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ESF

# ESF: feminism and the movement

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**Why a women's day at the European Social Forum (ESF)? The idea of organizing a whole day of women's debates inside the ESF emerged in the context of the limited space for discussion in workshops or in seminars provided by the first ESF at Florence.**

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The lack of time available for a real discussion of the subjects raised by women in the framework of this first forum was obvious. Despite the efforts of the World Women's March, which had participated from the beginning in the European meetings to prepare this event, the presence of women - in particular feminists - and their impact in the Forum's discussions has been extremely limited. This corresponds both to the persistence of patriarchy (understood as relations of domination between the two sexes) in our societies, including social organizations and movements, and the absence of a strong structured autonomous women's movement at the national and international levels.

The proposal for a whole day (at the beginning we had even considered a weekend) dedicated to women's rights was intended to rebalance this situation and make it possible to reinforce the bonds between various women's associations and movements in European countries.

## A complicated process

The idea was to insert in each European meeting of the ESF a meeting of preparation for the women's day, thus creating a dynamic transcending the traditional borders and horizons of the women's movement. In fact this formula has not been so easy to apply. The same difficulties that women's associations face at the national level - geographical and thematic dispersal, lack of economic resources and organized and permanent structures - weighed in the realization of a real coordinated work for this Assembly. Consequently the bulk of the organizational and political work had to be taken on by the country hosting the Forum.

The positive side of the coin consists in the great interest that the Assembly has aroused in various countries and in particular in France, where hundreds of women, organized and not, have already registered. In several countries, mainly in the Mediterranean area, feminist groups have collectively prepared their participation so that the meeting can be really used to exchange experiences on the ground and to work out common strategies of resistance to the Europe of the banks, the army and the Vatican.

In fact one of the objectives of the Assembly is the drafting of a declaration of women opposed to the Europe which is being built - its Convention and the policies which will follow from it.

This declaration will be accompanied by proposals for campaigns centered on the key questions concerning the rights and freedoms of European women: starting with the right to free choice in relation to sexuality and procreation; the inclusion of immigrant women and their autonomous status; and opposition to the neoliberal policies of the EU which impoverish women (and in particular older women) first and foremost.

The Assembly of women is conceived first as a stage in the construction of networks and campaigns which will allow the women's movement to act at the continental level, to approach the European dimension of politics.

The work of the morning will be divided into six workshops which will exchange the experience of resistance and struggle on the following subjects: women and war; violence; free choice; immigration and reproduction; employment, poverty, job insecurity; incarnation of power.

The topics dealt with will be presented to the plenary assembly in the afternoon and then connected to the declaration concerning the Convention to be approved at the end of the day. A procession will then connect the women's day to the official opening of the ESF.

## Feminism in the movement for global justice

The holding of the European Assembly for Women's Rights is the fruit of an enormous subjective effort by the wing of feminism which has involved itself in the movement for global justice on the basis of two assumptions:

1. That the presence of the women's movement is essential within the international movement for another possible world and that the radical critique of systems of domination is doomed to failure without the contribution of feminism.
2. That the movement of women has everything to gain by immersing itself in this mixed movement, made up mainly of young people - many of them young women - to renew itself and build a bridge to the new generations.

It is mainly thanks to the maintenance from the year 2000 of the European network of the World Women's March against Violence and Poverty that the essential minimal conditions were met so that the event could take place.

In connection with the first assumption it is obvious that the movement for global justice has had difficulty in fully absorbing feminism into its analyses and discourse. Feminism introduced into the movement fundamental topics like a rereading of the economic structures through the recognition and valorization of domestic labour, which practically remains the responsibility of women, or the use of the optic of gender to interpret social relations. On these themes there is now a full bibliography and an 'expertise' built up by researchers and activists everywhere in the world.

At the theoretical level feminism brings fundamental concepts like the multiplicity of the subject of transformation (from which it follows that there is no longer one priority contradiction in relation to others and no longer a single vanguard that will direct the process); the need for a holistic approach which integrates the different spheres of life in a revolutionary perspective (a project that can only succeed if it manages to mobilize the energies and passions of those directly affected).

All this remains absolutely marginal in relation to the ideas and forces that have characterized the movement until now, a movement which moreover has rarely explicitly expressed itself in feminist terms. A strong and articulated presence of feminism within the movement is an essential condition but not necessarily a sufficient one so that the theoretical and strategic assets of the women's movement become hegemonic within the World Social Forum.

The millennia of patriarchal culture consolidated in structural social and economic relationships weigh on the social Forums, which show a formidable inertia relative to attempts at renewal of the modalities of struggle and organization, the training of a different leadership, and definition of the priority contents of the movement.

However, it should be said that from the point of view of the affirmation of principles, the WSF and its various regional articulations have registered progress compared to what is the tradition of the labour movement. In words at least, feminism and the fight against patriarchal structures have been taken on. The international feminist networks and the

women's movement in various countries taking part in the movement have found the doors open to their entry in the Forums. In several countries, not particularly progressive in terms of women's rights and sexual freedoms, like Portugal, Italy and Switzerland, the Social Forums have integrated into their programme topics raised by feminists and lesbian and gay activists.

These are the first indications that the 'mutual contamination' of the various currents and subjects which make up the movement will not stop there and that its advance is a question which rests also partially in our hands. At the same time there are signs of a revival of the women's movement and interest in relation to feminist analyses outside and inside the movement for global justice.

In the countries of the South women's organizations have not ceased growing during recent decades. Massive support for the World Women's March in 2000 in certain countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America bear witness to that. Within the framework of the social forum some sectors of women are raising questions on the specificity of their participation as (young) women within this movement. During the last demonstration against the Europe of the bankers and social exclusion in Rome, for example, a sector of 'disobedient' youth self-organized for the first time by seeking their own forms of visibility and radical action within the demonstration, facing the police force, inspired by the direct action of peasant women during the mobilization against the WTO in Cancun. A great debate followed on the feminist discussion lists in Italy. Do forms of action which do not exclude conflict belong to our movement? Is there an embryo of feminist consciousness there?

In my view it is not at all an automatic process that young women who mobilize within the framework of the movement become aware of their condition of subordinate gender, the patriarchal relations which exist in society and the discrimination to which they are subjected. But it is certain that this milieu offers the best possibilities so that the feminist discourse can be heard and taken up, provided that we are perceived as part of that same movement and able to communicate our ideas and our experiences in an attractive way.