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Success of Assembly for Women's Rights

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More than 3,000 women and about 150 men took part in the European Assembly for Women's Rights that took place on November 12, 2003 in Bobigny on the outskirts of Paris. This was an undeniable success for an event that constitutes very much a "first" as a feminist initiative in Europe. Let's look at where it came from...

The idea first emerged in Florence during a seminar organized by the European coordination of the World March of Women Against Poverty and Violence. The idea was put forward of a specific women's initiative during the 2nd European Social Forum which was going to be held in Paris Saint Denis in 2003. Why such an initiative? The participants at this seminar felt the need to create an event around the next ESF that would mark a feminist presence in the ESF and reflect the fact that the movement for global justice could not claim to construct another world if it did not integrate the struggle against male domination.

[http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L204xH300/05_paris-fbcad.jpg]

So the idea was to hold a women's assembly for one day at the opening of the ESF. A fight was needed on the French organizing committee for this day to be considered as an integral part of the ESF. Some organizations argued that every movement would then demand the same treatment. This was, once again, a failure to understand that the question of women's rights transcends all movements.

In the end the following compromise was made: the women's assembly would be part of the ESF process in the same way as the general assembly of social movements. This proposal was then adopted in February 2003 at the European preparatory assembly in Brussels. A preparatory committee in France involving approximately 50 organizations began planning the contents of this day. A genuinely collective and European preparation was sought, while it was acknowledged that the host country had a particular responsibility.

At the time of the various European preparatory assemblies (Berlin in April, Genoa in July and Bobigny in September), we ensured that the agenda included time for the preparation of this assembly. That made it possible to discuss the contents with women from various European countries. Very quickly four working themes appeared and were adopted in Berlin: Violence against women; Women and migration; Employment, insecure work and poverty; the right to choose. In Genoa two additional themes were

Several countries, Greece and Italy in particular, organized national meetings to prepare for this day and to make proposals as to the various axes of reflection. In Italy a group, Parigi Diverse, was created for the occasion, while in Greece the World March network was responsible. In other countries it was often groups linked to the World March who took part in this preparation. As was the case with the ESF, there was a special effort to involve women from Eastern Europe.

On all the subjects proposed, it was necessary first to share reports at a European level, then develop analyses and consider perspectives for common campaigns. This was the general approach in our preparatory work. Two discussion lists, one French and the other European, were set up in order to allow exchange of ideas on the preparation. Reports on the workshops were regularly posted on these discussion lists to get reactions and proposals, in particular from women in other countries.

The idea of a manifesto was also put forward in the last month of preparation so that we could come out of this

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assembly with a strong text that could be used to question political leaders at the European level and in every country.

In addition while taking part regularly in the preparation of the ESF, we argued for more plenaries and seminars integrating women's questions than had been the case in Florence. In particular, five plenaries were held on women's rights, rather than one as initially planned.

Which networks supported us at the European level? The World March of Women, the European Network of Family Planning on the question of the right to choose, the gender and globalization group of ATTAC, the "Femmes solidaires" association, lesbian networks, the European Women's Lobby contributed to the European construction of this day. There is no properly constituted feminist network at the European level, but there are some networks that often have different spheres of intervention. One of the issues at stake from the European Women's Assembly is to constitute a European feminist network, making it possible to improve the relationship of forces so as to impose a real equality between women and men.

In the morning, after an opening text, read by women from various countries, which clarified the meaning of this day, the participants split up into six workshops. Within each workshop, we tried to bring out the themes of common campaigns for the months to come.

In the workshop on employment, precarious work and poverty the goal was to discuss the effects of neoliberalism on women's employment in Europe and to begin the collective construction of a European response to this situation. In Europe, women had largely made their entry into the workforce when the new economic order was durably installed. Women have resisted the offensives of neoliberalism. Over the last 25 years, mass unemployment, part-time work imposed on hiring and flexibility have become essential characteristics of female work.

After the reading of a letter from women fired by the Lewis company, several interventions, in particular that of an unemployed Belgian woman, a Spanish peasant from the European Peasants' Confederation, a Basque trade unionist, and women's employment specialist Helena Hirata, evoked the situation of women in Europe in the area of jobs, casualized work and poverty and the impact of neoliberal policies on the latter. Everywhere in Europe, the effects of neoliberalism are particularly harsh for women. To pose the principles of a real equality between men and the women, to arrive at a true autonomy, is also to fight for the individualization of all social rights.

Some themes for campaigns were defined: real equality in rights at work, struggles against all professional discrimination; increase in the social minima, attribution of the social security benefits to the individuals and not according to marital status; development of collective child care.

In the workshop on immigrant women, the view was strongly expressed that immigrant women contribute actively to the socio-cultural life of the host country, in spite of the phenomenon of double discrimination related to their condition as women and immigrant. Europe is closing its borders to immigrants and the laws of European countries place obstacles to the entry and right to stay of foreigners, forcing them into precarious status and leaving them without rights, subject to arbitrary and violent behaviour. Women, increasingly numerous among immigrants, are confronted directly with these policies which oppress them doubly, as women and as foreigners.

Even if laws are not sexually discriminatory, they have sexually discriminatory effects, because they consolidate, indeed worsen the situation of inequality between men and women, institutionalize the dependence of women within the family framework (in particular by the application of personal status codes from the countries of origin, the non-renewal of residence permits in the event of rupture in cohabitation and so on) and maintain situations of violence (traffic of women, arranged or forced marriages) and of exploitation (professional and/or sexual). The

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following axes of mobilization were adopted: the application of individual personal status in order to support autonomy and individual rights and to fight against marital dependence and double violence (familial and official); the application of the law of the host country as regards labour legislation; freedom of movement for all; recognition of the qualifications of immigrant women.

Workshop on violence: According to various estimates collected by European institutions, 20-50% of women in Europe have been victims of male violence. Much remains much to be done to bring things out into the open and give an account of the breadth of the phenomenon. For the past 30 years or more, feminist associations have worked on this issue, often alone. Now it is important to involve the social movements to allow a real mobilization, because women can no longer tolerate being alone in these struggles. Three main questions were tackled in this workshop: violence within relationships, and violence towards women in a more widespread sense; the question of prostitution; the resistance of young women and prevention of sexist behaviour in relations between boys and girls.

The struggle against violence against women must become a completely specific public policy. The axes of mobilization adopted were: harmonization of national legislations on the struggle against violence against women on the basis of the most advanced situation, through the implementation of European directives; recognition of the responsibility of states if laws are not applied.

To popularize this campaign, it was proposed that the international day against violence against women, November 25, 2004, be promoted in each European country by the social movements.

It was also decided to organize a European campaign for a world without prostitution or slavery during the Olympic Games in Athens in June 2004.

Workshop on sexual and reproductive rights: against levelling down! The disparity of women's rights in relation to control over their bodies in European countries constitutes an indicator of progress or regression. The right to abortion and contraception is the keystone of women's autonomy. The situation in three countries where abortion is prohibited and penalized was described by women from Portugal, Poland and Ireland. Another issue is the growing importance of medical techniques of reproduction. Whether we are talking about medically assisted procreation or therapeutic cloning, the eggs used are taken from the bodies of women. From the sale of eggs to the sale of organs and the forced sterilization of Roma in Slovakia, a process of commodification and accentuation of relations of domination is underway.

The right to control one's body is called increasingly into question in European countries by religious institutions, both within society and at the level of the political institutions. At the same time there is a certain downplaying of sexual and reproductive rights in feminist struggles. It was decided to mobilize clearly for the basic right for the women to control their bodies and for free access to abortion and contraception in every European country. This demand must be an integral part of the project of global justice. To this end, the workshop proposed the construction of a permanent network of struggle, information, debate, solidarity and vigilance for common mobilizations, like that initiated by the women of Portugal for abortion rights.

The workshop on women and war chose to emphasise resistance struggles through the testimony of Chechen, Palestinian, Russian, Israeli and Kurdish women, to show the specificity of the opposition of women to war, her political specificity and its overlap with feminism; relations of solidarity between women and their difficulties. The principal proposals for action are as follows: sponsoring of Palestinian prisoners and detainees; participation in the caravan of peace, which will leave Europe for Palestine and Iraq; a specific campaign so that Europe imposes peace in Chechnya; to build an international table in Turkey for September 2004 to support Turkish women peace activists; to make March 8, 2004 a day of mobilization against war.

The workshop on women and power proposed a shared analysis based on the fact that the feminine as a category is a historical construct whose consequence is the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Patriarchal domination persists in all types of society and the question of power runs through all spheres of social organization. That is why the presence of women in places where decisions are made is a major democratic issue. This workshop worked around proposals for mobilizations: to ensure that texts on equality between men and women become legally enforceable at the European level; for the effective exercise of parity in countries which have a law and parity in all European and national bodies whose members are nominated and elected, whether these structures are advisory or decision-making.

A springboard for the future

In the afternoon, in the plenary session, reports from the workshops made it possible to develop an outline of the debates on each topic and take on the action proposals. A proclamation which had been drawn up beforehand by the various preparatory groups was presented during the plenary, a meeting of synthesis of the various workshops having allowed the integration of the campaigning proposals. One of the constants of the workshops was also opposition to the contents of the constitutional treaty and a stress on the need for European struggles, to build common campaigns on the basis of the existing feminist networks like the World March of Women, the lesbian networks and those concerning reproductive rights, pacifist networks, or by creating other ad hoc bodies. The Assembly then demonstrated in the streets of Bobigny, heading, symbolically, for the courtroom where a key legal case on abortion had been decided in 1972. There were more than 6,000 of us in the streets. Over and above the day's success, the potential for mobilizing the movements and feminist networks of various countries and the need to build a broad feminist network at the European level were obvious. The debates of this day also informed the debates of the ESF. Many women attended the ESF and felt much more legitimate in contributing a feminist analysis to the debates.

This meeting made it possible to dynamize or redynamize the various women's groups, in particular because it showed that a feminist relationship of force could be built at the European level. The challenge is important: building another Europe which is feminist and anti-capitalist requires all our energies. As was clearly shown by this assembly, the backward moves contained in the constitutional treaty and the impact of neoliberal policies affect women particularly. This is a dimension that the global justice movement must take into account. If it does not integrate the struggle against male domination as a political dimension in the fight against neoliberal policies, it will be difficult to build another world. This is the message that the women's assembly tried to bring to the general assembly of social movements on November 16.