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For power of a different kind

The "political world", to me, covers all decision-making wherever there are exchanges between people or networks for communication, production and creation. // Politics understood in this way is exercised everywhere - that is, at all levels of society and in every sort of occupation. // It is daily business engaging all men and all women whether as agents or subjects. If it is thus, then the responsibility of women in the political world cannot be considered only in terms of tasks to be carried out at the level currently called the "summit". It is of concern to all women in all activities.

When considering the means and conditions for women's access to decision-making levels, we may be forgetting to look in political terms at the sectors of activity where women are in the great majority. Political study of the traditional fields of women's activity is indispensable to understanding or devising strategies to give women their place in politics, strictly speaking. Yet to make the entry of women into politics an idealized goal risks making politics the only practical objective. // Power is a diffuse reality throughout society - it is sufficient to have had some brief experience managing an enterprise to get to know what is evident in everyday life: the impotence of power and the power of the impotent.

Everywhere in the world we see the paralysis brought on by the recession. If in the present decade the range of opportunities seems to be shrinking, the structural and universal character of the crisis nevertheless helps us to see that new touchstones are necessary. It was in the search for a new touchstone that I found in an embryonic state something which corresponded to my deepest convictions. // Political power to be exercised by women will be worthwhile only if it is to become power of a different kind. Because power seems to me to be of no interest unless it corresponds to new attitudes, new ideas, to another way of managing affairs at levels ranging from the village to the planet. Yes, of course, no access by women to decision-making - but in order to do something else.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Discrimination

Certain facts have been stated over and over again, but they need to be repeated to make the situation clear - so that the fight and the battles do not make vain the sufferings and frustrations of millions of human beings, or that the international community, so concerned in other contexts about putting to good account all human resources, does not waste the still ignored resources of half of humanity.

Unofficial translation



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This discrimination reflects the values of a whole society and not only its masculine part, it being well known that women who have "arrived" are often the instrument of discrimination towards other women and that, in turn, the great mass of women seem to ~~bring grief~~ ^{accept badly} those women who have access to power by withholding their normal base of social support. This type of discrimination, and the complex mechanisms linked to it, are evident at all levels and in every instance of political power.

The United Nations does not escape. It is enough to look at the division of tasks by work category inside the System in terms of Article 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which seeks: "... to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations."

This contradiction has been so amply documented that I need not dwell upon it. There is the risk, however, that the importance of this fact will not get sufficient attention if only the relation of strength between the group discriminated against and the System as a whole is considered.

Discrimination within the United Nations takes on a magnitude, in effect, that surpasses discrimination in a country or a region. A discussion of discrimination against women within the United Nations is not simply an expression of claims to power on the part of a marginal social group hampered in its initiatives and participation, blocked in its legitimate ambition for access to greater responsibility.

Given that the norm-setting activity of the United Nations generates a new international law of great breadth and generosity - the actual discrimination against women within the System becomes in a striking way an internal contradiction. Such a contradiction is disturbing because it reveals the false character of many declarations of principle and norm-setting texts of the Organization. What can be the moral authority of the System if the very aims of its efforts, going so far as to establish a Decade for Women, is denied by its own practice? This is why, here as elsewhere, the struggle of women for equality is at the same time an indispensable fight for the moral health of the System and for the internal coherence of society as a whole.

This discrimination can be disguised in a thousand ways, even going so far as to point out that it is incumbent upon women to show responsibility by not presenting their candidature. But does not the study by UNITAR in 1978 show that at the professional level, after 25 years of service 26 per cent of the men had attained the level of D-1, while only 11 per cent of women reached it and that for the category of D-2, it was 8 per cent men against zero per cent women? In breaking down the category of D-1, 19 per cent of the men had reached it after 20 years of service versus 3 per cent of women. After 15 years, it was 9 per cent men versus 2 per cent women.

We wish to put an end to discrimination not only to assure the universality of human rights but also to free the cultural and social energy of a group that has long been dominated and whose very culture has been reduced to silence by the dominant culture, whether ruled by men or by women.

Women's quest for political responsibility: a contemporary phenomenon

Another observation is the ~~new~~ contemporary character of women's massive quest for involvement in tasks of political decision-making. Figures are still scarce, limited and liable to be too personalized. And the results are still too ambiguous to draw conclusions about major behaviour patterns. All that can be said relates to recent phenomena and belongs to history still in the making.

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This contemporary character of women's claims has far-reaching significance. At the extreme, one could almost be content with obtaining changes in existing laws, norms, measures and institutions whereby the mechanisms already set up to "protect" women would be applied. Women would merely remain objects of a process and nothing else would have been done except apply human rights to female human beings. The challenge of our age lies in the possibility of women as subjects to lead the fight, struggle.

The equality impasse

It has to be recognized that the critical mass threshold has not yet been reached so that a policy of equal opportunities could make differentiation possible. This is why one may speak of a certain equality deadlock. // In the rare situations where women have had access to the same positions of responsibility as men, several pitfalls are visible: ranging from tokenism, / blockage by women who have "succeeded", / to enforced assimilation in order to assure survival in a milieu where the norms remain deeply foreign. The strength of one or a few will not be enough to develop a new mode.

From all sides, one hears about "afibi" women - and we often have examples in front of us. These are women who begin by yielding to established norms, to the status quo, and who themselves sometimes question the value of their contribution. // Other women pass directly to the "other side", often emphasizing to the extreme that which constitutes the norm established by men. Reinforcing

"Prickly questions", because, with the old master, one may ask, "But what do they really want?" For my part, I can only say that simple "infiltration" is not enough. In such a case, women see themselves overwhelmed, not only by the double task which is already their lot, but also by a style that is not theirs. // I recognize that the presence of women at what is called a "high" level of responsibility permits a lifting of bans and a re-awakening of the collective consciousness to new possibilities with regard to the social functions of the two sexes. But what seems to me more important is the possibility for women to express themselves differently and thereby introduce new vectors into politics.

What could be significant for society as a whole is that women in politics serve in some measure to question the established norms, to shuffle around the rules of the game. In order to do what? Simply to make politics return to basics, that is, to structuring social relations for the common good, its most urgent but least practised deeds, / making politics return to its most profoundly realistic dimension, / linking it to reality without which politics is pure humbug.

As in the workers' movement of the nineteenth century / and in the struggle of colonial peoples for self-determination more recently, / women are becoming the outlet for a new and personal human voice. Through this choir around the world they will thus become a potential force to enact their own words.

THE CHALLENGE

• Link of the personal and the political

In respect to what I have just said, it is evident that I consider that the presence of women at the level of political decision-making will not reach its full breadth unless two conditions are fulfilled:

- Women must see themselves as women in the exercise of political power;
- The collective strength of women must find expression at the political level.

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A few years ago one could still say, "Women have to act as women" or "Let them be women" - proposals with a voluntarist tinge. What I speak about is something else. The affirmation of a contribution (other than women as politicians) can be effected by recognizing the human being as such rather than as a sexualized being. As a women philosopher recently wrote: "Each individual must be born a second time that is mythic and supplementary, for the sake of history, for the sake of an institution that is not the mother."

Regarding birth with respect to an institution that is no longer the mother but takes her place, it matters whether one is a man or a woman. One is born to history differently - birth as such being linked to the archaic regions of each of us where the first birth took place. This second birth does not happen by itself. The same philosopher affirmed that it must occur "at the precise moment of the juncture between the history of an individual and the collective history of a region, of a nation, perhaps of a whole continent".

This amounts to saying that it is not enough to be born a woman to enter politics. One has to pass through this "exact juncture" combining knowledge of oneself as a woman with knowledge of institutions. It is a lucky opportunity for all marginalized cultures which have suddenly acquired rights of citizenship to enter history with modern tools at their disposal. It is to each woman and to each group of women in real institutions and societies to find the means that will permit each one to read her own history so that the exact juncture comes about.

The specific politics of the UN System

It is up to each of us to read the collective history, and why not that of the international community through the Organization in which this community has vested so much hope? Such a reading would raise questions at different levels where politics plays a role - as does history - in the United Nations.

The United Nations System is a mechanism regulating international co-operation or its opposite, confrontation. This amounts to saying that the whole System is a political structure, including its agencies and organs of a specifically technical character. Upon ending his mandate, Kurt Waldheim underlined "the breakdown of multilateral co-operation" and the present Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar, did not lose an opportunity to speak publicly about the political paralysis from which the Organization suffers.

The United Nations System has evolved out of the failure of the modern State to resolve, through a multiplicity of bilateral links, the conflicts and great problems which beset humanity on all sides. The United Nations belongs among those instruments bestowed on the modern State, that is, among intermediary bodies chosen through universal suffrage and thereby to be representative. The United Nations can be regarded as the epitome of these intermediary bodies through which the will of the people is expressed. This raises certain questions:

- What is the connection between these intermediary bodies and real people who, indirectly through their States, are supposed to be the ultimate beneficiaries of the programmes and concerted efforts?
- Intermediary does not mean a step on a ladder but rather a process of mediation. To what extent does the Organization see itself as a place of mediation, an intermediary body expressing the will of the people? Or, conversely, to what extent does the Organization see itself as an end in itself following its own logic?



- What walls have to be toppled so that this political structure functions as such?

- What role can this System play in an international community where politics has come to mean more and more a fierce tug-of-war so apparent in the cleavage that has marked the middle of this century - East/West - and also the one which scarcely began to take shape in the last decade - North/South?

What steps must the Organization take so that politics may again contribute to organizing the various spheres related to concrete conditions of human life?

What role can the United Nations play in the elaboration of a policy embracing all the objectives, strategies and measures that the international community has given as guidelines for Member States and, finally, as a guarantee of multilateral co-operation?

• Beyond the quantitative

Society today has been challenged to its very foundations because the model of progress that upheld it has dissolved in the accelerated process of breakdown and the increasingly visible crises and local skirmishes.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the failures of two (and soon three) strategies for development, the theories based on this paradigm have lingered. Quantity, as an expression of progress, is one. Certainly statistics are a valuable indicator but like any numerical language, they have no significance in themselves; it is the entire system of values that gives them their meaning.

→ It is in this perspective that concern about quality of life has emerged within the Organization in recent years. Yet it is not bold enough, because it is clear today that economic theory has failed even though economics as such is an integral part of "ethnography, sociology and psychoanalysis in any society", as the brilliant young Alain Minc has remarked. If so, the field of observation and the range of solutions to the problems must necessarily be enlarged.

It is the importance attached to quantitative values that underlies the myth of objectivity, a myth which within the United Nations system is translated, among other indices, into uniformly flat reports, so boring and difficult to read that the majority of delegations to meetings of the Organization have not even read them by the time debate begins. What a waste of human material and resources.

→ It is at this level that ~~the presence of women would seem indispensable in the hierarchy of the Organization.~~ Of course, I do not wish to equate women with the non-quantitative. However, neither do I wish to overlook the fact that the majority of women have a vast multifunctional capacity. This permits them to stick to reality in its most tangible form, giving qualitative concerns a weight that figures could never convey.

Similarly women, like any dissident marginal group, let subjectivity rule. However, it is precisely through the interaction of subjective values that the most determinant social phenomena operate. Moreover, overt subjectivity often points to the lack of logic in seeming objectivity. For this reason, women may be able to give real substance to ~~the~~ old aspiration of ~~the United Nations Organization - that is,~~ intersectoral work. This is work that has scarcely begun and where, as yet, solely the pitfalls are obvious, that is, the multiplication of organs dealing with exactly the same questions.

• Breaking the language code

We live in a period when all messages are conditioned by the media, from the most elementary traffic signs to expressions of abstract thought. In the ~~United Nations this reign of the media has become the empire of coded language.~~

The ^{political} language known as "UNese" undoubtedly corresponds to certain developments in thought and research within the System. However, its coded character puts it in the same mould as political language at the national or regional level. What is dangerous about this coded language is not so much its complex relationship to events, phenomena or the ideas that it is supposed to clarify. It is rather the way in which it undermines the message carried, inasmuch as what is said could have been said by anyone. Coded language eliminates the "mother tongue" of the speaker (in both the ethnological and psychoanalytical sense) going so far as to efface the speaker as subject. The message could have been delivered by somebody else, even by a robot.

This is the kind of language spoken by almost everyone with political responsibility who hides behind expressions such as "the Government believes that" or (for experts and civil servants) "the Secretary-General, the Director-General, the United Nations believes that ..."

This language operates in a closed circuit and presupposes a fundamental cleavage between people who know and people do not know, because they do not know this foreign language.

Created to promote democracy, the agencies and organs of the United Nations have become realms of the immortals, reserved for those who have been initiated. Such elitism, when it permeates the System, never ceases to aggravate the artificial divisions between individuals and peoples, thereby subverting the very purpose of the Organization.

One of the characteristics of the emergence of women in the world today is the fact that they can now speak on their own behalf. Having ceased to be the property of their fathers or their husbands, having ceased to be invisible statistically and socially, women have found their own tongue. The use of the mother tongue, whatever it is, rings true. The "mother tongue" speaks truth in a way that no other language can. Though its verity it bridges the gulf between persons and cultures. When I speak from my own being and my own experience, I become open to dialogue and communication. It is this language that can bring those who know in touch with those who appear not to know.

Talking about the "mother tongue" brings to mind other languages which could be changed so that politics would belong to everybody. When mother tongues have replaced the coded languages, this will have a great liberating effect on political speech.

• Towards an active voice

This leads directly to the question of words and the stream of words surrounding politics. "Politics is conveyed by words," certainly, but we have reached a point where words seem to be a substitute for policy. Today, to say something is more important than what one says. The content is absorbed by the flow of words.

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If to act on one's word constitutes a policy, the contribution of women at the decision-making level must take the form of speech having not only a real subject but also an active voice. Such a speech is possible only to the extent that women with political power are in a position both to speak and to act. A healthy connection is indispensable between the time of action and the time spent discussing political issues, so that bureaucratic practices collapse under their own weight; so that words create action; and so that political machinery ceases to be an instrument for conformity, infinitely reproducing itself socially. It is sufficient to read once again the preambles to many solemnly adopted resolutions in order to become aware of this liturgy of words, this litany of a religion which would be ashamed to be identified as such.

The link between speech and action gets lost if one holds only the idea of a vertical career. No doubt, we are faced with a paradox. If women are to have access to various levels in the hierarchy, and if the summit is no longer to remain an "old boys' club", this is surely in order to permit the hierarchies essential to any living organism to be established differently and to let horizontal mobility bring into focus the men and the women who at any given moment could be at the summit.

The contribution of women to such reorganization of institutions and social structures will be real only to the extent that women reveal all their incumbent tasks and roles. Only reality with all its multifacets will give politics a trustworthy human face.

If the world economic crisis can be solved in the political sphere politics will have to cease to be a place where death holds sway; it will have to become a melting-pot of new forms of living and new human relationships among all peoples.

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