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## ANOTHER (ALSO FEMINIST) WORLD IS POSSIBLE

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### CONSTRUCTING TRANSNATIONAL SPACES AND GLOBAL ALTERNATIVES FROM THE MOVEMENTS

sonia E ALVAREZ with nalu faria and miriam nobre<sup>1</sup>

The nineties are considered the decade in which feminist movements in Brazil, as well as in Latin America and other world regions, ‘went global’ or became transnationalised. Academic analyses typically explain this globalisation of feminisms in terms of the growing participation of sectors representing feminist movements in the hegemonic spheres of international politics, particularly the conferences or world summits sponsored by the United Nations during the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Without a doubt, the incursion of scores of feminists into these official spaces of global politics had a marked, and contradictory, impact on Latin American feminisms.<sup>3</sup> A wide spectrum of feminist reflections gathered together in a recent dossier on ‘Feminisms and the World Social Forum’ affirm, however, that ‘other transnationalisms’ — other processes and modalities of feminist activism that transcend the borders of the nation-state — also emerged *from the movements themselves*.<sup>4</sup> The articles in the dossier attest to the existence of multiple feminisms that have been constructing alternative and counter-hegemonic public spaces at the regional and global levels, in which new meanings, identities, transgressive practices, and forms of resistance and rebelliousness have been forged and fed back into the process.

The bulk of the essays analyse the participation and intervention of feminists, particularly those from Latin America, in one of the most recent, innovative and promising of these counter-hegemonic transnational spaces, and one of the first concrete expressions of the so-called ‘anti-globalisation movement’, namely, the WSF. In order to contextualise this most recent form of feminist action in the space of the global movements, the dossier starts with a reflection on another transnational process, well prior to the WSF,

which has been of the utmost importance to the development of the feminist movements in Brazil and all over Latin America : the region-wide feminist meetings (*encuentros*, or encounters) that took place during the eighties and the nineties.

Since the beginning of the eighties, as this first essay documents, Latin American feminists have been building networks of advocacy and activism (*militancia*), weaving personal-political linkages and constructing regional identities and forms of solidarity through the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros*. These events have taken place every two to three years since the First *Encuentro* was convened in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1981, with the tenth edition scheduled to take place in Brazil in 2005.

The Latin American *Encuentros*, as well as the national meetings periodically organised in a number of countries, are places of dialogue, negotiation, coalition-building, conflict, and contestation *among women* who are self-proclaimed feminists or who in one way or another identify themselves, or seek to become closer to, feminism. In other words, these *Encuentros* are critical spaces where Latin American feminist activists exchange ideas, discuss strategies, and imagine utopias *among themselves*, along with 'other' feminists who — although belonging to different countries, social classes, ethnic and racial groups, age groups, sexual preference, etc., with the most diverse personal-political trajectories and involved in the broadest array of political practices — share visions of the world and declare their political commitments to a wide gamut of feminist and social justice struggles.

More than mere 'events' in the life of the movement, the *Encuentros* foster processes of both solidarity and contention among the region's feminists. They constitute a sort of supranational platform where key issues confronting Latin American feminisms can be staged, debated and (re)formulated. Among the most contentious axes of discussion have been : the meaning and practices of the movements' autonomy and 'institutionalisation'; the diversity and inequality among women and among feminists; and the relationship of different feminisms to other movements, particularly to the larger women's movement, political parties, the State, and the sphere of international policy making. Already at the Sixth *Encuentro*, held in 1993 in Costa del Sol (El Salvador), the involvement of many feminist NGOs and regional networks with dominant national and international political institutions, especially the UN processes, had become one of the most heated topics of debate.

In the second half of the nineties, the various "+5" UN conferences, intended as follow-up to the Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, and Beijing summits, made clear — even to many of those who most actively participated in such processes — that the feminist project of influencing official international spheres had yielded meagre concrete results. If it is true that it was possible to incorporate some of the elements (the most palatable) of the feminist agenda in the international accords and platforms of the nineties, it is also true that any possibility for more significant changes in the rights and life conditions of most women were in effect blocked by the intensification of neoliberal globalisation, the ever more dramatic rolling back of the State, structural adjustment processes, and the concomitant erosion of citizenship and social policies.

The obvious deficiencies of neoliberalism unleashed an innovative and dynamic

resistance to the 'single thought' doctrine in Latin America in the most recent times. This resistance, which first appeared in the public eye with the Zapatista uprising of 1994, branching out and becoming broader and more diverse in the entire region during the last decade of the twentieth century and the opening years of the 2000s, has included from the massive mobilisations of the MST, the continental articulation of indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples movements, and the neighbourhood assemblies (*asambleas barriales*) and the pickets of the unemployed (*piquetero*) movement in Argentina to the most recent confrontations between coca growers (*cocaleros*) and repressive forces in Bolivia. At the same time that the cycle of UN conferences was coming to a close and that the 'disenchantment' among many of those who had participated in these official processes was growing, there emerged a new global social force that found its point of articulation precisely in its radical opposition to the reigning global neoliberal regime — that is, the anti-globalisation movement or, as others would have it, the global justice and solidarity movement. Many feminist activists were, from the very beginning, part of these ample, yet diffuse, new regional and global movements that found their most enduring expression in the WSF. Among the 112 regional or global organisations making up the International Council, nine are feminist networks.<sup>5</sup>

The 2003 WSF was organised around five axes : 1) democratic sustainable development; 2) principles and values, human rights, diversity and equality; 3) media, culture and counter-hegemony; 4) political power, civil society, and democracy; and 5) democratic world order, fight against militarism, and promoting peace. The second and fourth of these axes were organised by two feminist networks, The World March of Women against Poverty and Violence and the Marcosur Feminist Articulation, respectively. These thematic axes functioned as parameters for the registration of participants and seminars by hundreds of entities participating in the WSF. There were 1,286 self-organised activities at the 2003 Forum. Public demonstrations and cultural activities have been growing with each successive Forum, introducing novel languages to the Forum debates.

Along with a broad and heterogeneous gamut of movements, NGOs, and networks of all imaginable types, the Forum saw the confluence of the most diverse expressions of Latin American and global feminism. Feminists, like activists from other social movements, arrived at the Forum in large numbers and with enormous, albeit not always convergent, expectations about the WSF.<sup>6</sup> In such a wide and diverse space / process as the Forum, important political and strategic differences and divergences were evident among participants. Even if united in their opposition to the most egregious effects of neoliberal globalisation, participants at the WSF espouse the most diverse, and at times antagonistic, visions and strategies about how to combat those effects; these range from those who seek to 'democratise' the World Bank, the IMF, or WTO to those who want to 'nix them'; from NGOs and networks that 'negotiate' with national and international public policy arenas to groups and movements that reject and 'expose' these official spaces while advocating for radical structural transformations; from those who promote 'other globalisations' — more horizontal and based on solidarity — among the planet's peoples to those who prefer to strengthen national sovereignty or that of their peoples and ethnic

groups; from those who defend mobilisation and direct action against global capitalism to those who persist in lobbying and advocacy strategies; from sectarian positions advocating *one* other world all the way to those who defend the notion that many other worlds are possible or that want to foster another world where, as the Zapatistas put it, many worlds can fit. All of these positions and many others — that oscillate between the more polarised ones above — meet each other at the Forum, dialogue, debate, diverge, and sometimes articulate tactics and strategies in common agreement.

Needless to say, these agreements and differences also characterise feminist engagements with the WSF process. The collaborators in the dossier, who include feminist activists from Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador, Italy, Canada and Brazil, are unanimous in affirming that the WSF is an indispensable space of action for the feminisms. For Uruguayan Lilian Celiberti and Peruvian Virginia Vargas, from the Marcosur Feminist Articulation, the WSF “has become a space of confluence of the struggles and proposals of movements, organisations, networks, campaigns, and multiple actors who have assumed this space as their own, developing new perspectives for a utopian imagination, something which had been almost completely lost in the social horizon of the last decades”. “To me it seems a cauldron where all the elements necessary for the construction of a better world find a place”, proclaims Brazilian Maria Edinalva Bezerra Lima from the Brazilian Workers’ Union Central, CUT. They all concur with the fact that, as Canadian Dianne Matte (Coordinator of the World March of Women) suggests, feminist participation in the WSF process is fundamental to tighten “the relations between the feminist movement and the movement for another globalisation, and to inscribe our priorities in it and strengthen the possibilities for a real social transformation”. “Another world, without feminism”, Matte insists, “is impossible”. And Uruguayan Lucy Garrido, from the journal, *Cotidiano Mujer* and the Marcosur Feminist Articulation, states that, “we want the feminist agenda (symbolic-cultural subversion, sexual rights, equity, etc.) to become an integral component of the agenda for economic justice and the deepening of democracy”.

For Ecuadorean Irene León from ALAI (Latin American Information Agency), the WSF represents an unparalleled opportunity to construct and consolidate alliances not only among feminists but, principally, between the feminisms and the forces of the world movement for another globalisation. As she says, “the participation of the movement in the making of alliances and in the creation of critical discourses and new proposals is a necessary effort if we want the vision of a different world to be inclusive and have a gender perspective”. At the same time, Nadia Du Mond, from the World March of Women in Italy, points out that, “the expansion of the WSF at the regional and continental level enabled the creation of international spaces of encounter and articulation which the women’s movements would have had difficulty finding under other circumstances”; she also observes that the Forum process has fostered the growth of feminism, given that many young women and other women who “had become activists in all kinds of mixed movements along the road from Seattle or Porto Alegre looked for the first time with interest at the presence of a feminist component, becoming interested in a gender approach in relation to their own sphere of engagement”. For Brazilian Júlia Ruiz de Giovanni, one of these young feminists, the young women who participated in the Forum “are the

bearers of a renovated feminism since they have to respond continuously to the historical challenges that arise today not only for feminism but also for the ensemble of emancipatory projects for which the ‘movement of movements’ pretends to be the channel of convergence”.

Beyond these points of convergence, of course, lie differences of approach, emphasis, and strategy among those feminists who come together at the WSF. First, similarly to other participants in the Forum process, feminists also encompass a broad spectrum of positions on the best way to face and combat neoliberal globalisation in general and its devastating impact on women’s lives in particular. Second, feminists also differ in relation to the strategies that are best suited to promote alliances with other social forces who participate in the Forum process and to ensure that the questions that are central to the feminisms become an integral part of those ‘other worlds’ envisioned by the new global movements.

As the essay by Argentineans Silvia Chejter and Claudia Laudano suggests, for example, from the Second WSF, there have been significant differences between those feminists that insist on the need for an autonomous space (*espacio propio*) with its own programme within the WSF, on the one hand — “a space of encounter, debate, creativity, artistic expression, embodied activities, and circulation of information on themes such as health, development, sexuality, environment, theology, and violence, all of them approached from a women’s perspective”; and, on the other, those feminists who place their bets on achieving a more effective political insertion in all of the Forum spaces. Arguing that, “a parallel women’s Forum, following the format of the civil society events at the UN conferences”, is not the best feminist strategy for the WSF, the Ecuadorian Magdalena León T, from the Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy, proposes that, “this does not mean that women do not need their own spaces, nor that the Forum is lived as in an ideal world of equality, but that here we are dealing with a qualitatively different process...it is a collective and solidarity effort where power — in its institutional and formal meaning — is not exerted or struggled over and where feminism can occupy a central role in the in the advancement of its utopias and proposals, which are of a radical and global character”. Others, however, such as Brazilian Maria Betânia Avila from SOS-Corpo and the Brazilian Women’s Articulation, state that unequal power relations “still shape this political space in movement”, insisting that “as a form of thought and political practice, feminism forms part of such a construction [that is the Forum process], and part of that construction is the overcoming” of the inequalities that are manifested at the interior of the WSF and of those movements that make it up. For this author and for several others in this dossier, the WSF presents itself as “a space where feminisms find a productive *locus* to weave their alliances and ideas with other subjects, but also to act in the sense of demarcating feminism’s contribution to a democratised form of politics”. In this way, as Irene León suggests, feminist participation in the WSF faces “a double challenge : on one side, to break away from androcentric and ethnocentric visions and practices, in order to move towards all-inclusive kinds of ethics; on the other, to call on so-called issue-specific movements to widen the scope of their action and proposals so that they include the full set of social problematics in their approaches”.

We hope that these thoughts and discussions will contribute to stimulating the debate on how to deal with this double challenge, and also to giving greater visibility to feminist actions in alternative transnational spheres and to the contributions and interventions of the diverse expressions of feminism that participated in the first three Forums — in the events themselves as much as in the regional and global processes triggered and articulated through the WSF. Towards this, we asked our authors to address the following questions, on the basis of their specific perspectives and subject “positionality” : what does the WSF mean, as both event and process, for feminisms, especially for those in Latin America ? What have been / should be the significance and contributions of the diverse feminisms to the Forum ? Does the participation of feminisms in the Forum constitute a new or different form of action, insertion, intervention, or articulation in the international sphere ? In particular, how could one compare this action with the regional feminist articulation in the *Encuentros* and with the feminist participation in the various preparatory processes for UN conferences and / or other official international processes ?

We attempted to secure reflections that could account for the widest possible range of feminist networks that have participated in the WSF, both Latin American and global. The various voices are all militant feminists who developed their feminist practice in various countries and regional and global articulations and / or speak from different feminist places : from the feminisms of the new generations, of labour unions, NGOs, activist and advocacy networks, and so forth. Without pretending to be representative of the vast gamut of feminist positions at play in the WSF, these voices hope to contribute to a debate and a process that are still under construction. The debate on the feminisms and the Forum will continue in Mumbai with the realisation of the Fourth WSF, and also in all of those spaces where the most diverse forms of resistance to neoliberal globalisation are articulated on a daily basis.

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Essay authored by Sonia E Alvarez based on the introduction to a dossier on ‘Feminisms and the World Social Forum’ edited by Sonia E Alvarez, Nalu Faria and Miriam Nobre, in a special issue of *Revista Estudos Feministas* ‘Journal of Feminist Studies’ (Brazil), Volume 11, No 2, 2003.

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**Sonia E Alvarez** is Professor of Politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is the author of *Engendering Democracy in Brazil : Women’s Movements in Transition Politics* (1990), co-editor of *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America : Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*, with Arturo Escobar (1992) and *Cultures of Politics / Politics of Cultures : Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*, with Evelina Dagnino and A. Escobar (1998). Her new book, *Feminism in Movement : Cultural Politics, Policy Advocacy, and Transnational Activism in Latin America*, is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

**Nalu Faria** is a psychologist and currently the General Co-ordinator of Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF). She is part of the Brazilian co-ordinator of the World

March of Women, of REMTE (Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy), and is member of the National Council on Women's Rights and the National Women's Secretariat of the Workers' Party, PT. She co-edited, with Ângela Borba and Tatau Godinho, *Mulher e política — Gênero e feminismo no Partido dos Trabalhadores*.

**Miriam Nobre** is an agronomist and currently programme coordinator of Sempreviva Organização Feminista (SOF), is part of the Rede Economia e Feminismo [Economy and Feminism Network] and part of the international coordination of the World March of Women. She is author of published articles such as '*Mulheres e economia solidária*', in Cattani, Antônio (org.) *A Outra Economia. 'Marcia delle Margaridas': le lavoratrici rurali nella Marcia Mondiale delle Donne*', published in *Donne in movimento*, Milan, 2002. '*La Marche Mondiale au Brésil*', published in *Politique Revue européenne de débats*, Paris, 2002.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alvarez, Faria, and Nobre, eds, 2003. The issue is available online at [www.portalfeminista.org.br](http://www.portalfeminista.org.br) and [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_serial&pid=0104-026X&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_serial&pid=0104-026X&lng=en&nrm=iso). Arturo Escobar translated this version from the Portuguese. Contributing authors to the Dossier include : Maria Betânia Ávila, SOS-Corpo and Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras in Brazil; Ericka Beckman, Stanford University, USA; Maria Edinalva Bezerra Lima of CUT, Brazil; Maylei Blackwell, University of California-Los Angeles, USA; Lilián Celiberti, Cotidiano Mujer and Articulação Feminista Marcosur, Uruguay; Silvia Chejter, Revista Travessia, Argentina; Norma Chinchilla, California State University-Long Beach, USA; Nadia De Monde, World March of Women, Italy; Elisabeth Jay Friedman, Barnard College, USA; Julia di Giovanni, SOF — Sempreviva Organização Feminista and World March of Women, Brazil; Nalu Faria, SOF — Sempreviva Organização Feminista and World March of Women, Brazil; Lucy Garrido, Cotidiano Mujer and Articulação Feminista Marcosur, Uruguay; Nathalie Lebon, Randolph Macon College, USA; Irene León and Magdalena León T, ALAI, Ecuador; Diane Matte, World March of Women; Marysa Navarro, Dartmouth College, USA; Miriam Nobre, SOF — Sempreviva Organização Feminista and World March of Women, Brazil; Marcela Ríos-Tobar, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA. For a full set of references and bibliography, please see the Dossier.

<sup>2</sup> For a sample of this literature, see Chen 1996; West 1999; O'Brien et al 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998; and Meyer and Prugl 1999. For analyses that examine the inter-relation between local social movements and transnational activism, see Naples and Desai 2002; Friedman 1999; Alvarez 2000b; and Basu 2000.

<sup>3</sup> For analyses of the engagement of some feminist sectors from Latin America in the process of UN conferences, see Clark, Friedman and Hoehstetler 1998; Friedman 2003; Alvarez 2000a; Olea Mauleón 1998; and Vargas 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Alvarez, Faria, and Nobre, eds, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> These are : Articulación Feminista Marcosur [Marcosur Feminist Articulation; [mujeresdelsur@mujersur.org.uy](mailto:mujeresdelsur@mujersur.org.uy), [www.mujeresdelsur.org.uy](http://www.mujeresdelsur.org.uy)]; International Gender and Trade Network. [secretariat@coc.org](mailto:secretariat@coc.org), [www.genderandtrade.net](http://www.genderandtrade.net); Red Latinoamericana Mulheres

## The WSF : Challenging Empires

Critical Engagement

Transformando a Economia [Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy] [mujerdialogo@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:mujerdialogo@prodigy.net.mx), <http://movimientos.org/remte>; Rede Dawn de Mulheres [Dawn Women's Network] [dawn@is.com.fj](mailto:dawn@is.com.fj), [www.dawn.org.fj](http://www.dawn.org.fj); Rede Latino Americana e Caribenha de Mulheres Negras [Latin American and Caribbean Black Women Network] [criola@alternex.com.br](mailto:criola@alternex.com.br), [www.criola.org.org](http://www.criola.org.org); Rede Mulher e Habitat [Women and Habitat Network] [gem@agora.com.ar](mailto:gem@agora.com.ar), <http://www.redmujer.org.ar>; Rede Mundial de Mulheres pelos Direitos Reprodutivos [World Network of Women for Reproductive Rights] [office@wgnrr.nl](mailto:office@wgnrr.nl), [www.wgnrr.org](http://www.wgnrr.org); REPEM – Rede de Educação Popular entre Mulheres [Popular Education Women's Network] [repem@repem.org.uy](mailto:repem@repem.org.uy), [www.repem.org.uy](http://www.repem.org.uy); World March of Women, [www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000/en/index.html](http://www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000/en/index.html), [dmatte@ffq.qc.ca](mailto:dmatte@ffq.qc.ca).

<sup>6</sup> Other analyses of the participation of feminists in the WSF include León 2002; Faria 2003; Celiberti 2001; Rosemberg 2003.