

SAN BERNARDO

Feminist Encounter in Argentina

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The feminism that exists in Latin America and the Caribbean is a multi-faceted movement in search of its own identity. Nearly 2,500 women attended the Fifth Feminist Encounter of this region, held in San Bernardo, Argentina, last November 18 to 24. From neighborhood organizations, labor unions, political parties, support centers, schools, religious institutions, human rights groups, cultural organizations and so forth, all of them gathered together to reclaim possession of the rights of the feminine gender.

The intention was to exchange experiences in the struggle and to discuss four main themes: the present-day situation of the feminist movement; the collective identity of feminism in Latin America, organizational variants and areas of development; relations of the feminist movement with other areas of struggle; and finally, proposals for the future.

The Encounter included open workshops dealing with topics as diverse as the participants themselves, the permanent exhibition of videos made by women on women's themes, reading of works and a documentation center. Through the years Latin American and Caribbean feminist encounters have awakened interest, even among European women who traveled to this continent to participate in it. Nevertheless, this Fifth encounter was marked not only by its disorganization, but also by obvious rejection by the men of San Bernardo, who thought that only lesbians, who were better off in the kitchen, were gathered together there.

Organizing a meeting of 2,500 Latin women from all over the continent was not an easy task. Participants' lodgings and

workshop locations were spread out all over the city. At the last minute, food and board had to be sought for more than half of those who attended. Because the San Bernardo Light and Energy Union did not fulfill its original commitment, the organization of the meeting was turned upside down. Workshops were held in the most unexpected places: in banquet halls, cafeterias, street passageways, hotel lounges, galleries, cafés, and so forth.

Journeys of one sort or another were indispensable to find workshops. They might be either next door to one another, or several blocks away in any direction. At the beginning there was total confusion: "This is no encounter, it's a search", was heard frequently. Nevertheless, by the second day, things fell into place. Lesbians, women neighborhood representatives, union members and indigenous women did not have their own slots in the initial program, but soon they organized themselves into open workshops to discuss and share experiences.

We Mexican participants, some 150 women, could never organize ourselves into a delegation. Two meetings were called, which were attended by less than a third of us, which made the fragmentation of the feminist movement in Mexico clear, in spite of the national encounters held here. This situation is not exclusive to our country, in fact there has never been a proposal for participation by delegations in any of the Latin American and Caribbean encounters. This characteristic of the meetings of Mexican women motivated the proposal to initiate future encounters with presentations by delegations on feminist movement advances in each country and that this be a point of departure for the topics of discussion.

Mexican delegates also proposed that organization of the next encounter be given to a continental commission, not in only one or two countries, as was the case in this meeting, and that professional women be hired in the organization of events of this magnitude to avoid repeating the same mistakes. It was also proposed that the participants have greater access to information on the economic side of the encounter and on the relationship with financing agencies.

One of the most interesting discussions in the search for identity of the Latin American and Caribbean feminist movement is the relationship between the theory and practice of feminism and the relationship of this with other social movements. There was a consensus that practical reality has gone beyond the theory of

the feminist movement. Those who work on this indicate that new currents or new concepts are still not very clearly seen where the diversity of feminism's forms and tendencies might be able to group themselves.

Today's theory requires modification in order to explain the increasingly greater participation of women from popular sectors, indigenous groups and blacks. This is one characteristic that defines the Latin American feminist movement in contrast with that of Europe, where these sectors do not participate, only those of the middle and upper classes. Lesbians could have been included as lesbian feminists in gender studies and they demanded their own spaces for the next encounter.

As for the relationship of the feminist movement with other social movements, it was clear that in fact it was a matter of a struggle for survival, housing and work along with the gender struggle. "We have begun fighting for governmental subsidies of basic foods and for suitable housing, and now we also have gender demands", said Mexican women from neighborhood organizations.

The work of women for human rights and for the presentation of political victims was magnificently represented by the presence of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They showed a video on children found, their grandchildren, in which the untiring activities of these women is shown. Their work now includes the use of the most modern technology to detect the "Grandmotherly Index": through sophisticated blood analysis, it is possible to know if a child is a grandchild of some of them although their parents, who have "disappeared", no longer live. These analyses have permitted the identification of children who lived with military families and others who had been adopted by trustworthy families. In the latter case, if the children are happy and well cared for, they remain with the family that has adopted them and in addition they gain another grandmother. But many children and grandchildren still remain to be found. The Grandmothers demand their presentation, their struggle continues.

The feminist movement also made other political demands: legalization of abortion, no to the exoneration of soldiers in Argentina, no to impunity for crimes against humanity, restitution of children born while in captivity, freedom for political prisoners, an end to sexual violence and to discrimination against women, and no to the celebration of the fifth centennial of the European invasion. ■