminist pole.

24. The general dynamic of women's lives today is: a) that more women than ever before are entering social and political struggle; and b), that they find themselves objectively in contradiction with their oppression. But in making the big jump from transforming these conditions into a political movement of women for their liberation, there are a series of political problems that have to be analyzed and overcome:

a) The diverse demands of women in struggle

Women's initial demands usually have a specific local focus, which makes it difficult to unify their struggles. This lack of unity and, for the same reason, contact with many more women, not only creates difficulties for winning the immediate struggle but impedes their thinking about their oppression as a social question.

However, although there are immediate demands that unite the women of a whole sector, this does not mean that a general political movement takes shape which sees itself as a women's movement. Obviously, the unity of women organized as such, even by sector, has a big multiplying effect in other sectors. But, insofar as the movement is not politically extended to unify women from different sectors, there is a big danger that even stronger sectors can see their gains pushed back.

Finally, where the different popular organizations advance gender demands these are also very different and difficult to unite in struggle. And it is in struggle and through progress around their concrete rights that women will appreciate the usefulness of organizing for their demands as a gender.

b) Clientelism and self-helpism: two dangers in building the movement

Women, particularly in the neighbourhoods and peasant communities of Latin America, have two ways of surviving: by making demands on external agencies or trying to find a solution through their own resources.

Placing demands on the state in relation to social and political problems has the enormous advantage of putting the responsibility where it should be, on society as a whole and its institutions, and more easily gives mass action a political character. Successful struggles and mobilizations advances both their overall consciousness and their strength and confidence in themselves.

Practice has taught us, however, that reliance on the state is not without its dangers. On the one hand there could be a clientelist dynamic and, on the other, in partially winning certain demands

women can become absorbed into administrative tasks of providing services.

The other form of self-organization for assuring survival, that of self-solution/self-administration, has the advantage that it is a process of cooperative self-organization which presents immediate solutions to urgent problems and gives greater value to domestic labour, creating the seeds for its socialization.

But it also has two real dangers: the legitimization of the established role of women as those responsible for domestic tasks and family well-being, and apolitical self-helpism.

c) The difficulties for the political participation of women workers

It is clear that there is no automatic correlation between the mass entry of women into the labour market and their involvement in political and/or trade-union struggle as workers:

- They basically work in “feminine” industries and sectors, such as services and in the informal sector in general. As in the rest of the world, their jobs are often similar to the work they do in the home, or require great meticulousness.
- The informal sector usually means working in isolation or in small workshops, where there is very often a paternalist relationship with the employer or boss.
- Even in those cases where women have entered big industry, the majority have to put up with a double workday as well as having other restrictions in the time they can allocate for trade-union or political participation.
- The working woman continues to see herself primarily as a mother and/or wife and not a worker, even when she is the family’s only breadwinner.
- Fellow workers often apply pressure to prevent her participating actively in trade-union life; and the trade-union leaderships are not only unconcerned by women’s specific conditions, but frequently openly block women’s participation.
- Most women who become trade-union activists are unmarried or childless. Because of this, they usually identify less with the majority of women workers.

Aside from these difficulties, in many places little attention is given by revolutionary organizations to women’s trade-union work.

For all these reasons, the organization of working women has not increased at the same tempo as their incorporation into the labour market.

d) The state’s attempts to coopt

In the case of countries where the state has a relatively aggressive policy towards women, the need to respond with alternative political proposals that strengthen the mass movement is obvious. Without presenting a political alternative to state initiatives it will be increasingly difficult to maintain class independence, because the state will appear to be more useful than the movement in the eyes of the masses.

e) The predominance of sexism in the leaderships of the mass movement

Insofar as the initial rise in consciousness of most women comes through the struggles of the more

general movements, usually led by male leaderships, the machismo of these latter is a big obstacle to their advance. This is particularly important in the absence of a specifically women's political movement which raises at a national, unified level the gender demands that women in various sectors are beginning to put forward today. In its turn, the leaderships' sexism is an obstacle to building this movement.

25. Over the last few years, the non-bourgeois mass leaderships have changed their approach to women's situation and their role in society and in struggles.

In many countries the crisis of the Communist parties includes questioning the old Stalinist conception of the women's movement as an "auxiliary" to the mass movement in general.

At the same time, revolutionary organizations are discussing revolutionary strategy, a discussion in which the role of women and the struggle against gender oppression is also raised, at least potentially. However, in almost all cases these leaderships reject this point as part of the strategic discussion and strongly resist any serious consideration of the subject.

However, within all types of left political parties there are feminist nuclei and currents emerging which are putting forward different alternatives around the need for women to fight for gender demands. They influence the orientation of their parties, not only in line with their political capacity, but also in function of the more or less democratic traditions of discussion, the social insertion of the party and its overall political capacity to recognize and confront the real problems of women in struggle.

26. The discussions within the women's movement and its feminist pole have evolved positively, passing from the initial examination and affirmation of basic points on oppression to defining the routes for building mass women's movements around their specific demands.

Elements of broader debates on politics and society in general influence this discussion. Thus, existing political tendencies exert a certain pressure on the discussion on feminism:

- Modernizing bourgeois ideology, which legitimizes competence as a social norm and reduces democracy to the relationship between the citizen and the state, divorcing it from social classes and problems.
- Social-democratic positions, today accompanied by a political offensive throughout the sub-continent, which support gradualist and institutionalist tactics.
- Imperialist propaganda which identifies market mechanisms with democracy on the one hand, and socialism with dictatorship on the other.
- Perestroika and the crisis in Eastern European countries, which as well as reaffirming the false distinction market/democracy vs. socialism/dictatorship, has brought pressure to bear on revolutionaries, thus weakening the influence of a perspective of revolutionary rupture as a solution to the problems of the Latin American masses.

Given these pressures, some feminists have been incorporated into bourgeois projects, particularly with the controlled transitions to democracy that have taken place in several countries. Given the weakness of feminism and the anti-feminist positions of the majority of the socialist and left oppositions, they have placed their confidence and/or decided to work in bourgeois women's projects in order to "really change women's situation" in relation to the regime. Among many of them positions predominate based on the necessity and possibility of "democratizing the state", and creating "space for women" within it. Others identify with ideas around the "feminine essence" as

something morally superior to the “masculine essence”, which is one way of denying the need to build an autonomous mass women’s movement.

However, the great majority of feminists are independent of the bourgeoisie and the state, and consider themselves as being in some way on the left, with a broad range of positions that identify with the elimination of capitalism and a socialist perspective. In this sector, which in general takes the broad women’s movement as its point of reference for the struggle against gender oppression, the debate is particularly diffuse, thus making it difficult to characterize the currents within it.

Under discussion, among other things, are:

- The relation between gender oppression and class exploitation/oppression.
- The struggle for democracy and feminist demands.
- What sort of power do women want?
- Women as political and social subjects.
- The validity or not of the concept of the vanguard in a strategy for change.

III. Our orientation

27. Confronted with any form of oppression, the only solution is the self-organization of the oppressed to fight it. The case of women is no different. It is the independent self-organization of women themselves that can impose reforms to the law and to current government economic policy, and changes in the social and political organizations of the masses, to improve their immediate situation and encourage and create better conditions for their continued struggle. On the basis of self-organization, as the fundamental foundation of their liberation movement, they can reach the numerical strength and political development necessary for having a favourable influence on future events, both today and after the revolution.

It is only through a process of self-organization that women can succeed in transforming themselves, collectively and individually, in public and private, in such a way that the traditional role filled by women can be replaced with a new concept and a new reality of what is woman, creating this through the struggle itself.

28. A thoroughgoing, consistent feminist struggle is not simply to achieve formal equality between women and men, but to completely revolutionize relations between them, eliminating the historico-social construction of gender. This change cannot be fully realized in the framework of class society, particularly in the present Latin American context of exploitation and oppression in countries that are dominated by imperialism. In this sense, it is in all women’s interest to struggle for the overthrow of the oppressive patriarchal capitalist system and for building a socialist, democratic and pluralist society. Only such a revolution and a new society can lay the bases for completely eliminating the oppression currently experienced by women.

However, women’s oppression is not automatically eliminated either with the anti-capitalist revolution or in post-capitalist society. For women to be able to transform their own lives, to be revolutionary subjects in the taking of power and the overthrow of the present bourgeois regimes, and to have the strength to favourably influence the events in a post-revolutionary society, it is necessary now that they build a political movement based on their demands as a gender.

The formation of this movement will transform them into a political subject, which fights for its own interests; women's objective historical interest in eliminating patriarchal class society laying the basis for their transformation into a revolutionary subject. This transformation could in practice go along with the political development of the movement itself and its vanguard.

29. To build this movement today, we have to start from the conditions, the forms of organization and the demands that women feel to be theirs, whether they are gender demands or not. Self-organization of women by social sector around their most pressing demands is an essential element in strengthening women socially, collectively and thus individually, creating greater possibilities for the development of consciousness of gender oppression, even though this is not automatic.

Undoubtedly, women's struggle for their own demands will be closely linked to the struggles of all working people, even with the rise of their own political movement. In building this movement general class demands will combine with gender demands as the basis of unity. Nevertheless, this dynamic will certainly include ups and downs in the promotion of specifically feminist demands.

A better level of organization of the popular movement will encourage greater recognition of women's struggle for their own demands. This is because a better level of coordination and unity not only means more chance of winning but also a higher level of politicization, the establishment of a more global basis for unity and an understanding of the need to organize in an ongoing way, not just for tackling one problem but a whole series of problems.

In practical terms, it also creates the possibility for a better division of labour within organizations of struggle and for giving more attention to seriously analyzing their reality.

The coming together of forces whose objective is extending women's consciousness of their specific oppression is more effective in reaching larger numbers of women.

But there is no mechanical relationship between the general popular movement and women's advance. Women have to have their own political expression. And they will only succeed if there is a conscious effort in every movement to promote the growing discovery and politicization of gender oppression, which we can call the feminization of the demands, organization and political dynamic of the women's movement.

30. In the very process of building the movement, different problems are raised:

a) Given the diversity of demands, which reflect not only different needs but also different levels of consciousness, we must take every opportunity to bring together struggles and establish a system of demands that can move towards the formation of an increasingly clearly defined political movement.

b) Given the dangers of clientelism and self-helpism, we have to reinforce the internal democracy of both the mass organizations in general and the political space and organizations for women, as well as ensuring democratic functioning in the women's movement as a whole. On the other hand, the political nature of women's demands should be emphasized - they cannot be met by charity - along with the absolute necessity of keeping the movement independent from the bourgeoisie and the state.

c) Despite the difficulties faced by women workers in terms of their political and trade-union participation, this should not lead to the conclusion that their involvement in the women's movement is not central. The numbers of women who have gone into the labour market has meant that, despite all the obstacles to their participation, more women are active in trade unions than ever before. And when they enter into a collective process of consciousness raising and struggle around their oppression as women as well as workers, they advance politically more rapidly and consistently than

other sectors because of their living and working conditions and their numerical concentration - in sum, their social situation.

d) Given the attempts of the state to coopt the women's movement, particularly its feminist pole, in addition to strongly maintaining its autonomy for historical reasons there must also be political perspectives for the type of changes considered necessary from now on at governmental level. We should promote the following criteria for these within the movement. Distinguishing between two things: services that the state is obliged to provide with the greatest control on the part of the users; and a position of accepting or promoting the state organizing women (the example of the Women Today programme in Argentina). In the case of legislative proposals, it is more feasible to maintain the independence of the women's movement in proposing or supporting this or that draft law. But at the level of the executive (ministries for health, justice, social or family welfare), the form of the relationship between the movement and particular state programmes is more complicated. If we demand a programme of maternity healthcare, for example, and win it, we cannot simply leave the state to determine its form, content and application. But neither can the movement take full responsibility for it. The criterion that we can adopt is proposals for and vigilance over such programmes, but without accepting direct responsibility for their functioning.

In the case where the left controls municipalities, the objective of its programmes should be to increase the possibilities for self-organization of the movement, as was done with the Glass of Milk programmes in many municipalities in Peru. The simple implementation of the programme, without women's self-organization, will neither guarantee its future nor strengthen the women's movement or the long-term objectives of the left itself.

e) Because of the prevailing sexism in the mass movements and their leaderships, mechanisms have to be established within them to increase women's space and promote discussion - not only around concrete action proposals and demands, but also around the origins, manifestations and solutions to women's oppression: that is, a theoretical discussion.

31. To enable this process to move forward, the feminist pole in the women's organizations and movement has to be strengthened:

a) Strengthening the recomposition of this pole to include more women leaders of the mass movement so that they - along with the women of the autonomous groups, the non-governmental organizations, the political parties and the youth who today would like to get involved in this struggle - can forge a real vanguard of the whole women's movement.

b) Establishing more opportunities for political and theoretical discussion in the vanguard through conferences, coordinations around concrete campaigns, publications, seminars, and so on.

c) Orienting this pole so that its priority becomes the relationship with the general women's movement, so that it can:

- take advantage of each opportunity to put forward unifying gender demands;
- take advantage of each opportunity to unify the women's movement;
- ensure the continuity of the movement;
- encourage reflection and theoretical production - a collective memory for the movement;
- develop independent alternatives to the proposals of the bourgeoisie and the state.

To do this there has to be the development of a political alternative within the feminist pole in alliance with other sectors which have a similar vision. If other revolutionary currents and parties which are today absent from this political elaboration become convinced of feminism this will also help the development of this alternative.

If the clearly feminist expressions of the women's movement are weakened, in time the organization of the mass of women will also tend to be undermined. The mass sectoral organizations will tend to disperse or be manipulated for other ends, which implies a political weakening which will in time lead to an organic erosion.

32. The reason for the existence of our organizations is to be a useful political instrument for our peoples organizing themselves, proposing and implementing their own projects as a nation in line with their interests, against the interests of the bourgeoisie and imperialism. The revolution and the new socialist society that we seek to create can only be the work of the toiling people as a whole, and for this reason our revolutionary Marxist current has a conception of feminism that encompasses a profound transformation, the subversion of the existing order.

For this reason we must be the foremost promoters of the women's liberation movement and of the discussion within the mass movement and the left - particularly the revolutionary left - around the necessity of building this movement and the ways of doing so.

33. In nearly all our sections women's work is being reorganized and we are reformulating our political perspectives for building the women's movement.

This fits into the general framework of the need to tackle the question of building our organizations with greater effectiveness, and is part of this task. In particular, in relation to women's work the reorganization must confront the following problems:

- To a greater or lesser degree, our sections did not understand the central dynamic of the radicalization of the majority of women and have had to make a turn towards the mass sectors, working on the basis of immediate demands.
- The fact that feminism did not develop on a mass scale, the non-centralization of the general women's movement as a political movement and the sexist pressures of society as a whole are strong countervailing pressures to our maintaining consistent feminist positions.
- Today there are many comrades, men and women, who have not been formed in our programmatic feminist vision and this makes the elaboration of a concrete political orientation for the movement difficult.
- All this means that the objective difficulties which all women comrades face have been inadequately considered by the leaderships, leaving comrades to confront them individually.
- Consequently, little effort is made to include in political leadership tasks.

Obviously, the possibilities for each section resolving this situation vary with its social insertion and accumulation of cadres and the degree of progress in forming a leadership team.

34. Our general objective must be to elaborate concrete political strategies and implement them in the struggle itself. But to do this we need to:

- a) educate comrades in our feminist programmatic vision;

b) clarify our theoretical positions in line with the central discussion in each country, in order to intervene with the greatest clarity;

c) develop adequate organizational forms in each case to:

- ensure efficiency and not overload comrades doing women's work with tasks;
- ensure that the whole of the party, and in the first place all women comrades, participate in elaborating the political orientation for women's work.

d) Counterbalance, within the limits of our possibilities, the obstacles which confront women comrades:

- making it easier for comrades who are mothers to participate;
- special education measures for women comrades;
- consciously promoting women to take on tasks, in particular seeking to establish a proportional relationship between the number of women on the leadership bodies and the membership, which will mean using a system of targets or quotas in elections.