

Feminist organisation and the future of women's human rights: the perspective from Brazil¹

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This year, along with the 25th anniversary of CEDAW, women in Brazil have much to celebrate. Indeed, in response to demands from feminist and women's movements, President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva has established 2004 as *Ano da Mulher* (Women's Year). Besides, this past July, as part of the agenda for the year, the Special Bureau of Policies for Women (SPM-*Secretaria Especial de Políticas para Mulheres*), also created by President Lula and with a cabinet status, held the First National Conference on Policies for Women (*I Conferência Nacional de Políticas para Mulheres*).

Close to two thousand women delegates, chosen by their peers in regional and state conferences, assembled in Brasília to discuss and elaborate the directives for a national plan geared towards gender equity. The entire process mobilized nearly 300,000 women throughout the country, showing not only our ability to articulate diverse interests and demands, but, more importantly, showing also the real potential of feminist organisation to carry them through. This should explain why I am still in such a cheerful mood regarding the future of women's human rights in Brazil, and willing to share, with all of you, what we have learned from this entire process.

Let it be remembered that twenty-five years ago, when CEDAW was drawn and approved by the United Nations, Brazil was still under the dictatorial military regime established with the 1964 *coup*, that severely silenced all protesting voices. Thus, only in 1984, after the so-called *abertura* or political "opening up" process was well under way, did our government finally approve and sign the terms of CEDAW.² Furthermore, nearly two decades elapsed before our first official country report was elaborated and

¹ Paper elaborated for presentation at the conference "Global Challenges to Women's Human Rights: Twenty-five years of CEDAW", organized by Womenkind Worldwide; Portcullis House, Westminster, September 9, 2004.

² Even so, with reservations, due to the non-existence of legal divorce in the country. It took another ten years, and a new Federal Constitution (passed in 1988), before all the reservations were lifted. Since then, however, Brazil has ratified all international treaties and conventions fostering women's human rights.

presented to the CEDAW Committee.³ In point of fact, the first Committee review of our progresses and shortcomings, and the members' recommendations for Brazil to comply with the agreed upon terms, were presented just last year (in 2003).

In all fairness, it must be stated that SEDIM (*Secretaria de Estado dos Direitos da Mulher*), the State Bureau for Women's Rights, created in 2001 by the Cardoso administration, did not measure efforts in preparing the aforementioned country report. Indeed, it commissioned a *Consortium* formed by a group of well known and respected feminist NGO's, as well the assistance of highly regarded scholars, who took responsibility for the elaboration of the document.

Let it be noted that some of the same NGO's (such as AGENDE and CLADEM, for example) participated in the elaboration of the so-called "shadow report" presented to the CEDAW Committee in May of 2003.⁴ This alternative report involved the collaboration of thirteen national and regional feminist networks, and was also presented to the newly elected government of President Lula da Silva, as a means of "building a dialogue and the improvement of the quality of federal programs and actions towards poverty eradication, and the promotion of equity and justice."⁵

As Coordinator of REDOR (the Feminist Network of Women's Studies Centres in the North and Northeast Regions), one of the networks involved, I took part in this process, collecting suggestions and case studies from the affiliated groups and scholars. I must confess that, although thus familiarized with part of the information that was being compiled, I still was utterly distressed in reading the final document. It showed that despite the real advancements in the legislation pertaining to women's rights registered since 1984, when Brazil first ratified CEDAW, the gap between "law and life" still remained very wide for the great majority of Brazilian women.

Nonetheless, this should not come as a surprise. Indeed, current debates on women's human rights in Brazil have called attention to two distinct - even contradictory - processes that have profound implications for the formulation of policies regarding women's issues. On the one hand, we have witnessed, in the last three decades, the gradual re-democratisation of our political institutions, a process marked by the

³ It was elaborated and presented in 2002.

⁴ "Documento do Movimento de Mulheres para o Cumprimento da Convenção sobre a Eliminação de Todas as Formas de Discriminação contra as Mulher – CEDAW, pelo Estado Brasileiro: Propostas e Recomendações"; Brasília:AGENDE: São Paulo: CLADEM, 2003.

⁵ "Documento...", 2003, p.01.

emergence of new actors - women among them - in the national arena, rendering events such as the forthcoming National Conference a possibility. On the other hand, however, we have suffered, in the same period, a severe economic crunch. More specifically, Brazilians have seen the effects of a perverse combination of the processes of globalisation, production re-structuring, and the large-scale advancement of neo-liberal politics, which have made labour relations even more fragile and resulted in the widespread impoverishing of the population. In particular, the implementation of fiscal adjustment policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund, with the consequent shrinking of the State and severe cuts to social programs, have rendered the life of the Brazilian poor labouring classes even more difficult, if not downright painful. Besides, the gap between “rich and poor” has widened even more, as neo-liberal politics has fostered increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of few. Indeed, at present, the average income of the 10% richest segment of the population is 28 times greater than the average income of the poorest 40%. Such a “score” has assured to Brazil the shameful position as the fourth country in the world in terms of concentration of wealth.⁶

As such, despite the important advancements made towards the re-establishment of political and citizenship rights which have culminated with Lula’s inauguration as President, Brazilian society is still profoundly marked by social inequalities, particularly those resulting from the intersection of gender, class, race, age, and other equally widespread social determinants.

More importantly, even if inequalities between women and men still persist, they have tended to narrow within given social groups, whereas inequalities among women – specially between black and white women - have instead widened considerably. For example, data from the 2000 population census brought good news with respect to women and education. The data point out that women have supplanted men in all levels of schooling, and particularly at the university levels. However, this does not apply to all women in the same way. Whereas the proportion of white women who have completed secondary schooling has grown to 17,2%, only 10,2% of all black women have reached that same status. Similar differentials were found in terms of College education: 7.7% among white women, and a mere 1.9% for non-white females.⁷

⁶ BARROS, Ricardo Paes de, HENRIQUES, Ricardo and MENDONÇA, Rosane. A estabilidade inaceitável: desigualdades e pobreza no Brasil. IPEA – Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, Texto para Discussão no. 800. Rio de Janeiro: IPEA, 2001.

⁷ IBGE (2003). *Síntese de Indicadores Sociais*. Rio de Janeiro: IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística).

Yet, women as a whole still earn lower average incomes than men, regardless of their colour/ethnic groups and independent of their level of schooling. As matter of fact, the distortions increase as we move up in terms of years of schooling. Nevertheless, white women, as a whole, earn more than black men, while black women earn, on average, half of the earnings of white women and a mere fourth of what white men receive. Besides, black women tend to face the most precarious conditions of insertion in the labour market, a large proportion still working as domestic servants.

These statistics gain significance as well to current debates on the “feminisation of poverty”. In Brazil, at least, this is not necessarily a “feminist fable”; studies have revealed that households headed by women present greater vulnerability to poverty than other households, in that the female heads are more likely to be among the unemployed or working part time, and pooling, on average, more reduced earnings .⁸

Insofar as this situation is more crucial in the case of families headed by black women, poverty reduction policies in Brazil must take a gender and race approach. By the same token, poverty reduction and the fight against racism are among the fundamental challenges posed to feminist activists in seeing that public policies for women, are in fact “universal”, that is to say, make a difference for all women.

This is especially so for those of us, like myself, living in the northeastern State of Bahia - the state which concentrates the largest black population in Brasil and stands as one of the poorest in the country. For certain, feminists from Bahia will need to take a strong stand in favour of affirmative action policies on gender and race lines, as well as press for stronger and more inclusive social programmes geared at poor families, particularly those headed by women.

Of course, this is not necessarily a “novelty” to feminism in Brazil. To the contrary, for some time already, and for the great majority of feminist groups and organisations, in fact, it has been clear that, as Anne Marie Goetz rightly observes, “(...) credible feminist alternatives to fundamentalisms - market fundamentalisms or religious ones – require a moral vision that goes beyond gender equality.”⁹

⁸ LAVINAS, Lena (1996). “As mulheres no universo da pobreza: o caso brasileiro”. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, v.4, no.2, pp.:464-479.

⁹ GOETZ, Anne Marie. (2004) Reinvigorating Autonomous Feminist Spaces. *IDS Bulletin*, Vol.35, No.4, p.138.

However, for Brazilian and Latin American feminists, as a whole – and possibly for feminists throughout the “South” – this has involved not only efforts towards “reinvigorating autonomous feminist spaces,” as Goetz further suggests, but perhaps even more importantly, involved efforts also in the way of networking and building alliances across different feminist and women’s organizations, as well as across those active in other social movements, be they regional, national or international, and accomplished either by “virtual” or “face to face” encounters.

I believe this explains why participation in the World Social Forums (I, II, III in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the IVth, held this past February in India) has seemed particularly important to all of us from the South. Indeed, it has been a major means of articulating spaces for “joining forces” and cementing cross-the-border support both for our common and “specific” causes. As Sonia Alvarez well put it, “another world (also feminist...) is possible.”¹⁰

In Brazil, reflections of the belief in this “another world”, and of the wider “moral vision” and intensive networking it has entailed, were already apparent in the “Feminist Political Programme” (*Plataforma Política Feminista*), elaborated for the 2002 national elections. Drawn up through a process of women state conferences launched by the Articulation of Brazilian Women (*AMB-Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras*), a network of women’s forums and feminist groups throughout the country, and approved in a national conference also held in Brasília, the Feminist Political Programme advanced women’s demands far beyond gender-specific issues. Indeed, we dared to voice our position regarding the future of the country at large.

But one would not expect that the regional, state wide and National Conferences, organized as they were by government agencies, could forge a document as progressive as the Feminist Political Programme. In point of fact, patriarchal relations are still very strong in the Brazilian hinterlands, particularly in the Northeast region, which means that, despite the “capillarity” activated in the conference process, many delegates were not only far from being “activists”, but also of even supporting established demands of the women’s movements. Some communities, in fact, even sent men as delegates to the women’s conference – one community in Bahia sending a Catholic priest who was heard saying that he had come to “crush any proposal

¹⁰ ALVAREZ, Sonia E. (2003). Um outro mundo (também feminista...) é possível: construindo espaços transnacionais e alternativas globais a partir dos movimentos. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, Vol. 11, No.2, pp: 1-7.

favouring the decriminalisation of abortion”. Another delegation from the southernmost tip of the same state, attempted to appoint a man as national delegate, but was forced to withdraw his name after the loud majority of participants in the State Conference voiced their protest.

Surprisingly – and regardless of these many shortcomings – delegates to the National Conference worked for three long days and produced, approved and acclaimed a considerably progressive document. Even the polemical issue of “decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion”, was approved by a very wide margin, eliciting an emotional celebration by feminists, like myself, who have been fighting for this for decades. Yet, I believe that such a move could not have been possible without the intense “networking” that took place before and during the Conferences (unfortunately, as it often happens, not always on friendly terms). Nor would it be possible to produce a document of potential Political, Social, Economic, and Cultural consequence – with capital letters indeed – such as the one which resulted from the National Conference, if feminists remained exclusively in the terrain of discourse of gender equity. Not that gender equity is no longer important – to the contrary, it is our ultimate goal. But it is clear to feminists active in Brazil – and I am sure my fellow comrades from the South would also agree – that to achieve “real” gender equity, we must unite efforts to eliminate other forms of social exclusion and inequality (based on race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc.) which so deeply differentiate and establish hierarchies among women.

Finally, I must confess that my optimism about the National Conference – indeed, about the future of women’s human rights in Brazil - does not necessarily rely on faith in the federal government’s apparent commitment to women’s issues. In point of fact, to this day, Lula has yet to answer our demands for the nomination of a feminist as head of the Special Bureau for Women’s Policies.

Of course, I do recognize that the designation of 2004 as *Ano da Mulher*, as well as the calling for the First National Conference on Policies for Women, have already had a positive impact on the course of women’s struggles in Brazil towards gender equality. Indeed, they have finally granted visibility and legitimacy to these struggles, for long claimed and deserved by feminism in Brazil.

However, I would rather place my trust on women - the real protagonists of this story -, and on the never ending resourcefulness and creativity of feminist organisations in the

art of reinventing themselves and producing new forms of struggling in this ever changing and adverse world.