

Equality in Political Power

- talk

- UNG Forum

- World Conf. of women, Copenhagen

15 julho 1980

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NGO Forum Copenhagen, 1980

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Talk on "Equality in Political Power"

July 15, 1980

In "Women Building"
Brazil International Women's Network Newsletter
nº 3 - oct 1980

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Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo was invited to talk on the panel about equality, to approach the theme 'equality in political power'. This talk took place during the WORLD CONFERENCE OF WOMEN, in the non-governmental organisations forum. It is a challenge to our reflection on a problematic that we, as women, sometimes try to solve in a non-creative way.

(for more information on this World Conference, see notice entitled IMPORTANT INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL CONFERENCES)

EQUALITY IN POLITICAL POWER

Equality. With what? What are the norms? With whom are we going to be equal? I don't take for granted that the norm is men, even in the exercise of political power.

As women, if we have access to so-called political power, we have to change the very nature of that political power. We know what it has done, what it insists on doing and therefore the only real interest for women to get into the arena of political power is to bring about another type of concepts,

not only of how power is exercised, but also how you can interweave the different elements that make up the policy of a country, either interiorly or in its relations with other countries. This does mean a tremendous struggle and implies and demands uncommon attitudes, uncommon options and also a radical change of concepts. And we have to be ready to pay the price for it; I am banned by the government of my own country. Therefore any time that you attempt to change and to introduce something that is different - and not because it is different - but because you are a different being, you immediately become a threat to the establishment. You become a threat mainly, not so much because you behave according to this or that ideology but because what you say and what you do is to some extent unforeseeable.

As women, we are dealing with reality. We are - even when men call us idealistic - extremely pragmatic and it is those pragmatic steps which take into account the wellbeing of people and the basic human needs that disrupt the superstructure where men get themselves involved in a certain political order. There they like to imagine that everything goes for the best in the best of the worlds and when at the same time they get the acknowledgement of being up there on a platform, which appears to them as extremely rewarding.

I would like to start from my own experience. When have I experienced equality?

Equality, the general term, equality with men as they are, I have experienced in what I call frontier-situations. In the exciting months of rupture, of radical change. There you could not make a distinction between men and women because we were all caught in the same drive. Nobody had stereotypes at that moment - not even about political behaviour. The whole country was going to be shaped in a new way. I was not only prime-minister last year but I was minister of social affairs in the first year after the revolution in my own country and at that time equality was something that you could experience at all moments, because the revolutionary ideal got us all in the same wavelength.

I have also experienced in the contact with the people. And I can say, coming from a country which is South from the North,

that the real simple people in the rural areas, in the factories wherever, even in the shipyards, where only men work, do not discriminate at all against a woman exercising political power.

It is when we come to the upper classes of society that women exercising political power are discriminated. Because, indeed, they disrupt the prestige men have acquired and they disrupt very basically the prestige the wives of those men have, because these women are nothing but the mirrors of their husbands.

But the people in general? Thinking not only of a developing country like my own, but also of people in highly industrialized countries who have to undergo a lot of work, a lot of frustration commuting from the job to their homes being subject to all the demands of the consumer society, we verify that they too identify and recognize a woman in any function of political power without discrimination.

A third group with whom I experienced equality in a strong way has been with women who have nothing to lose. These are women who have acquired a very high degree of awareness of their situation as women and oppressed beings. When women who have nothing to lose have identified with me in my own struggle - then I have felt completely equal. I have felt behind me an esteem which is not in official figures and official laws, but is in something that gives you much more strength than the formal esteem would have.

I have also experienced equality in the traditional sense, I think we shouldn't make a point about that. At this moment in society, technical questions and managerial tasks of governing either in local, at national or even at international level, can be tackled equally by men or women. Equally, I mean, with the same capacity to deal with them in a strict point of view.

Can we say that there is equality? Of course there is not. Women practically have the right to vote everywhere, nevertheless they don't exercise their right to vote as fully as men, the percentage is always lower, they don't elect other women and there are few women in decision-making.

As a friend of mine from Finland pointed out in a recent meeting of Unitar, even when there is a great number of women and a high percentage in a national governing or legislative body -

she mentioned 26% of women in the Finnish parliament - even then you can ask if those women make a difference. Or are they, like in the labour-force, just adding to the numbers that already are there? Is there a difference?

Some quantitative facts are always pointed out: that there are more women exercising political power at the local level than at national level. Well but what after that? If those facts that we know all about are clear, I think that there is one element that is extremely important: it is that women exercising power in the traditional way may behave as men do and certainly ^{many} of us do that. But I am convinced that when the quantity will amount to a certain number, a qualitative change will take place. And the impact of women will really be felt, not only because person A, B or C is quite different and quite aware of her own being as a woman, but because that force of women will try, will express sociologically another type of concern.

I think however that the direct change at a qualitative level is very important. I think that we have to be aware that there are women who are trying to exercise political power in a way in which it is exercised on the same platform as men, but because these women are on the same platform and they are sure that they are equal, they can dare to be different. They can dare to be just what they are. And just what they are may very often mean breaking the rules as they have been used by men without really being challenged.

That being different, certainly, will point to other sets of values. There is nothing more disrupting in a society than the emergence of new values, because they will put very strong demands on the routine to which we all finally are submitted.

I would ask what is so interesting about exercising political power as men do? At the recent seminar of Unitar I could not resist telling a story which I can't resist telling now. In '75 several women ministers from Eastern and Western Europe met in Belgium at the invitation of the minister of culture.

It was a very nice cosy atmosphere. A woman who was at the time minister of justice and culture in Denmark was asking ^{a question to} the minister of health from the Netherlands. The three of us were sharing notes on what we had been doing and the one from Denmark says to the Dutch one: "Have you been doing lately?"

She thought for a while and replied: "Well, you know, a lot of nonsense and a few nice things."

I ask who are the men who would be able to say that? That a lot of the red tape in whatever administration really is a lot of nonsense; in the midst of it there are some nice things which need to be done and which indeed mean an improvement in peoples' lives.

So for me, equality is an attitude but it is also a social acknowledgement. We often tend to think more of the social acknowledgement but we have got to be ourselves.

I would like to specify some traps in which we women very often fall even in the analysis we make about women in political power. It is obvious that some special portfolios or some sectors of activity in one country have been exercised by women. Health, welfare, social affairs, education, culture, environment, these have been the first fields in which women have exercised political power at local and at national level. Often there has been criticism among us, among feminist circles saying this is that way because those sectors are 'soft' issues. In a way they are a continuation of what women have always done. I would agree to some extent. It is very seldom that you see women having responsibility in terms of foreign affairs, economics, industry. But I think that it is important to stress something. To call social and cultural issues 'soft' issues at this time, at this turning of civilization, is a trap. These issues are 'soft' for those whose concept of development, of planning, of government-program is fragmented and sectorial and goes along with the system and the rules of the status quo.

But when these issues are taken in a government-program which is basically inter-sectorial and which is geared towards the fulfillment of the needs of real people, they can be a challenge to the whole system. I know of situations in which somebody having a portfolio on a soft issue became the major threat to the establishment. Have women been aware of that? I think we are not sufficiently aware. Our action in those fields should be much more daring and much more unique in a way. Much more positive.

We should take stock of what is going on in the world.

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For me this is an example of how women are following the same pattern as men, by exercising or thinking that to exercise political power is just a question of management and introducing a few important changes once in a while. I think women have not seen enough of the significance of such fields of action in terms of radical social change. I am stressing that because the opinion of imminent economists is that economic science is coming to an end and is failing to come to grips with the present change. If we don't appeal to cultural values and to the fundamental cultural concepts of culture at the basis of development, we are not getting anywhere, neither in the South nor in the North.

I also think that another trap we fall into is that we consider political power very often as we would consider any other business - a kind of career. I am convinced that it is not. If women want another type of society, another way of conceiving the theory and the praxis of politics, something else is needed. It is not so much professional politics but the political dimension of all spheres of life. And if this political dimension comes to the fore, then all women and all men are ready to exercise political functions. I think, here again, women have a lot to say.

To list some other aspects of the contradictions of political power as lived by women: central power versus local power, giving back power to the people versus the need for motivations, for inspiration, for more than the sum total that we get through the representative democracy and also the de-mythologising power, which some will call populism versus the need that exists everywhere for distant secluded political figures, which in fact can become elements of security for everyone.

Finally the concept of political power like the concept of development has been dealt with much of a mechanical way. What do I mean by that? Political power is person A exercising certain force over person, institution, society or nation B, minus the reaction that that other person, institution or society has against A. This is a strictly mechanical view.

But we don't live in the realm of simple and harsh mechanical facts any longer. Power can be seen in the thermodynamic

equilibrium of the whole cosmos and of society. It requires then another concept of energy. Energy which is at once heat and animated matter. Energy which can only be grasped in the systemic balance of the different living organisms. Energy which partly dissipates itself and partly animates from within, all the matter involved in any physical transformation. I assume that power in this context is leadership. It means sense of purpose and direction capacity to generate energy around and within.

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