



WOMEN'S WORLD REALITIES AND CHOICES IN THE
POLITICAL FIELD

by

MARIA DE LOURDES PINTASILGO

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

presented at the 4th International Interdisciplinary congress on Women
Hunter College, City University of New York
3-7 June 1990

WOMEN'S WORLD REALITIES AND CHOICES IN THE POLITICAL FIELD



Introduction: Intersection of two spaces

In the past twelve months the geo-politics of the world has undergone dramatic and unexpected changes. Its reorganization is still in the making. Everywhere think-tanks are drawing up scenarios which reveal themselves outdated in face of the events. The results of the Summit show the difficulty of the task ahead. The shape of the world of the XXI century -in which we have entered already - remains unknown.

At the same time, another "space", this time not a geographical one but rather a sociological one, is undergoing a major change. The "social territory of women" has been the scene of unceasing adjustments and intensive actions in the last 20 to 30 years. Some basic developments are still in the making. So much so that we can also say the the shape of the social territory of women in the decades ahead is unknown to us.

We reach here the crux of the political feature of our time. We are facing complexity. Indeed, how can we speak about the interaction of two unknown realities in their future forms? And yet there lies the possibility for this most international of all social movements, the women's movement, to be relevant to the world, to knowledge, to mankind, at this very juncture of time. A double matrix must be formulated. Points of intersection and of added potential must be drawn. This is the road I intend to follow this afternoon with you.

I. The social territory of women

Let us look at the first zone of intersection between the social territory of women and the global concerns of today, in its political dimension.

In the actions undertaken and in the mechanism set up in the last 20 years, there has been decisive weight given to the status and the power of women. Last year, organized by the United Nations, by the Interparliamentary Union, by UNESCO, by the Council of Europe, several very important meetings took place concerning the analysis of the situation of women in decision-making policy.



Almost all aspects have been dealt with: the numbers of women in high-level political decision-making, the career paths, the degrees of underrepresentation, the conditions of the political structures and ideologies, the concrete applications for strategy.

In a linear and quantitative mode of thinking, the future seemed clear and the steps to be taken well defined.

However, this linear thinking is not enough, as it is shown by the situation of human rights. It is true that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does stress that there "should be no discrimination based on reasons of sex". All the nations continue to pay lip service to the Declaration. But what would happen if the General Assembly of the United Nations would once face a Universal Declaration of women's rights? Would it pass? Certainly not by consensus!

- Algeria will be ready to accept free elections, but what about women's rights?....
- China may move away from Tiananmen, but what about women's freedom?...
- The Western world may appear self-righteous with their defense of human rights, but what about the spelling out of all women's rights?...

How can we discuss the participation of women in governments and parliaments if millions of women remain outside the recognition of their existence as free human beings, unable to be seen and taken into account on their own right?

Nations and individuals are selective in relation to human rights. There are violations which are visible while the violations touching almost three billion people are not even mentioned (as we can see in the State Department report on violations of human rights in different countries). Indeed in the social territory of women there is not yet full citizenship. Hence, our first political task.

A strategic goal can be clearly defined. At a time when human rights are at the hub of all political changes women have to be in the forefront of their defense. Women are for human rights, yes, but all human rights and no less.

By human rights I do mean the civic and political, as well as the social, economic and cultural rights all human beings should enjoy. It is most important that women exercise pressure on their governments to adhere to the United Nations Covenant on Civic and Political rights and to the Covenant on Socio-Economic and Cultural rights, approved in 1966.

Women's culture as a basis for social territory

Speaking about full citizenship of women, I also mean that women should take as their own the problematics and issues which encompass the whole political scene. In other words: once and of all women have to overcome the "status of victims" and to act firmly as new partners who want to change the prevailing norms and behaviours.

Such an appropriation is only possible if women convey with them their own culture. I consider this the second political task for women's movements in our time.

Women, as a social group, have been obliged to submit themselves to the conditions, rules and norms, language and thought, of the masculine culture when they have entered specific masculine fortresses like politics. Their own culture gradually became speechless and invisible.

We have enough evidence that, in order to assert the equality between men and women, women have had to accept the dominant culture, shaped by masculine values and by the generalized feeling about the supremacy of men.

Thus, women's access to the public space has been often achieved at the expense of the values and knowledge women have in themselves. Hence a waste of human energy, of potential for innovation and for renewal of political life itself.

Through the path of a mechanistic equality, it is a new type of inequality that has been created - it is inequality under the disguise of equality.

Today, we see women's culture, like the culture of other social groups, beginning to emerge. Such a culture can start shaping a social territory, to give it a language, codes, rituals, sense of identity and responsibility. Then women address themselves not only to the "question of women", or to the "problems of women" but rather to all issues that correspond to pressing needs of our time.

II. Towards a new agenda for the women's movement

1. Post cold war agenda in a multipolar world

We have entered the post Cold-War period. To the bi-polar world where the two armed giants faced each other, there is no succession - political analysts write and write but they seem to be at a loss about the new structure for peace and security. More important though is the post cold war agenda: if for the first time in history weapons

are being destroyed and if that movement goes on, where are the priorities for international cooperation? where are the targets and the schedule to reach each one of them? Isn't the world ready for a post cold war agenda that will take food, health, shelter, education as seriously as tanks, conventional armament, missiles of short, medium and long range were taken during the cold war?

For many the end of the cold war period means the beginning of "one world". There is, of course, a global interdependence that unifies the world. Women are able to understand such interdependence from the experience of their lives where everything is connected with everything else!! But women know too the danger of the "one" world, the myth of a single model, the risk of overwhelmingly uniform norms, the imperialism imbedded in the repetition of the "same".

Women have to clarify the ideological content of the "one world" formula. How ironic that the Marxist theory of the historical repetition is coming up now, built on the ashes of the communist regimes! Women have to confront the burgeoning of the ideology of the "same" with the plurality of expressions, with the joy of discovering one's own path, with the belief in the human and political value of diverse historical traditions. From the bi-polar world we want to move not to the uniform world but to the multipolar world.

2. New political mediations, new political culture

The Western countries have come up with the political conditionality for the East European countries to be able to apply for immediate aid: human rights, free elections, market economy, multipartism. A package of success, they think...

But the women of the world know that free elections, multipartism are not enough to make democracy a reality where all share in the decisions concerning their lives.

Many of us are aware that politics permeate everyday life, that all choices, acts, gestures, statements, are political as they shape the infra-structure of society and as they model the value systems of the individuals. We are aware that the representative democracy, as it is, with its continuous struggle for individual power (if not for individual interests), is not really representing adequately all of us. This is why everywhere women have been speaking of a participatory democracy, where new mediations between the individual and the State may convey aspirations and shape decisions.

In all continents, side by side with the official process of democratisation through elections and party formation, there is a diaspora of people, men and women alike, who point out to other concerns than those of the self-centered "political class":



Are women ready, as international force, to be the forerunners of a truly democratic system, where voice will be given to those who are silent or not heard, where the political system will be attuned to the fabrics of society, to its anthropological and sociological reality, where the political culture of every region, every ethnic group, will be taken into account?

Are women ready to express the gains in social and cultural cohesion which come from the deepening of such a diversity? The answer to that question is not an abstract thought but has pertinent connections with the shape of central Europe and the Balkans, with Canada and the status of Quebec, with the multiplicity of small states in Africa and in the Pacific.

3. The myth of the market economy

The choice made by the ^{Central + Eastern} East European countries raises profound questions and urges new thinking at the world level. The Berlin wall has come down only on one side. The other side needs urgently its own perestroika. Market economy has not yet been able to come up with useful solutions for the so far centrally planned economies. There is a mix to be found that is not yet there.

The development pattern of the market economy didn't solve the problems of the starving millions in Africa, Asia or Latin America. It didn't enable economic growth to go hand in hand with respect of human beings -on the contrary, as we see in the theory and practice of delocalisation of enterprises in Asia, it is based on the exploitation of women's labor force. Nor did the market economy took into account the costs of environmental consequences of the industrialization process. It didn't create a consistent and pervasive system of generalized social security for all individuals, at all stages of their lives.

All these issues have to be addressed to with the greatest urgency, not as separate items but as a chain where each is, at the same time, cause and effect of all the others.

4. The fallacy of development: towards a wider framework

The very concept of development cannot anymore stand up in isolation. It is rather part of a much wider cluster where we see the linkages and interfaces of development/population/environment/poverty/consumption.

Let me give the example of China. Having attempted to stabilize its population, China will have by the end of the century 1,2 billion people, who are almost 1/4 of the world population and who have, however, only 7% of the world's arable land. Hence the indisputable need for industrialization. But with what kind of energy? China has



been planning to build 200 coal-based power stations. Their emissions would be enough to bring the greenhouse effect to a catastrophic climax. What to do then?

New sources of energy are the first priority of all scientific research. Of course there are many other problems but this one is of a global nature, it affects all human beings now and in the generations to come. One of the strongest statements comes from a Canadian woman engineer, Hortense Michaud-Lalanne, a member of the Advisory Committee for Energy Option to the Canadian Parliament. She says:

"Billions of tax payers money are being channelled right now, in the name of development, to accelerate the total collapse of the system, reflecting our superman aspirations of limitless power".

She goes as far as showing that there is a very strong parallel between the promoters and the beneficiaries of our throw-away civilization and yesterday's champions of slavery. To illustrate that, she proceeds with very simple equations to demonstrate that the annual consumption of energy in North America is the equivalent of 25 billion slave-years!

5. For new problems, new international mechanism and new priorities

Market mechanisms alone cannot cope with this new scale of problems. Administrative targets of limits for gas emissions are necessary. New orientation for scientific and technological research is imperative.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

New and flexible mechanisms are needed:

- a convention on global environment matters incorporating binding commitments for the reduction of emissions and accompanied by raising consciousness discussions;
- disseminations at all levels of society of the idea that it is a question of survival to adopt policies providing for the internalization of the costs of environment degradation and pollution into public, corporate and private decision-making about all kinds of economic choices;
- a massive R and D program into the economical use of renewable sources of energy;
- a joint effort of all nations and individuals to double the resources allocated to international population assistance programs with a strong emphasis on education on family planning and on the responsibility of the individual;

- conscious priority given to the poor as target-groups in our societies and understanding/acceptance of strong fiscal and other measures necessary to put it into practice;
- analysis by all individuals of the patterns of consumption the market-economy brings along and personal diagnoses and corrections of such patterns...

Nothing in this list is alien to the everyday life of every woman. Women in the family, in the industry, in science, in the schools, everywhere ought to be the first ones to undertake this enormous task. So many women have been concerned with developing countries or with the poor in their society. What is asked now is a broader vision of the actions to be undertaken.



6. The economic disorder: the North/South division

The choice of the market economy comes also at a moment of history where the organized international economic disorder was becoming apparent.

The superpowers are not the same as in the arms talks. The reality is not bi-polar but has a different geometry". In economy there is a triangle, constituted by Japan, USA and EEC. Though there is economic warfare among these three powers there is also a conspiracy of silence, maintaining their interests closely knit together vis-à-vis the South.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany have each huge account surplus. They have to be encouraged - by their own people, men and women, - to divert those funds to the regions in greatest need.

On the other hand, USA has a most paradoxical situation. It is the richest country of the world and yet its twin deficits are being financed by external sources! Moreover, from the first creditor in the beginning of the 80's the USA have become the first debtor today!

Are not women rebelling against this basic injustice? Last fall, a women minister from Zimbabwe said at a symposium of the Interparliamentary Union" "We are paying our external debts with the lives of our children"! And I ask now: with what, with the lives of whom, are the USA compensating their twin deficits?

Isn't there a tremendous challenge for women? If women are -- and I want to believe that they are -- the great international solidary force we are witnessing for in this Congress, shouldn't we put our efforts together and come up with interwoven solutions and proposals?



7. Beyond the Nation-State

The nature of the issues included in a post cold-war agenda do show that the Nation-State, as it emerged from the XIX century, cannot cope alone. Hence the fluidity of the national boundaries. Hence the various regional attempts to do away with national boundaries in what concerns circulation of goods, services, capital and people. It is not only the process taking place at the EEC but also in the Maghreb, in the 16 Western Africa countries, in Latin America with the Group of "8", now reinforced by the internal measures taken successively by the President of Brazil and the President of Mexico. Stronger spaces yes, but also a dimension where a critical mass of research, investment, ideas can help to reach another level of energy and communal development.

This move from the Nation-State to the regional cooperation or integration as a consequence of the global interdependence is of the utmost importance for women. Their true solidarity undergoes a decisive test. The opportunities open to their interaction are countless. To be free from the security given by belonging to the Nation-State, women will have to learn to feel at ease in the territory of their own culture. It is a totally new geo-politics women can help to shape.

8. Women's political agenda

Because of their multi-functionality women can perceive the interconnectedness of issues, the contradictions in solutions, the interwoven fabrics of the political world. The only condition for their effectiveness is the unequivocal assumption of their own way of being.

A world of complexity, shaken by turbulence, meets with the day-to-day experience of most women, called here and there on all kind of errands, taken by different tasks and roles, faced everytime with a new event, recorded in their hearts and emotions.

Because of their own experience, their familiarity with life and death, they are able to challenge the prevailing limitless paradigm. They know that limits are a condition of life and, like in the process of nature, a guarantee for the continuation of life at a wider and long-term scale. A new politics and economy, taking limits into account for the sake of the limitless universe and cycle of life, should find in them the most innovative thinkers.

Because of their millenary experience. Because of the fountains of tenderness in their hearts, women ought to be ready for a politics of caring rather than of dominating, a politics for survival rather than a politics of destruction and exclusion.

What am I pointing to? Being part and parcel of today's world, we are faced, as women, with the need to build our agenda for the nineties and the century ahead. This is our most compelling task.

After almost 30 years of soul-searching, the women's movement can make the great leap of this time: to move from women as objects of oppression to women as subjects of world's history. The great epistemological change has already occurred: in women's studies, object and subject became one. A new stage has to be reached: with the strength of their self-knowledge women have to assume the difficult task of being subjects of thought and policy.



Summing it up: our time is marked by three fundamental changes:

- the passage of centrally planned economy to market economy -- no solutions available!
- the end of Yalta and of the security the division in zones of influence has brought about
- the end of the last empire, the Soviet Union.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

This means a time of tremendous instability, of a turbulence in all political spheres. Mankind cannot live with it for a long time. Phenomena of fundamentalism are collective answers to anxiety. Refuge in hedonism and narcissism is often the form of individual reaction.

Women have been traditionally a factor of stability. Their presence in the political arena, as individuals and as social movement, asks of them a new phase of such role. By being aware of the instability, by coping with its sources wherever they live and work, they can provide a new security, a new liberating and nurturing environment. Then individuals and groups may be able to face the instability in a creative and dynamic way.

In order to fulfil this role women cannot depart from the deep labour in and about themselves. No political work can be achieved in our time that escapes the work done within ourselves. It is a continual learning process, it is descending into our inmost being, it is becoming ever more lucid about who we are and how we become whom we are.

Then, from the smallest to the biggest political task, we can, each one of us, say what the great thinker Marguerite Yourcenar said about herself:

"I have the impression of being an instrument through which currents and vibrations went. And this is true for all my books and I would even say for my entire life. Maybe for everybody's life; and the best among us are probably also nothing else but crystals through which currents went.

Everything comes from far away and goes much further than we are going. In other words, everything goes above us and we feel humble and amazed for being so pierced by currents which go through us and further than we go."



Fundação Cuidar o Futuro