

Mending the Fabric of Life: Integrating Feminism into World Social Forum, Caracas

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Everyone's World Social Forum is different as we each thread together all we're exposed to in this intense immersion experience—conversations, slogans and signs, mini history lessons folded into talks and presentations, translators' apt phrases, information passed in leaflets or plastered on walls as posters, stickers, and graffiti.

Some highlights for me were the smiles and laughter as thousands of Forum participants crammed onto the Caracas subway (free to us) en route to the opening march and rally; the soccer-stadium atmosphere of President Chavez's two-and-a-half hour presentation delivered entirely from memory; the clear sounds of flutes and ocarinas played by indigenous musicians from Peru looping through the downtown traffic; the bands on the outdoor stage playing late into the night... all laced with the high-energy buzz of thousands of people from every continent, excited to be there, overflowing with information and experience, and hungry to share them. Coming from the USA, I had a glimpse into this huge continent where visionaries—from indigenous people to presidents—are full of ideas, drive, desperation, and hope for change.

The Forum's potential as a space to exchange ideas and information is powerful, whether through the formal program of talks and presentations (with the inbuilt frustration of so many marvelous things packed into the same time slot), or by bumping into people at meals, in the street, in the hallways, or lines for the bathroom, seemingly random and serendipitous. Sometimes this "marketplace of ideas" seemed diffuse, unstructured, and lacking in political purpose and direction. At times it was simply a market place, as people from Ecuador and Colombia sold their craftwork alongside Venezuelan booksellers with venerable copies of works by Lenin, and many stalls heaped with T-shirts, caps, buttons and other paraphernalia immortalizing the icons: Simon Bolivar, Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and Hugo Chavez.

I was thrilled to learn about Latin American women's organizing, arising out of colonial repression, continued economic exploitation, and the entrenched role of sexism. Women have organized for the right to vote, for access to land, and redistribution of wealth. Mothers and grandmothers have denounced human rights violations committed by military dictatorships and have demanded to know the whereabouts—and the fate—of family members who have been "disappeared." Women are working to mend the torn fabric of family and community life caused by military regimes, destabilizations, and civil wars. They are dealing with social and cultural disintegration caused by foreign debt crises and structural adjustment policies, the long workdays with no job security that take time and energy away from their children.

Latin American women came to the World Social Forum in large numbers—representing local women's groups, national organizations, and international coalitions—and also as members of labor unions, human rights organizations, groups of farmers and peasants, poor people's groups, anti-racist organizations, environmental groups, and indigenous communities. Some talked Marxism; others talked equal rights; still others held indigenous worldviews and cosmologies.

They all talked about opposing violence in its many forms—personal violence against women and children which has increased under globalization at home, at work, and in public places; the violence of an exploitative economic system; and violence caused by narco-trafficking, gangs, and heavy-handed military and police interventions. They are involved in struggles against authoritarianism and for increased democracy—nationally, locally, and within their own organizations.

Many speakers celebrated this new moment in Latin American history with six left-leaning, progressive presidents and the defeat of the FTAA last November. Women from Venezuela spoke proudly of the Bolivarian Revolution's emphasis on health and education, considered a social debt owed to the people; the program that feeds thousands of needy people each day; the reduced prices of staples that ease women's household budgeting; and the alliance between Venezuela and Cuba whereby 20,000 Cuban physicians and health technicians are currently living and working in poor Venezuelan communities in exchange for oil. Alicia Muñoz, an organizer of rural indigenous women from Chile, spoke of women's political participation since winning the vote in national elections in 1949, women's role in sustainable development, and the difficulties they face currently as Chile has signed a bilateral free trade agreement with the European Union and the United States. Mona Vasquez, a Mayan spiritual leader from Guatemala, spoke of the medicinal uses of plants and the crucial importance of intellectual property rights. She emphasized that 200,000 people had been killed in the civil war that split families and communities. Some were in the self-defense forces; others in guerilla forces. In the aftermath it's very difficult, she stressed, to resolve community conflicts caused by war. Women from Colombia emphasized the many ways that militarism affects their daily lives, as illustrated by the banners they carried at the opening march:

We Want to Live without Violence
For the Demilitarization of Land and Life
Women Risk Our Lives for Life

Indigenous women spoke of the need to go back to their cultural and economic roots, interpreting ancestral wisdom for current times, balancing spiritual and material aspects of life. Among many others, women from Brazil spoke of reproductive rights, open sexual options, and the right to live without violence—alone, with others, or in community. Women from all these countries spoke passionately about sustainability, restoring Mother Earth and raising her energy by giving back nutrients, such as organic fertilizer and prayers.

In a large evening plenary, Margarita Lopez-Maya, a professor of history at the Central University of Venezuela, held up indigenous movements (in Bolivia, Ecuador, among Zapatistas, and landless people in Brazil) as making a critical contribution to transforming power relations on the continent. Typically, she argued, social movements have seen states as something to resist. Now new movement-state relations are emerging in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina based on people's assemblies, collective deliberations, and the principle of reciprocity that can transcend the neoliberal state. Social movements, however, came into being to defend their rights against the state. As such, she warned, it may be difficult for movements to work together—a point taken up by many other speakers, who called for more dialogue and debate among people of very different experiences, cultures, analyses, and strategies.

Despite their political insights and organizing experience, women's overall role in the Forum still seemed rather tentative and marginal. Cândido Grzybowski, one of the WSF founders from Brazil, said as much in an early presentation. He noted that there were relatively few women speakers in the large plenary sessions. He mentioned the machismo of the Forum culture and organizing. He made a plea for much greater diversity, for the Forum to create a new culture that sees diversity as strength, and for different people to initiate conversations and events. How to incorporate the idea of economic, cultural, and political diversity into leftist movements? He concluded: "If human beings are at the center, we will be able to confront the market."

In a panel organized by a coalition of women's organizations including La Red Latino-Americana de Mujeres Transformando la Economía (Network of Latin American Women Transforming the Economy), La Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres (World March of Women), and Diálogo Sur-Sur LGBT (South-South LGBT Dialogue) speakers addressed the need for diversity and inclusiveness directly. Anna Luz, a speaker from La Marcha Mundial, pointed out that the Forum has accepted that feminism isn't just a token but a part of the wider WSF perspective. Nevertheless, she argued, it's important to build our space here as women. It's not easy to get gender equality in social movements or the wider society. We want a change of focus in social movements, recognizing that people start from different places—indigenous people, those from the African diaspora, homosexual people. We want to build synthesized visions from our different identities. There was debate about diversity among socialists, she said. Women are involved but men take over. Women often support social movements but are not in leadership roles. Women's organizations have made some changes in this. We will get equality if we respect diversity. Women's stories have to be heard.

This conversation about diversity is where I want to see the WSF develop. Many movements are familiar with this issue and have some experience of what is needed. People have been struggling with it for decades in the US, with exclusions based on race, class, sexuality, age, and culture. A World Social Forum that seeks to be more inclusive needs the overall consciousness that this is a priority. It will take participants of many networks to identify other people who should be invited to join, and fundraising to ensure that those who need financial support get it in a timely manner. It will mean giving much greater visibility to young people, farm workers, and poor people. It will require many more interpreters and translators—not just for language but also for concepts and culture. It will mean a different way of doing things with less emphasis on formal talks and more creative ways to connect people and issues—less conference, more gathering.

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