
Empowered women: Social struggles and gender consciousness

There can be no doubt that we are immersed in a long and sometimes resisted process of gender awareness regarding social relationships that in general terms have historically placed women in an unequal and subordinate position.

The women's struggle –a freedom struggle stemming from their condition as excluded sector- is, in essence, a social demand for changes in relationships and social structures that, in most societies have restricted women's role -through political, legal, cultural, religious and family systems- to the private and family context. In short, it is a demand for social justice.

In the western world, it is possible to identify old roots of this struggle in the figure of Olympe de Gouges, a French dramaturge and political activist who, in 1791 was the author of the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen," in clear contrast to the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen." Article 10 of her declaration establishes that "Woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum," meaning that if women have the right to be executed, they should have the right to speak.

During the twentieth century, the gender issue took on greater visibility as it was addressed by international organizations and processes. The Platform of Action of the Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995 was instrumental in this respect, advocating women's full participation in exercising power in public life.

Since then, progressively documents, conferences and international processes have started to formally recognize women's right to participate on an equal standing with men in the fields of power and decision-making. However, statistical data reveal an under-representation of women vis-à-vis men in decision-making spheres, showing that the present situation is not yet in step with this formal recognition.

In other spheres and particularly in the countries of the South, social struggles against the imposition of productive models implying the destruction of communal goods such as water, land, sovereignty and even culture itself, have found women on a level with men and, on some occasions, at the forefront of these struggles. These women, who start getting involved in local struggles usually do so not for themselves but for their children, their family, their community. They have grown along the way, becoming protagonists: they have become empowered, undergoing an individual change, undertaking their own collective action transformed into political action because it attempts to influence public decisions.

This is progress built on pain, courage and the hope of the lives of many anonymous women, such as those from the Ecuadorian mangroves in defence of their food sovereignty when facing the destructive advance of shrimp farming; the peasant women of the Brazilian Landless Movement defending peasant production, displaced by industrial eucalyptus plantations; the women of Idheze, in Nigeria, who closed down the oil facilities of the Nigeria Agip Oil Company, tired of the community

not even being compensated for the contamination they have endured for years; the women of the historical Chipko Movement in the Indian Himalayas, hugging their trees to defend them from the loggers. Women who resist the advance of monoculture tree plantations, women against mining, against dams, against oil and against destruction because they fight for life.

And this awareness engenders other awarenesses, that become steps to either move out of invisibility or out of plain oppression. Women no longer want to be mediated by men. A group of Mapuche women (1) denounced “invisibility, negation and exclusion of Mapuche women by the Chilean State, which has no programmes involving our situation or our way of life.” Likewise they react and accuse that “this is also in great part also true for the Mapuche Movement itself.” They highlight the “invisibility” of Mapuche women in spite of the fact that they have worked “shoulder by shoulder with men, gestated the movement, struggled to obtain rights as members of society and above all, as women.”

The Mapuche women express strongly and clearly that the demand for rights, justice, equity and respect must begin at home. They challenge the concept of rebuilding the Mapuche “pater land” [meaning of the Spanish word “patria”, fatherland] and instead raise the idea of the Mapuche “mater land” [creating the Spanish neologism “matria”] since the origin of their existence is the Mapu Ñuke, their Mother Land. (1)

Just like their Mapuche sisters, women all over the world are incorporating their own claims into collective struggles and making their voices heard with increasing strength, regaining ownership over their place in the world, of their own lives.

Raquel Núñez
World Rainforest Movement

(1) “La matria mapuche”, <http://www.mapuche-nation.org/espanol/html/articulos/art-77.htm>