

# THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN MEXICO: From Self-Awareness Groups to Transnational Networks

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One of the current preoccupations of international feminism consists in developing theories about the form in which it would be possible to achieve a lasting alliance between feminism, social movements, the activists within non-governmental associations, political parties, state institutions and the university. The various efforts designed to give the feminist movement greater strength and democratic representation on the local, national and transnational levels, aim not only at transforming the patriarchal order of gender, but also at changing the relations of production and reproduction of life that are at the base of masculine domination. In this sense, the brief reconstruction of the past thirty years of the Mexican feminist movement that I present here in the following pages, attempts to demonstrate the different paths pursued and the multiple strategies and alliances followed, and also to make a critical analysis of the conflicts confronted and of the history of the attempts made to resolve these. Finally, I put forward a series of strategic points that, I hope, allow for the formulation of new perspectives regarding the cross-roads in which the diverse struggles find themselves today. At that point I will, then, propose the idea of a movement in which the multiple feminisms might find a space.

The efforts to internationalize the feminist movement in Mexico have been present along its entire history. In the seventies, these were not very intensive because the work done by the first self-awareness groups was aimed at developing a strong concept of autonomy that would allow them to remain independent of politics and its institutions. The radical nature of this concept showed itself when the majority of feminists refused to participate in the official preparation of the international year of the woman. This rejection however did not keep them from accepting development aid to finance projects by and for women, a step that, at the same time, opened the doors for a process of institutionalization and professionalization of the feminist movement, which, at that time in the seventies, was engaged in the search of identity.

The Mexican feminist movement has never had a social base of support, nor has it succeeded in mobilizing the masses for any of its gender-related demands. It had arisen from the organization of a group of middle-class women whose position in society, along with the resources available to them, determined the demands articulated as strategic interests of the gender. From the very beginning the goal of this group was the establishment of an autonomous movement, removed from any type of practical interests.

Given this situation, it established alliances with other social and political agents in order to compensate for the absence of a wide social base and for the scarcity of public spaces. Once it abandoned the logic of a growing self-awareness, it widened its strategy of forming alliances with political and academic arenas in order to prepare its struggle for power, the ultimate end of which was to be the transformation of patriarchal society.

By the end of the seventies and the beginning of the 1980s, the lack of organized democratic structures which characterized the first two phases of the movement, as well as the impossibility of applying strategies which would be in conformity with the existence of a plurality of political identities and policies, led all the coalitions and alliances to failure. The "National Federation for the Liberation and the Rights of Women", for example, was incapable of articulating a politics of hegemony because the parties of the left that constituted it lacked a social base. Neither was it capable of supporting decisively

the politics of gender because the parties rejected this. From this moment on it is possible to detect a certain short-sightedness of the movement as it preferred to focus all its actions on the demand for abortion – in a society with a strong conservative influence of the Catholic Church and with structures of male domination characterized by a hegemonic hyper-masculinity that is even accepted, reproduced and defended by many women. This hyper-masculinity predominates in all areas of society, and it rejects violently the efforts to transform the gender regimen - neglecting, thereby, also other important social conflicts that have an existential impact on women. From this perspective it is possible to explain the ambivalent attitude towards domestic labor that still has strong features of servitude in Mexico. In addition, also from this same perspective, it remains an established fact that the topic of abortion will never be able to obtain wide social acceptance.<sup>1</sup>

The feminism popular in the 1980s attempted to relate the category of gender of class, and the practical interests with the gender strategies. These efforts generated a new type of activists who tried to establish relations between the political camp and feminism, between the political camp and the social movements, and between feminism and the popular movements.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to this new direction, new coalitions have been formed among the actors of the different camps, which, over time, end up becoming representatives of the interests specific to the women's movement.

The activists of the base learned very quickly that material questions were also questions that were articulated as the gender demands of. From then on, new positions within feminism were developing. The women who came from feminism and who shared a perspective that differed from the one of the activists of the popular movements had difficulties with opening their ideas to other viewpoints. They restricted themselves to attempts of recruiting members for the feminist movement without succeeding in developing a theoretical position and a hegemonic policy that would be capable of integrating the struggles of the popular movements into the struggles of feminism. This conflict is present in all of Latin-America, and it was discussed in the 4 th Latin-American Feminist and Caribbean Conference which took place in Taxco, in 1987. This conference clarified the difficulties that exist for the elaboration of a hegemonic policy. The issue faced was how to combine emancipation and self-determination in the Latin American environment of poverty and the lack of democracy. The final document of this conference, composed by a small group of feminists, noted the difficulty of reconciling the multiple differences among the various groups. An appeal was then made for a recognition of these differences so that a common action plan could be generated. It was deemed necessary to restate the relations between gender, class and ethnicity, and to structure a wider feminist project that would include the entire society.

Sonia Alvarez has analyzed how the Feminist Encounters of Latin-America and the Caribbean, which began in 1981, not only furnished an adequate opportunity for the collective discussion of the identity of the women's and feminist movements in Latin America, but also inaugurated a Forum in which the conflicts and the differences of the diverging groups could be confronted within an international context. These "Encounters" took place first within the frame-work of a logic of solidarity, enabling the formation of local political identities by means of establishing relations of solidarity with other local political identities which were experiencing similar local as well as national processes of marginalization. It was at these encounters where Lesbians, women of the labor unions, of the rural or urban movements, women belonging to diverse ethnic groups and to NGO's (Non Governmental Organizations), academics, guerilla-fighters and militants of the political parties discussed their struggle for social and political rights, based on their conceptions of social justice and of the goals of different feminisms (Alvarez, 2000)

The NGO's of women began to prepare themselves for discussions and interventions on an international level. They acquired more and more representative importance as they focused on the planning and implementation of projects related to gender issues. During this process, their principal

concern was the re-structuring of the relations with the State and the political arena. They abandoned the position of absolute independence in order to make room for a conception of an autonomy that could coexist with activity within the political arena. From this moment, the work in Mexico took several directions: some groups defended their position regarding a radical autonomy, others developed a more pragmatic strategy concerned with politics, while trying to maintain “an equilibrium between what is politically correct (ethics), and politically possible (action)” (Tarres Barraza 1999:244). Another part committed itself to practices of “lobbying and seeking allies” with the aim of influencing political decisions of the ministries, parliaments and national governments.

The NGO's of women in Latin-America have had a growing interest in transnational politics to the extent that, increasingly, they participate in the preparation of conferences organized by the United Nations, and re-orienting their activities towards the implementation of trans-national, inter-governmental policies. Their main interest is directed towards the widening of formal rights, as well as toward the possibility of influencing state policy. This change of emphasis resulted in the rise of a new type of activists and the creation of new alliances among trans-national activists who work in NGO's, in inter-governmental organizations and state institutions (Alvarez 2000). This process, incubated since the middle of the 1990s on the local and national level, has been, at the same time, growing on the international level. The principal goal of this process consists in implementing gender policies that have been recognized by the member states of the United Nations. Thus, within this context, Mexican feminist organizations have completed their transition from a stance of general opposition to the patriarchy and all its institutions within the State and society to a politics of concrete interests in local, national, and trans-national struggles.

In the decade of the 1990s, the feminist movement directed its strategies towards widening communication with women of political and academic camps. For this purpose, they organized discussion forums<sup>3</sup> attended by militants of the parties, of popular organizations and of the universities (Tunon 1997:63). They also organized the National Convention for Democracy, and the pre-candidates for the convention met with academic women in order to discuss strategies for political struggle. Plans included reaching a greater degree of professionalism with the aim of achieving a greater impact on politics.

In the forum of discussions organized by “The Feminist Debate” in June, 1991, and entitled “To whom does politics belong? - Crisis of Representation: the Interests of Women in the Electoral Struggle”, the documented intent was to establish alliances with militants of political parties and with those of popular movements. Here again the necessity arose for working out an organic project of universal character that would lead to an abandonment of partisan positions, and thereby express the need to comprehend the feminist perspective as part of a total plan.. (“To whom does politics belong?” 1991:12). The representatives of the political parties formulated strategic perspectives, and they demanded from feminism a concrete project with clear perspectives on how to implement them,<sup>4</sup> as well as the ability to establish alliances with diverse social actors, regardless of their positions (To whom does politics belong? 1991:15).

The representatives of the grass-roots movements attempted to find a solution to the dilemma of how to engage in politics with women of the popular classes, i.e. how to articulate the demands of feminism within the framework of the economic and social needs of grass roots women. These attempts, however, were not met with a response from within the faction of autonomous feminists who insisted on monopolizing the definition of feminism. Based on the fact of the sexual difference, they intended to elaborate a project for “the improvement of the position of women in the existing social and political order”, at the same time aspiring to building a new social order (“De quien es la politica” (Whose politics is it) 1991:64). The solution offered by feminism of this kind implies the realization of a “feminist social contract” which would allow women to establish bonds of trust and to recognize

leadership based on professionalism and competence ("De quien es la politica," 1991:69). This debate brought to the fore the obstacles that create a confrontation and which would have as its goal entering the field of politics and negotiating alliances with the grass roots movements.

The conceptual positions around the definition of sexual difference and of feminism, the difficulty of developing critical positions in the face of the male political culture and the abandonment of spaces of self-affirmation (Lovera 1991:257-258; Bedregal 1991:259-260), as well as the plurality of interests of feminist groups and political parties that contradict one another, led, during the convention, to a minimum of consensus and the omission of discussion about gender democracy and the development of a feminist political platform. Thus, autonomous feminism was left with defending proposals far removed from the arena of the social conflicts of the majority. As it is not clear about its own role as a social movement, it engaged in attempts to move towards becoming a political movement, without, however, succeeding in shaping a coherent and hegemonic position. Thus, the actions of autonomous feminism focused on certain particular spaces, orienting itself more and more towards professionalism and efficiency within the traditional political space, thereby moving away from the emancipatory goals which it originally defended.

On the other hand, at the end of the 1990s, one could observe in Mexico a growing strength of the GNO's that enabled them to count on major cultural and social resources. These advantages allowed them to develop hierarchical organizational structures that responded to the international needs and requirements of professionalization. The price that these NGO's paid for financing and consolidating their work led them to abandon the practices of GNO - autonomy, organizational experiments, selectivity as far as the choice of political allies with whom to establish coalitions is concerned, and to reformulate their social and political relations with the grass roots movements of the 5. Politically, they broke their ties with social movements in order to redefine themselves socially as providers of services to women of the popular classes, and not any longer to defined themselves as political advocates (Tunon 1997:104). On the other hand, international organizations that have the support funds tend to favor processes of professionalization. They support experts in questions of gender, displacing the women of the grass roots movements who fight for their political and social rights or those who have feminist goals and objectives critical of masculine domination. The consequence of this development is the marginalization of the women of the popular movements and their absolute dependence on feminist professionals who do not always incorporate or attend to their demands.

With this logic one can no longer hope that the NGO's will contribute to the development of gender democracy. The abyss that has opened up since the decade of the 1980s between the women of the popular classes and the feminist movement grows larger, not only because of the professionalization of the NGO's, but also because of the growing poverty of women and the disintegration of networks of family solidarity (Enrique Rosas 2001:57-59). Programs designed to fight poverty only reach women who can count on certain resources, as the services of the NGO's only are for clients who are solvent.

In summary, we can observe that the last three decades of the feminist movement can be grouped on the basis of three different elements that have characterized the strategies and concepts of its struggle: the first decade was dominated by the logic of self awareness and independence, making itself present in the public spaces by means of protests; in the second decade it is it is the logic of solidarity and identity which form the ground on which solidarity groups are built and within which feminists believe that they can help the grass roots women "understand and assume their condition as women within the framework of politics" (Lamas 1988:338). The third decade represents the phase of negotiations during which the relation of feminism and politics is reformulated. In this phase feminists asked themselves about the adequacy of strategies to influence social organization, the political system and the culture.

The feminist movement that shaped itself in public spaces at the beginning of the 1970s tried to relate feminism, in practice and in theory, to anti-capitalism.

The question then was how to find a way to transform, from a feminist perspective, the relations of production and of the reproduction of life. The experiences of popular feminism in the 1980s were not able to influence feminist theory and, therefore, did not advance discussion of the problem of the conditions of class and did not develop a new focus that would enrich both class and gender perspectives. Rather, feminism retreated into culturalist positions which, without ceasing to be legitimate, are difficult to universalize. The result was that this form of feminism lost sight of the material conditions of life, which mean that, on the one hand it was not any longer capable of developing a politics of open and diverse identities and, on the other hand, the attempts were abandoned to mediate the situation of class and of gender. The change into NGO's and the trans-nationalization of feminism in the 1990s has made possible a privileged access to material, political and symbolic resources for an elite group of women, but it has not been able to implant mechanisms that would democratize the access to power, or that would create the possibility of restructuring relations between grass roots women of and professional elites. Neither has it been able to the control of the articulation of the demands that come from local and regional areas.

## **PERSPECTIVES**

If we consider the last thirty years of the Mexican feminist movement, we are able to note a series of positive advances of great significance comparable to the successes attained by the international feminist movement. Feminism has achieved a presence in the public sphere and, in this way, it has been able to articulate its gender-related demands discursively on local, national and international levels. Thanks to its interventions in politics by means of legal reforms, its projects for the implementation of public policies and its work within the NGO's, it has succeeded in politicizing gender issues, thereby giving them a high degree of legitimacy. At the same time it has contributed to the institutionalization of certain forms of autonomy vis-à-vis the State, the political parties and other social actors. It also has transformed political and cultural discourse, thereby reaching a wide social acceptance of gender politics. By pushing forward the process of democratization in these latter years, it has been able to introduce successfully issues of gender-related justice into the democratic agenda, as well as to widen the political, social and civil rights of women. By means of the institutionalization and the professionalization of the movement, feminism has achieved recognition, strength and legitimacy on the local, regional and trans-national levels. Through the internationalization of the gender studies at universities it also has acquired the capacity to shape national and global policies.

On the other hand, the trajectory followed by the feminist movement in the last three decades has generated a series of problems that must be confronted critically if new emancipatory perspectives are to be developed. The collaboration of feminist activists with political parties, State institutions, NGO's and the inter-governmental organizations has had negative repercussions on the legitimacy of autonomous feminist groups, but also on the representative character of the movement as well as with its relation to other social movements. The professionalization of the militant feminist groups that resulted from being financed by the NGO's, the institutionalization of gender studies and the mutation of the activists groups into official political circles that defend the politics of gender, has led to a privileged position not only of strategies and spaces of political intervention that aim primarily at transforming discourses and gender representations, it has also contributed to producing a "gender technocracy" that specializes more and more in the implementation of processes, leaving aside strategies and spheres that would favor processes of self-awareness, empowerment and social and economic transformation (Alvarez 1997:161, Fischer 2000:271, Wichterich 2001).

The feminist movement has so far not been able to establish itself as a mediator between practical gender interests of social movements and the strategic gender interests defended by the autonomous feminists. For this reason the distance between the movements of the base and the professionals of feminism has been growing wider and wider, and their conflicts have become irreconcilable. This has

led many young women to become active outside feminist ranks and to join the fights against capitalist globalization without worrying about contributing to the development of global feminism,

For this contribution to happen, the movement in Mexico would have to recover the sense of its autonomy and recreate the meaning of feminism as a social movement. This would imply that it establish itself as an actor within civil society, adopting an organic character in order to mobilize the grass roots and to organize fronts of protest against the neo-liberal State, world capitalism and its globalization. The political participation would have to avoid marginalizing women of the popular movements or indigenous women, and it would have to respect the forms of autonomous organization of various feminisms. It would also have to channel the diversity of interests towards a global position, without losing sight of the fact that such a proposal can only be hegemonic if it is open to a plurality of political identities. On the other hand, it would be necessary to begin building transnational bridges that would become areas of contact or communication between local, regional and national feminist movements and as well as other transnational social movements opposed to globalization. Within these areas of contact it will be necessary to develop strategies for the translation of demands, interests and actions in order to build alliances and strengthen the struggles against capitalism and globalization.

Above all, it is necessary to consider those factors that enable the connection of local to transnational movements and to those factors that make it impossible for local movements to trans-nationalize their demands and their fights. These latter impediments result in local movements remaining cut off from the global movement, thus being condemned to isolation.

On the theoretical and conceptual level, feminism needs to rethink the relation of the symbolic or cultural sphere with gender, but it must do so by starting from the material conditions of production and reproduction of life, as well as from the conditions that make it possible to articulate struggles against masculine domination. It must do so by developing a critical project regarding the transformation of society and thereby becoming inclusive of other ethnic roots and social classes.

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## NOTES

1 Because of the struggles of feminism, Mexican women have begun to claim their right to the self-determination of their own bodies and their maternity -- even when, because of their religious beliefs, the majority of them cannot accept the legalization of abortion .

2 Many of the activists of the People's Urban Movement (MUP) were then affiliated with different political parties (PRI,PRD,PRT). Some feminists who participate in the Popular Urban Movement as activists within the NGO's also were militants of the political parties.

3 The forums organized by the Review Debate Feminista intended to establish a "bridge between academic work and the political arena that would contribute to the feminist investigation and theory inside and outside the academic institutions". (Lamas 1990:1)

4 Beatriz Paredes, a member of the PRI, and then governor of the State of Tlaxcala , thinks that the National Convention of Women failed in its objectives because it had limited the discussions to the differences among the feminist groups rather than focusing on the political platforms of the parties (1991:38).

5 Tarres Baraza reaches the conclusion in his investigation of the Mexican NGO's

that only the newly constituted and under-funded organizations function horizontally and in an egalitarian manner, while the rest of the organizations with solid financing adopt a logic that allows them to reach their goals (1999.229)

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