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WOMEN BECOME VISIBLE

We are witnessing a major civilizational change in the last five years. And that change concerns women, is brought about mainly by women but will change the conditions of both women and men.

Sure we are caught in the many conflicts that the end of Cold War has accentuated. We are alert to the violence undergone by women in those situations.

Equally, together with the growing economic success of a handful of countries, we see the growing marginalization of entire regions and the rampant inequalities within countries.

Most of all, the hegemonic system born in the industrialized countries and now spread all over the world shows the first obvious shortcomings in the countries of origin: incapacity to provide all with a sustainable livelihood, decline of the social benefits.

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These all-encompassing facts absorb all the attention and fill the media. Meanwhile a new fundamental phenomenon is taking place. Its consequences will have a bearing on all this.

The UN Conferences of the last four years have made women visible in the international scene. The events that took place daily at the Planet Femina tent in the Rio Summit, became central in the many happenings of that important meeting. In Cairo, thousands of women were able to give strength to the newly accepted concept of reproductive rights, thus opening the way for new breakthroughs and for an intense process of re-thinking of the place of rights in the overall process of development. No doubt, then, that, at the Social Development Summit, rights and development merged into

Beijing



the concept of women's empowerment. The official texts in Cairo referred abundantly to women's reproductive rights; the official texts in Copenhagen made of women's empowerment a basic commitment of some 120 heads of government and state.

Referred only in a few paragraphs in the UN International Development Strategies or left still at the margin in most international decisive meetings, women gained momentum and appeared visibly in the international scene.

This, in itself, is a major achievement. In the world culture in which we live, our existence in socio-political terms depends on how visible we have become. [Most cultures tend to make women invisible. The male-dominated society tends to veil women - they are not present in the news, they are only to be talked about when their power cannot be avoided.]

This newly gained visibility of women shouldn't be veiled again. If there is a trickle-down effect it should be operating now. From the international scene to the most remote place in the planet women have to become visible in their concerns for the future, in their rights, in their struggle for a better life for themselves and for others.

Visibility of women has to lead to: equality and opportunities for both women and men have to be overcome. There won't be any new world order if some 90 countries still have reservations about the Convention on Elimination of D. against women. If human rights are the basis of a new world order, this most flagrant violation has to be banned.

Particularly urgent are the cultural and juridical measures that combat violence against women or new and dynamic programs for education and health.

But also this effect has to operate on an issue-led level: from their specific rights, particularly concerning reproduction, women want to have all their rights acknowledged

and taken into account. Most of all, the right to give a frame to all the efforts, to contribute to the shaping of life at all levels, in all situations.

This is not a mere wish - this is already a decision of the international community. No other is the meaning of women's empowerment, the process by which women become aware of their situation, gain better information on its conditions and struggle to change the power structures of which they are dependent. Experience shows that no decision-making is fully possible at the most private level if it is not part of a chain of power-sharing.

WOMEN BECOME EMPOWERED

These years are also the time of women's empowerments, of the acknowledgment of woman's rights, of her central place not only in reproduction but also in all social processes.

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Women have been proclaimed free and responsible in the very field from which, through centuries and millenia, patriarchy derived its domination. This in itself is a colossal revolution. It is a turning point in the understanding of women as full human beings, not defined anymore, in their dignity, by their capacity to procreate.

But being human rights, we cannot separate them anymore from the conditions in which they are exercised. Can women be proclaimed as having reproductive rights when they are not educated to even be aware and fully conscious of their own rights, when access to education is denied, when health care services are scarce or non-existent? When they live in conditions of utter destitution in what concerns food, water, sanitation, housing?

In other words, can we speak of reproductive rights when social rights are not guaranteeing the quality of life needed for a health sexuality and for a motherhood fully chosen and cherished?

Outstanding authors have shown that "free and responsible decisions" are not made in a vacuum - they need a context of social, economic and cultural conditions in which freedom and responsibility acquire concrete meaning. Reproductive rights are not alien to social rights, they demand them, they cannot be respected without them.

Dignity and personhood, the basic principle of human rights, can only be achieved when bodily integrity and the decisions affecting it are fully respected. But this cannot happen when social rights in health, education, sanitation, are not implemented. Reproductive rights are a cornerstone indeed - they oblige national leadership, international organizations, to look towards the full implementation of an agenda of social rights. Apparently "individualistic", (confusion with free or voluntary), reproductive rights oblige all of us to look at the social conditions in which individual freedom takes place.

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Moreover, not only do they point out to the "social nature of rights" but they also acknowledge that rights take place in concrete contexts, where "human needs" provide the "substantive basis" of human rights. (Sonia, page 110).

This whole process is what has been called women's empowerment. It is based on the linkages between personal liberties (the areas where no interference should exercise any coercion upon the individual conscience) and social entitlements (the areas where affirmative action is needed from the public authorities).

The process of empowerment supposes that not only rights are proclaimed but also that social rights are put in the forefront of the political agenda. This is, in itself, a radical change.



WOMEN SHAPE A CIVILIZATIONAL CHANGE

Visible and empowered, women will have in their hands the fundamental tools to shape the much needed civilizational change.

If states and international agencies are consistent with their recurring stress on reproductive rights, then their priorities have to shift from one-sided, technocratic economic balance to the policies capable to enhance directly the exercise of such rights.

If states and international agencies understand what they are saying when they say women's empowerment, then economic policies must be shifted radically - credit to women's initiatives, change of international lending conditions, establishment of priorities in national budgets, balance between international duties and answering the crying needs of people.

In the whole spectrum of power, women must also gain another status in decision-making positions of political power. They have come up in most of their NGOs declarations, with an urgent sense that "more of the same won't do". They are saying - and I take at random quotations from recent publications - that: "We are the women who will transform the world" (SIGI).

For the first time in history, the international system has agreed to commit itself to the goals of social development. People first, people at the center of development, social development objectives having absolute priority - these are some of the ways in which the radical change has to happen.

But is it going to happen? Where is the political will?

The very process of empowerment of women is going to change the way women exercise power. For women, power is everywhere - from home to workplace to the

Cabinet or Summit meetings. Power based on competition, on either/or, on domination over others produces the type of relationships and social conditions women reject.

In a world whose limits are visible, competition can only sow death, rape, violence, ethnic confrontation. We want to go beyond it. Towards a world where cooperation, dialogue, mutual understanding, alliances are the goals power is seeking.

If all the national and international authorities are true/ sincere/ conscious when they put women's empowerment at the center of the development process, a major change has to happen. That change can only take place if women, at all levels, fully aware of their rights and responsibilities, express their own convictions. Whatever will come, it will be in a different voice, a voice that seeks to integrate not to exclude, that provokes convergence not separation, that goes beyond abstract rights towards "lived capacities", that places "justice" in the hands of "care".

If women are empowered, many more talents will be discovered. The invisible work, the unpaid relentless concern for the well-being of those near to every human being, the knowledge that comes from the companionship of women, all that will be valued.

If women are empowered, laws and customs will deal with men and women in the same way, men will enter the universe of the daily responsibility and care and will discover not only its burdens but also its joys; men and women, whenever they will encounter each other, will join hands in common projects.

If women are empowered, we won't be facing anymore separate, isolated concerns: environment here, development there, human rights elsewhere. This over-specialization has made of each solution an impasse and created alarming inequalities. Isolated strategies are not efficient. Interconnections have to translate themselves in integrated perspectives, all aimed at an improved quality of life for all.

With women rests the ultimate decision to give life but outside the scope of women are, in most countries, the political decisions that affect, sustain life.

With women rests a very important part of the total work burden in all societies and the majority of the devalued activities that, paradoxically, keep societies together. And yet, women are still kept outside the main structures of economy. The present system shows clearly its shortcomings.

Women are showing, by their choices, that work can have multiple forms and be accomplished within a great variety of conditions. A great step for the whole humanity is another definition of work, a definition that takes into account the tasks of production and services women are discovering outside the official frame, in order to guarantee a sustainable livelihood; it is a definition that gives value to the many, diversified and often simultaneous tasks women fulfil in the close circles of family and community; it is a definition that includes the work to be shared, as all and particularly the young, need to enter into the chain of creative solidarity through their work.

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This is one of the main revolutions of our time.

