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Sexism in the World Social Forum Is Another World Possible?

February 2005

By **Ana Elena Obando**, *WHRnet*

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The violence against women in the Youth Camp of the World Social Forum (WSF) is a stark reminder that Forum's exclusion or failure to include a gendered perspective, is not only detrimental politically to social movement building, but it has real and harmful effects on women, personally. This article analyzes sexist contradictions at the WSF, and challenges resistance movements to build a more inclusive vision of 'another world'.

Contradictions in the Revolution

Between January 26 and 31, 2005 diverse political, cultural, spiritual, environmental and social movements from all regions around the world converged in Porto Alegre Brazil to resist, dialogue, dance, analyze, dream, meditate and build an alternative vision for the world- or like the WSF moniker states "another world is possible". Yet within this process the hopeful groups and individuals came face to face with both the long term and short term limitations and contradiction that have plagued larger movement building.

Contradiction #1: the common denominator amongst the resistance movements I encountered was their general opposition to neoliberal capitalism, militarization, war and the destruction of the environment and their lack of opposition to one of the expressions of patriarchy that is intertwined with those above: fundamentalisms, particularly religious fundamentalisms.

Feminists from Latin America introduced the issue of fundamentalisms at the World Social Forum (WSF) through the *Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur* (Marcosur Feminist Organization) Campaign; this issue is not part of the structure of the political discussion at the forum, in spite of the threat it represents to democracy and the principles of equality and diversity of identities and beliefs. People are also subjugated by alliances between political, economic and ideological-religious fundamentalist groups. The fundamentalist discourse wielded by the right in the United States to win votes during the last elections is contrary to the most basic human rights principles it calls for control over the bodies and the sexuality of LGTBI people. It also perpetuates values that keep women in their traditional roles.

Resistance movements need to struggle against more than economic and political fundamentalism of U.S. imperialism. Expressions of fundamentalism are mutually supportive and are borne of the same logic that confers absolute power on economic systems like capitalism, on fascist political systems like that of the United States or on religious systems for the interests of a corporate elite that makes money by exporting war, in the name of God.

This is not to say that social movements and churches cannot or do not work together. Fundamentalisms are ultimately a political, and not a religious movement. Liberation theology, for example, has supported just causes and has fought against some fundamentalisms. For this reason the political and ideological role of religious groups and their commitment to social justice must be more openly explored.

The question is not only how social movements work with religion, but it is still how vision of revolution includes support and experience from a range of feminists. For example, the *Manifiesto of Porto Alegre*, which establishes 12 points synthesizing what the forum supposedly proposes globally, was written by 18 men and 1 woman.

The WSF is an open space for meetings and organizations. It is not a representative body for global civil society, and therefore no one can assume the right to speak in the name of the entire group, as those who created the *Manifiesto* did. This is an asymmetrical, antidemocratic and sexist practice of power which is far from efforts to create an equitable, fair and just model of society.

The manifesto included the struggle for public policies against all forms of discrimination. However, it also included: canceling public debt in the South; achieving full employment and social protection; dismantling tax havens; adopting fairer commerce; prohibiting patenting of living beings and knowledge; abolishing the privatization of water; democratizing international organizations; guaranteeing the right to information and the right to be informed; dismantling foreign military bases and ending environmental destruction, none of which were articulated from a gendered perspective- and there were no claims to consider gender as an addendum.

This failure to incorporate a feminist perspective in addressing the issues, suggests a belief that these issues are independent of the subordination of women, although women are half the population of the world, and often the poorest and the ones who supply the services that are being privatized.

That this small group included the struggle against discriminations does not mean that they or the movements that meet at the WSF are conscious of the interaction of the multiple oppressions that different systems of domination and exploitation entail or of the need to mainstream a feminist gender perspective in their struggles as a fundamental pillar of resistance.

This contradiction; this compartmentalized and undemocratic resistance reiterates the need for increased sensitization work with other civil society movements. As feminists we again have added duty of ensuring a gendered perspective in the building of an alternative world, that is, the resistance within the resistance. Therefore, we must continue to fight against many forms of capitalistic patriarchy while strengthening the movement from the inside and raising the consciousness of those who believe the revolution is possible. "Revolutionary patience", as

Brazilian women say, "or a form of forced maternity? You decide".

The third contradiction is the so-called mainstreaming of gender and diversity theoretically a part of all WSF activities. Despite feminists-created spaces within the WSF, different panels and feminist debates on the Diversity Boat, for example, women continue to navigate between women and with women, incorporating in some measure the agendas, concerns and perspectives of other movements without those movements necessarily incorporating gender in any meaningful way.

How, then, do we operationalize "mainstreaming" in different spaces; at the institutional level it has resulted in policies that add the word "woman" without budgetary support or real understanding of the concept. Technically the appropriation of the term gender is meant to be synonymous with women. In the civil sphere, it would seem that the word is understood as the sum of all excluded people (the LGBT and feminist movements) whose issues, interests and needs continue to be viewed as marginal, special and not an integral part of a revolutionary struggle, as in the case of the WSF. In this way, spaces are assigned for each excluded group to debate their problems, but the "general" topics such as neoliberal globalization, for example, do not address transvestites' poverty or their lack of access to the formal labor market.

According to Les Pénélopes, of the 570 events that took place on the first day of the forum, only 25 were directly related to women's rights, 4% of the total, and in general they were related to issues of sexuality, LGBT movement struggles and violence against women. Very few struggled with the impact of war on women, an economy of solidarity or the new challenges of globalization. Additionally, the Feminist Dialogue, two days prior to the WSF, addressed the interconnections between the multiple oppressions that result from the forces of neoliberal globalization, war, conflict, militarism and militarization, and fundamentalisms.

Ultimately it should not be feminists alone who debate how war or globalization affects half the world's population or how to contribute to an economy of solidarity or the anti-imperialist struggle. For social movements more generally, it is not enough to recognize the other; it is necessary to have a (somewhat) shared vision and what actions are necessary to get us there. In the same way that racism must be deconstructed by those with power and privilege, sexism must also be deconstructed by those who call themselves revolutionaries.

Democratizing the WSF is more than the exchange of agendas, it is in a real assimilation of an intersectional feminist perspective. That is, making the connections between all systems of oppression both politically and personally.

In an article published in ALAI, César Pineda noted other contradictions springing from a meeting of various groups and people with members of the WSF Organizing Committee. While, I will not comment on them, it is important to share them so we can think through ways of moving forward. These comments included: "...It is contradictory and not ethical for various multinational agencies and companies such as the Ford Foundation or the Banco Santander to finance the WSF; that the forum must not be used by any group or person to foment an agenda for the reform of international political (UN) or financial bodies (WTO); that the forum has the duty to radicalize the types of organizations that build networks and foment action and dialogue between movements; that the forum must come up with mechanisms that support the participation of Asian and African movements equally and stop the explicit exclusion of such important groups as the EZLN; and that the forum must be a more effective instrument for concrete objectives, such as stopping the U.S. invasion of Iraq."

There are ideological inconsistencies in all movements, this process requires on-going critical reflection and development both individually and collectively. Still the WSF has provided a space for some learning and movement building. Over the years, different groups, movements and collectives have been recognized; information has been exchanged; and dialogue and understanding has inspired a counter-power, although we are still far from the level of strategic alliances between diverse movements we desire.

Feminists will continue to maintain dialogues about and between feminists, but feminists also need to work with other movements, whether inside or out of the WSF. These spaces must move beyond recognition into collective strategy-building.

Youth Camp: We're Women, Not Merchandise

Approximately 35,000 students, artisans, musicians, professionals, feminists, punks, gays, lesbians and vendors selling food, water, CDs, tee shirts, paintings, incense, drums, necklaces and many other youth attended the International Youth Camp during the World Social Forum.

Walking through Harmony Park you saw a rainbow of publicity tents, hammocks, sacred smoke, people sunbathing, flags, photos of Bush with swastikas, exhibits, cultural and health spaces, discussions, meditations and the ubiquitous images of Guevara, Marx and Bob Marley. This seemingly open and progressive space was a facade: within that very space young men kidnapped and raped women.

This crime leads to the fourth contradiction. The Ché Guevaras (look alikes) of the twenty-first century do not espouse progressive politics in their actions. It may be that for some of these young men, they have yet to connect their personal politics to their actions, and to the broader politics they profess. Some fail to see the connection between militarization and the control over women's sexuality. Other fail to see how their action or inaction perpetuates their gendered privilege.

The camp tried to create a socially progressive microcosm of political relationships and life in society. It was supposed to be the space where the values of the WSF were practiced. In this, much like the WSF it failed to include women in this safe and progressive space. There were 90 reported cases of violence against young women in the camp. These included harassment, intimidation, sexual harassment in bathrooms including men masturbating, looking at or filming naked women, and rape.

On the night of January 29, a group of young feminist women from the camp organized a march against this violence. In solidarity men and women walked throughout the camp with posters reading: "We don't want violence against women in our world" or "Everyday we fight: we are women, not merchandise."

The march inspired both support and mocking from men. The young feminists advised women not to travel through the camp alone, and the Lilac Brigades were created. In the Lilac Brigades women wore a lilac band on their arms to identify themselves as people willing and able to help young women who suffered abuse. Additionally, a process for reporting these violation was implemented through the Feminist Action Laboratory and on the Diversity Boat.

The lack of a gendered analysis for the living space on site created an unsafe living space for women. For example, participants who were not registered with the forum had free access to the camp; there were no women only spaces or campsites, and no women only showers. Moreover, that only one of the perpetrators was detained by the police showed the lack of commitment and procedure on the part of law enforcement.

The women I spoke with in the camp reacted with sadness, frustration and rage. They said that a space that permits or tolerates violence against women cannot struggle for another world. They were angered that the perpetrators were not arrested. Others asked if "another camp was possible"; in this one they felt invaded, disrespected and abused.

The majority of young men that I interviewed the day after the march expressed their solidarity with the women who were attacked and with the feminist struggle in general. They were less angered by this behaviour than the women interviewed but they were aware of and supported the feminists' demands. Discourse and practice are sometimes inconsistent. And still, some young men claimed it was the women's responsibility to prevent attacks, and they should have

known it was risky to share public bathrooms with men.

Is Another Vision Possible?

It is urgent that the WSF Organizing Committee review not only the methodologies, but their vision for another world. The WSF's sexism in practice contradicts the goal of a common, visionary struggle. We must all take responsibility for violence against women. Moreover, what of gender parity on each panel, or a mainstreamed gendered perspective? Until patriarchy, in theory and in practice, is dismantled oppression and discrimination will persist. And the old adage rings true if one is not free, then no one is free. The undemocratic organization of the WSF threatens to do harm in weakening a collective civil society as a whole. This revolution is a work in progress; and we all need to walk the walk.

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<http://alainet.org/>

Links

Les Pénélopes

<http://www.penelopes.org/Anglais/>

Les Pénélopes is committed to promoting, publishing and disseminating information, using all types of media, from a woman centred perspective.

World March of Women

<http://www.marchemondiale.org/en/cancun2003.html>

A global network for feminist action, focusing mainly on the struggles against poverty and violence against women. They believe in the globalization of solidarity; value the diversity of the women's movement; believe in the leadership of women and the importance of debating their ideas and strategies with other feminist groups and social movements.

World Social Forum

<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>

The WSF is a space to debate ideas democratically, deepen reflection, formulate proposals, share experiences and coordinate social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations. Those who participate, in theory, are opposed to neoliberalism and any form of imperialism. The WSF proposes to debate alternative means to building a global solidarity, which respects universal human rights, all men and women, the environment, is grounded in democratic international systems and institutions in service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples. Charter of Principles

Choike

http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/

Choike is a portal dedicated to improving the visibility of the work done by NGOs from the South. It serves as a platform where NGOs can disseminate their work and at the same time enrich it with information from diverse sources. Choike presents the perspectives of Southern civil society.

The Independent Media Center

<http://www.midiaindependente.org/>

The IMC Brazil is a network of independent media producers that offer alternative information and quality critiques that contribute to social justice efforts. It attempts to give voice to those often forgotten, and it is an alternative to distorted corporate media.

Rebelión (Rebellion)

<http://www.rebelion.org/seccion.php?id=5>

<http://www.rebelion.org/mujer/030404glez.htm>

Alternative media that publishes news not reported by traditional media. This organization tries to reveal the hidden political and economic interests in decision making- and news stories. It provides NGOs and socially motivated people with a radically different, more just, socially and ecologically balanced perspective.

Indymedia Argentina (Argentina Indymedia)

<http://argentina.indymedia.org/features/genero/>

The Argentina Indymedia Independent Media Center ((i)) is a non profit, democratic collective of volunteers that are the local body of the global Indymedia network. India media presents fair views and perspectives often ignored in traditional media sources.

La Minga. Informativa (La Minga Briefing)

<http://www.movimientos.org/>

La Minga is a 'communications' meeting space for networks, campaigns and coordination of social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean that belong to the Comunidad Web de Movimientos Sociales-CWMS (Web Community of Social Movements). During the Fifth World Social Forum, la Minga organized special coverage of the main events. Daily, more than 20 journalists from 10 countries wrote notes and articles that were used by social organizations and international audiences interested in the processes as sources of information and consultation.

New Issues

Mariela Jara

"El FSM excluye temas sobre derechos de mujeres (The WSF Excludes Women's Rights Issues)"

Pulsar-AMARC

1/31/2005

<http://pulsar.amarc.org/nota.php?id=3687>

Jara reports on Ximena Machicao's, a Bolivian feminist from REPEM, statements that women's rights issues are among those that continue to be excluded from World Social Forum debates. She said that other groups that helped to create this space for struggle against the neoliberal model and poverty have grown stronger, but in contrast, those related to racial, ethnic or women's rights are not visible. "And that is why we say that it continues to be a biased and discriminatory forum."

Articulación Feminista Marcosur (Marcosur Feminist Organization)

"Forummentalismos: Las contradicciones del forum social mundial (Forummentalisms: The Contradictions of the World Social Forum)"

CHOIKE

1/31/05

<http://www.choike.org/nuevo/informes/2554.html>

On the Marcosur Feminist Organization boat, feminists stated that the WSF had not incorporated the struggle against all types of fundamentalisms in the same way it has its opposition to neoliberal globalization and militarism.

Take Action

"Campaña por una Convención Interamericana de los Derechos Sexuales y los Derechos Reproductivos (Campaign for an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights)"

<http://www.convencion.org.uy/>

The campaign attempts to promote an international human rights instrument to advance and increase recognition and monitoring of these rights. The proposal is at the center of the political, social and ethical disputes of our time on freedom, individuals and the ways sexuality and reproduction are organized and valued in our societies. They join struggles committed to the radical democratization of life for all human beings.

Their objective is to institutionalize a rights discourse that places the recovery and reappropriation of women's bodies and lives at the center and that recognizes women as full citizens with a vision that broadens the horizon of liberties and offers new meanings to the principles of equality and non discrimination for all human beings.

Women's Global Charter for Humanity

<http://www.marchemondiviale.org/en/index.html>

Delegates of the World March of Women gathered in Kigali, Rwanda adopted the Women's Global Charter for Humanity on December 10, 2004, which proposes to build a world without exploitation, oppression, intolerance or exclusion, where integrity, diversity and the rights and freedoms of all are respected. This world is founded on equality, freedom, solidarity, and peace. The Charter contains 31 affirmations describing the principles essential to the construction of such a world. Between March 8 and October 17, 2005 the Women's Global Charter for Humanity will be made public. Women will bring the charter from country to country and organize different actions. They will also create a solidarity quilt that illustrates the values of the march.



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This contradiction; this compartmentalized and undemocratic resistance reiterates the need for increased sensitization work with other civil society movements. As feminists we again have added duty of ensuring a gendered perspective in the building of an alternative world, that is, the resistance within the resistance. Therefore, we must continue to fight against many forms of capitalistic patriarchy while strengthening the movement from the inside and raising the consciousness of those who believe the revolution is possible. "Revolutionary patience", as

Brazilian women say, "or a form of forced maternity? You decide".

The third contradiction is the so-called mainstreaming of gender and diversity theoretically a part of all WSF activities. Despite feminists-created spaces within the WSF, different panels and feminist debates on the Diversity Boat, for example, women continue to navigate between women and with women, incorporating in some measure the agendas, concerns and perspectives of other movements without those movements necessarily incorporating gender in any meaningful way.

How, then, do we operationalize "mainstreaming" in different spaces; at the institutional level it has resulted in policies that add the word "woman" without budgetary support or real understanding of the concept. Technically the appropriation of the term gender is meant to be synonymous with women. In the civil sphere, it would seem that the word is understood as the sum of all excluded people (the LGBT and feminist movements) whose issues, interests and needs continue to be viewed as marginal, special and not an integral part of a revolutionary struggle, as in the case of the WSF. In this way, spaces are assigned for each excluded group to debate their problems, but the "general" topics such as neoliberal globalization, for example, do not address transvestites' poverty or their lack of access to the formal labor market.

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This crime leads to the fourth contradiction. The Ché Guevaras (look alikes) of the twenty-first century do not espouse progressive politics in their actions. It may be that for some of these young men, they have yet to connect their personal politics to their actions, and to the broader politics they profess. Some fail to see the connection between militarization and the control over women's sexuality. Other fail to see how their action or inaction perpetuates their gendered privilege.

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The march inspired both support and mocking from men. The young feminists advised women not to travel through the camp alone, and the Lilac Brigades were created. In the Lilac Brigades women wore a lilac band on their arms to identify themselves as people willing and able to help young women who suffered abuse. Additionally, a process for reporting these violation was implemented through the Feminist Action Laboratory and on the Diversity Boat.

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The majority of young men that I interviewed the day after the march expressed their solidarity with the women who were attacked and with the feminist struggle in general. They were less angered by this behaviour than the women interviewed but they were aware of and supported the feminists' demands. Discourse and practice are sometimes inconsistent. And still, some young men claimed it was the women's responsibility to prevent attacks, and they should have

known it was risky to share public bathrooms with men.

Is Another Vision Possible?

It is urgent that the WSF Organizing Committee review not only the methodologies, but their vision for another world. The WSF's sexism in practice contradicts the goal of a common, visionary struggle. We must all take responsibility for violence against women. Moreover, what of gender parity on each panel, or a mainstreamed gendered perspective? Until patriarchy, in theory and in practice, is dismantled oppression and discrimination will persist. And the old adage rings true if one is not free, then no one is free. The undemocratic organization of the WSF threatens to do harm in weakening a collective civil society as a whole. This revolution is a work in progress; and we all need to walk the walk.

Bibliography

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Links

Les Pénélopes

<http://www.penelopes.org/Anglais/>

Les Pénélopes is committed to promoting, publishing and disseminating information, using all types of media, from a woman centred perspective.

World March of Women

<http://www.marchemondiale.org/en/cancun2003.html>

A global network for feminist action, focusing mainly on the struggles against poverty and violence against women. They believe in the globalization of solidarity; value the diversity of the women's movement; believe in the leadership of women and the importance of debating their ideas and strategies with other feminist groups and social movements.

World Social Forum

<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>

The WSF is a space to debate ideas democratically, deepen reflection, formulate proposals, share experiences and coordinate social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations. Those who participate, in theory, are opposed to neoliberalism and any form of imperialism. The WSF proposes to debate alternative means to building a global solidarity, which respects universal human rights, all men and women, the environment, is grounded in democratic international systems and institutions in service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples. Charter of Principles

Choike

http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/

Choike is a portal dedicated to improving the visibility of the work done by NGOs from the South. It serves as a platform where NGOs can disseminate their work and at the same time enrich it with information from diverse sources. Choike presents the perspectives of Southern civil society.

The Independent Media Center

<http://www.midiaindependente.org>

The IMC Brazil is a network of independent media producers that offer alternative information and quality critiques that contribute to social justice efforts. It attempts to give voice to those often forgotten, and it is an alternative to distorted corporate media.

Rebelión (Rebellion)

<http://www.rebelion.org/seccion.php?id=5>

<http://www.rebelion.org/mujer/030404glez.htm>

Alternative media that publishes news not reported by traditional media. This organization tries to reveal the hidden political and economic interests in decision making- and news stories. It provides NGOs and socially motivated people with a radically different, more just, socially and ecologically balanced perspective.

Indymedia Argentina (Argentina Indymedia)

<http://argentina.indymedia.org/features/genero/>

The Argentina Indymedia Independent Media Center ((i)) is a non profit, democratic collective of volunteers that are the local body of the global Indymedia network. India media presents fair views and perspectives often ignored in traditional media sources.

La Minga. Informativa (La Minga Briefing)

<http://www.movimientos.org/>

La Minga is a 'communications' meeting space for networks, campaigns and coordination of social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean that belong to the Comunidad Web de Movimientos Sociales-CWMS (Web Community of Social Movements). During the Fifth World Social Forum, la Minga organized special coverage of the main events. Daily, more than 20 journalists from 10 countries wrote notes and articles that were used by social organizations and international audiences interested in the processes as sources of information and consultation.

New Issues

Mariela Jara

"El FSM excluye temas sobre derechos de mujeres (The WSF Excludes Women's Rights Issues)"

Pulsar-AMARC

1/31/2005

<http://pulsar.amarc.org/nota.php?id=3687>

Jara reports on Ximena Machicao's, a Bolivian feminist from REPEM, statements that women's rights issues are among those that continue to be excluded from World Social Forum debates. She said that other groups that helped to create this space for struggle against the neoliberal model and poverty have grown stronger, but in contrast, those related to racial, ethnic or women's rights are not visible. "And that is why we say that it continues to be a biased and discriminatory forum."

Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur (Marcosur Feminist Organization)

"Forummentalismos: Las contradicciones del forum social mundial (Forummentalisms: The Contradictions of the World Social Forum)"

CHOIKE

1/31/05

<http://www.choike.org/nuevo/informes/2554.html>

On the Marcosur Feminist Organization boat, feminists stated that the WSF had not incorporated the struggle against all types of fundamentalisms in the same way it has its opposition to neoliberal globalization and militarism.

Take Action

"Campaña por una Convenci3n Interamericana de los Derechos Sexuales y los Derechos Reproductivos (Campaign for an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights)"

<http://www.convencion.org.uy/>

The campaign attempts to promote an international human rights instrument to advance and increase recognition and monitoring of these rights. The proposal is at the center of the political, social and ethical disputes of our time on freedom, individuals and the ways sexuality and reproduction are organized and valued in our societies. They join struggles committed to the radical democratization of life for all human beings.

Their objective is to institutionalize a rights discourse that places the recovery and reappropriation of women's bodies and lives at the center and that recognizes women as full citizens with a vision that broadens the horizon of liberties and offers new meanings to the principles of equality and non discrimination for all human beings.

Women's Global Charter for Humanity

<http://www.marchemondiviale.org/en/index.html>

Delegates of the World March of Women gathered in Kigali, Rwanda adopted the Women's Global Charter for Humanity on December 10, 2004, which proposes to build a world without exploitation, oppression, intolerance or exclusion, where integrity, diversity and the rights and freedoms of all are respected. This world is founded on equality, freedom, solidarity, and peace. The Charter contains 31 affirmations describing the principles essential to the construction of such a world. Between March 8 and October 17, 2005 the Women's Global Charter for Humanity will be made public. Women will bring the charter from country to country and organize different actions. They will also create a solidarity quilt that illustrates the values of the march.