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Latin America

# Feminism to the tune of the cumbia, corrido, tango, cueca, samba . . .

- Features - Sexual politics -

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The economic crisis that has touched all the countries of Latin America has meant a disastrous lowering of the standard of living of the sub-continent's peoples. One of the aspects accompanying the crisis has been hyper-inflation in many countries, especially during recent years. While inflation hits the whole population, it affects women particularly in their day-to-day activities because of their role in administering family spending. While consumer prices in general have risen, in almost all countries food prices have risen even more. For example, the rates of price-hikes for food in 1984 were 1,315.6% in La Paz, 183.3% in Sao Paulo, 365.5% in Lima, 74% in Mexico City, 224.4% in Buenos Aires, 68.8% in Montevideo and 41.6% in Quito.

Inflation of this magnitude means that housewives have to go from market to market looking for the lowest prices, eat less so that their children can have a little more, and face the anguish of simply not having anything to give their family come mealtime. The crisis in the countryside and the resulting massive growth of the cities has crowded the latter with millions of people looking for jobs that do not exist. The lack of basic public services in the popular neighbourhoods (shantytowns) in the majority of the region's big cities also implies that women carry out their housework in ever-worsening conditions: without water and electricity; in the midst of neighbourhoods with no paved streets, dustbowl in the dry season and mud-logged during the rains; without enough schools for their children or often any sort of medical facilities. Women's workload is increased by these conditions.

## The crisis deepens women's oppression

When we talk about the family in Latin America as a consumer and survival unit we are speaking literally of physical survival. A study of working class families in Managua, with an average of 10 members each, shows that a full 90% of all the adults' waking hours are dedicated to survival tasks. In another study of 222 salaried and unemployed families in Santiago, with an average of 5.8 members, 87% of the house polled had less than (Chilean) \$17,000 coming in monthly, when \$17,000 was the minimum necessary simply to feed 6 people for a month, excluding meat or eggs from their diet. Eighty-four per cent of their incomes were used for food and the rest for fares, clothes and health needs.

The majority of the families were permanently in debt to neighbourhood stores and constantly had to borrow money to buy water and cooking gas. Under these sorts of conditions, women have increasingly looked for additional sources of income over the last few years. In even greater numbers they must have their own income so that the family can survive. In the majority of Latin American countries, between 1950 and 1980 the percentage of women in the work force went up.

But, in addition for those countries for which we have data, between 1975 and 1984 in the majority of countries women's participation in the work force increased in relation to men's. With the exception of Brazil, women entering the work force have swelled the ranks of workers in services and the 'informal sector' of the economy. Changes in the general structure of employment are very clear in many large cities, where over the last ten years itinerant salespeople and beggars have multiplied like mushrooms. With a dearth of stable salaried jobs, the population has gone into the streets to earn its living any way it can; even through those activities that bring only irregular income

For women, in the majority of cases, this does not mean proletarianisation in the full sense of the word. The informal sector of the economy includes small businesses (preparing and selling food or other items produced in the home, door-to-door sale of beauty or household items or clothing; sale of basic foodstuffs in public markets, etc), services of all kinds, particularly as domestic workers and homework (clandestine sweatshops or individual homework, piecework in sewing, knitting or leatherworking). While this kind of work brings with it more income for women, and sometimes a certain economic independence that they did not have before, it does not mean that they enter into the kind of collective social relations they would find in factory or even office work.

Some governments have instituted special temporary employment programmes, originally aimed at the male population in Chile: Minimum Employment Programme (PEM) and the Workers Program for Heads of Households (POHJ); in Peru: Program for the Support of Temporary Income (PAIT). But it has been women who have flocked to these programmes. Thousands and thousands work sweeping streets, cleaning up parks, painting walls, with no job security and 'emergency' wages. This constitutes the institutionalisation of the informal sector on the part of the state. In Peru, however, the state has gone a step further. In September 1986, the government pushed through the Emergency Occupational Program which allows private industry to contract workers for up to two years with no job security. This measure with its obvious aim of destabilising the unions, which only last July won job security after three months of employment may also attract women.

In some cases, women went into industry in significant numbers. This is the case of the metal and plastics industries in Brazil, the maquiladoras (assembly plants) in Mexico and the fish processing plants in Uruguay. Brazil is the only country where women's entry directly into production has been the dominant factor in the increase in women's participation in the workforce. In these cases, women generally, go into all-female departments where they suffer discrimination in work conditions, wages and promotion opportunities. At the same time, they continue to do 'women's work' in the home, and are therefore subjected to the double work day. This hampers their effective access to the opportunities for collective trade-union action offered by the concentration in one workplace in big industry. Even in Brazil where there has been a mass entry of women into, industry, the level of trade-union participation beyond the shop-floor level is very small.

## Women and the state

The different governments which have existed over the last few years have not, in most countries, had a clear or sustained policy as regards women. Some governments, like the ones led by the PRI in Mexico or Belisario Betancur in Colombia, have implemented certain specific policies, particularly in relation to women's lack of income. In Mexico, this programme, which is applied through the Mexican Institute for Social Security, is to train women to earn additional income without leaving the home: garment-making, making food to sell, etc. This has been accompanied by strong propaganda campaigns encouraging waged women to return to the home and give up their jobs, on the need to strengthen the family, and restricting the use of state-provided child-care to only two children per woman worker.

In Colombia, Belisario went a step further with not only programmes to train women but also a programme of loans for women to be able to set up 'micro-enterprises': food-producing cooperatives, small workshops, etc. He has also introduced a generally progressive measure which allows a woman peasant to receive the loans needed for seeds, fertiliser, etc, when the husband is not present. This measure acknowledged the fact that women often take charge of the plots of land when the husband migrates to look for work or because of guerrilla activity in the area. It was presented by Belisario as the big gain of the International Decade for Women in Colombia, together with the presence of many women deputy-ministers, governors and directors of state enterprises and institutions. However, the inclusion of many women in responsible governmental positions was totally temporary, the present Barco government has only one woman minister.

In 1985, the Family Welfare Institute's budget was cut by 50 per cent. This year, the government has made a proposal for the state to take over responsibility for the food supply in grass-roots community-controlled nurseries, paying less than the minimum wage and not providing for professional training of personnel. This could have far-reaching negative effects on the self-organisation process of women while contradictorily establishing the precedent that it is the state's and society's responsibility to take care of the young. In the countries undergoing a process of 'democratisation' after a military dictatorship, the governments have varied their attention to women as part of their attempt to win a social consensus.

In Uruguay, it was agreed to have a Mesa de Conciliación sobre la Mujer (Conciliation Talks on Women) prior to the elections that gave the presidency to the Colorado party. This was not an initiative from the Colorado leaders but from women of different parties, none of whom, however, were elected to parliament. Once Sanguinetti's government had achieved relative stability after a series of defeats in the workers' movement, the executive moved to create a women's library, then an official national women's commission, and is now preparing the opening of women's police stations with advice from Brazilian officials.

In Argentina, Alfonsín has directed a good part of his political verbiage towards women, taking up the theme of defending life as central to his brand of democracy. His goal has been to socially and politically isolate the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who have had so much political weight in the country, since he has not been able to drown their voices and their demands for the disappeared to be returned and the guilty punished. However, in terms of practical measures for women, Alfonsín's actions have been rather symbolic. He established the Woman and Family Office following a Forum on Women and Democracy. This Office, a section of Secretariat for Development of the Family, allocates half its budget to provincial programmes to promote the family through family actions centres. The other half is allocated to childcare, kindergartens and technical work training courses.

The only programme of this Secretariat directed specifically at women as such is 'Women Today' which is meant to establish 'a woman's space in the neighbourhoods' but which has only succeeded in setting up one since women do not come to these 'spaces'. But it did succeed in including forty-two professional women in an advisory council in 1985, designed to develop concrete policies for women in different aspects of state activity, in the framework of the Alfonsín project to 'democratise' the state. While this council spends its time proposing various courses of action for the mass media, health, etc., the Lopez Rega law, which penalises the sale of contraceptives, remains in effect and divorce is still not established as a right although a draft law to that effect has been proposed. Alfonsín's democratising perspective has not yet even taken this sort of minimal measure for the rights of women, although it has integrated feminist cadre into its project.

The case of Brazil is the clearest example of what a bourgeois party can achieve through the state in the way of co-opting feminist cadres through an audacious policy. With the creation in three states (Sao Paulo first of all) of Councils for the Feminine Condition, the governments led by the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) succeeded in incorporating important sections of feminists into its projects. In Sao Paulo, the country's largest city, with great political aplomb, the PMDB has opened special women's police stations where the police (trained by women from the councils) deal with cases of battered and raped women. The priorities of the Sao Paulo council, the most active, include health (with the Programme for Integral Aid for Women's Health-health monitoring from adolescence); childcare (it has developed a proposal for a change in the federal law obliging enterprises to set up creches, which would provide greater financing to ensure its implementation); and work (various meetings of women workers organised by the council won from the state Secretariat for Work, directed by a former president of the Council, a Centre for Women Workers to hear complaints on labour problems and give information on women workers' rights). But its priority of priorities in 1986 was the preparation of a proposal for the Constituent Assembly, probably not equalled in its precision by any other political force, by the time and cadre given to its elaboration.

Obviously, many of these measures are progressive in general terms. But they are not measures won directly by a movement, but the product of the incorporation of feminist cadres into the political initiative of a state and of a party

which wants to create a social consensus around itself. And they are limited by the pressures the state is subject to from other forces, like the Church, not to mention the class outlook of the PMDB itself. This is clearly illustrated by its retreat on legalised abortion in the course of the Constituent Assembly debates and the issue's being taken up by the Partido do Trabalhadores (PT), the Communist Party, the Communist Party of Brazil and the independent feminist groups. In many countries, the state has carried out an aggressive population control policy. For example, in Piauí, Brazil, one-third of the women of child-bearing age were sterilised over a 7-year period. This policy is often directly tied to its dealings with international financing agencies and the negotiations for foreign credit.

Mexico is a case in point: since the first letters of intention signed with the International Monetary Fund in 1976, part of the conditions for receiving credit and later renegotiation of the debt, has been the lowering of the birth rate from 3.5% to 1% in the year 2000. To comply with this policy, which has been very successfully implemented, the state has extended its indiscriminate distribution of birth control methods to millions of women. At the same time, more than 1.3 million women have been sterilised in a ten-year period.

Obviously, the fact that the bourgeoisie's goal is to lower the birth rate and not achieve freedom for women to decide about their maternity is at the root of these infamies. Nevertheless, the contradictory aspect of this policy is to put into the hands of millions of women, however inadvertently a tool which they never had before, which enables them today to conceive of the possibility of controlling their own bodies.

## The Latin American Church in Crisis

The weight of the Roman Catholic church in Latin America is enormous politically, socially and culturally- In Argentina, Catholicism is the official religion; in Colombia, the church has veto power over many government decisions; in Mexico and Uruguay, while there is clear division between Church and State, the former's social power is enormous in influencing not only state decisions—despite many conflicts—but the consciousness of vast sectors of the population. In many countries it still has control over a sizeable percentage of education. However, in the twenty years, the Latin American Church has entered into crisis, a crisis shown through the existence of two main currents within it: that aligned with the Vatican and its theological and political orientation, and the current known as Liberation Theology with its many tendencies.

The first, totally reactionary, sector maintains a very conservative position in relation to women, blocking change in the law on divorce (in Argentina, Colombia- where the catholic religion is official) and contraception, not to mention its opposition to the decriminalisation of abortion (a very aggressive campaign in Mexico) In general it promotes a policy of strengthening the existing family system and the traditional—submissive—role of the woman within it. The current identified with Liberation Theology, with its many tendencies and levels of political participation, is in general linked to the process of self-organisation of the poor masses of the sub-continent mainly among shantytown dwellers and peasants but also some sections of workers.

Among the shantytown dwellers, a very high proportion of the members of the Christian base communities and bible study groups are women. In a very disparate manner, the contact of priests and the religious with the daily life of the women in the popular neighbourhoods has led to signs of a sensitivity to the specific oppression they suffer and the need to take political action to fight it.

There is still an important limitation for the development of the great majority of this current's political visions however: the contradiction between its adherence to a traditional moral view and women's concrete and changing needs, especially in matters related to sexuality, motherhood and contraceptives.

Even in Brazil, for example, whose Church hierarchy has been consistently linked to the fight for human rights, it is now promoting a very aggressive campaign to eliminate through the Constituent Assembly the few existing legal grounds for abortion. Little by little contributions to liberation theology from women's point of view are appearing, as well as their relation to the overall road to liberation envisaged by the current. The results of this contradictory process, although diffuse, can be seen in a series of events organised by lay women over the last few years, linked to the base, communities.

## **The forms of radicalisation of women in Latin America**

Women's struggles in Latin America have historically been closely linked to social movements in general. Women have come onto the political scene in the key moments of Latin American history from the colonisation period up until today. But it was at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the greater configuration of the national state, more complete integration into the world market and the consequent definition of social classes and birth of the industrial proletariat that the first mass women's organisations as such appeared.

With the new situation, conditions were created that formed, and form today, the basis for the appearance of different feminine organisations. These conditions permit an initial identification among women as such. Not an identification with all women—the recognition of oppression—nor even with all women of the same social condition (proletarians, peasants, 'poor', or other general basis). It is an identification with women of the same immediate community (peasant village, estate, shantytown, work department, etc.) who have the same schedules, immediate problems to attack, and common concerns.

We encounter a sprouting of housewives committees, mothers clubs, and identification between women workers in the workplaces (with their own activities, different from the male of mixed ones). This identification is the basis for the upsurge of different Latin American women's movements from that period up to the present day.

An important form of women's organisation is support for workers' struggles, which have formed part of our reality since the last century. The strike of the unlit stoves, organised at the end of the last century by the Women's Committees in Chile, is only one example of what in our time has been expressed by the Housewives Committees in Bolivia in 1961, the Women's Committees of the Tendencia Democratica of the Mexican electricians in the 1970s, the Women's Committee of Solidarity with Labour Struggles in Ecuador, etc. Women's struggles for the right to work and rights at work have not been absent.

Because of the prevalent segregation in Latin America industry, as in the rest of the world, significant sections of women workers have struggled alone, or virtually without male participation. Although the dynamic of these struggles has not been prompted by a consciousness of women's oppression as such, but, as workers, it should be recognised as one of the important forms of struggle which is today part of our tradition and that has thrown up thousands of experienced cadres for the workers' movement in general.

The Latin American right has not forgotten to organise women to beef up its campaigns: the notorious march of the empty pots in Chile in 1972 is part of a tradition which includes the organisation of the Santa Juana de Arco of the National League in Defence of Religious Freedom (Mexico) which gave logistical support to the rebel army and the barzolas organised by the Bolivian MNR to sabotage and attack, workers' actions and demonstrations, in the name of the decency of Bolivian women. Although this part of the Latin American tradition does not reveal a conscious claim for women's rights it can represent in action a blow at oppression and an advance in consciousness. 'Can' insofar as it does not contradict their overall class interests, and, for all that as women in the movements against the

interests of the working masses organised by the right. The step forward in experience and in consciousness is expressed in women's entry into public political life, and in different ways in their political representation and participation. This is a key aspect of women's oppression in our subcontinent that is questioned in practice by these movements.

But in addition we have to point out that it is not true as many think, that there has been no historical tradition of women organising for their rights as such in our sub-continent.

Bourgeois women began to organise around the right to education and access to the professions, and in some cases the right to vote, at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one.

In many cases as in the developed countries, these women were not linked with the women of the working class nor did they organise mass mobilisations to achieve their goals, because they were politically confined to their own class. However, among the list of organisations which took shape around the demand civil rights, the vote, land and work there were some which were mass organisations, rooted in the working class. Three examples: The United Front for Women's Rights, founded in Mexico in 1935; the Movement for Emancipation of Chilean Women (also founded in 1935) and the National Feminist Party and the National Federation of Women's Associations founded in Cuba in 1910 and 1921 respectively.

The origin of these organisations was in the context of a general upsurge in the class struggle, and women activists from the then strong Communist Parties participated, in the first two at least. These organisations struggled for the right to vote, to land, to education and civil rights in general for women, at the same time that they were linked to the general fight of the working class.

â€¢ Upsurge of feminist groups in the 1970s In the 1970s (and at the beginning of the 1980s in some countries under military dictatorship, such as Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Chile) our countries saw an upsurge of feminist groups of the same type as was then seen in Europe, the United States and Canada, precisely under the influence of the mass movements of the time. But, in Latin America, this process did not have a mass expression. The groups continued isolated in the middle sectors because the necessary contradictions did not exist at a mass level -for a greater response. Among the middle classes:

â€¢ The educational level is much lower than its equivalent in the developed countries. The same expectations were not created.

â€¢ The mass availability of women ready to do all or part of the domestic work in the houses of (mainly) the rural and urban lower and higher bourgeoisie lessened the oppression of women in the petty bourgeoisie (clearly at the expense of other women) and thus weakened the contradictions which could arise in the consciousness of women of this social class.

â€¢ The weight of Catholicism, with all its taboos about women is enormous.

â€¢ At the same time, the vast majority of Latin American women, because of the semi-colonial nature of our countries and the immense misery and hardship it provokes, were mainly concerned with physical survival and the activities that it entails.

This situation meant that the majority of these groups were characterised by ideological and theoretical discussion, and that they concentrated their activity principally in consciousness raising and propaganda. In many cases, their

positions and general theoretical and political propositions had an important impact in the mass media, thus introducing for the first time for many years the 'woman question' into intellectual and left circles. Despite this generally positive contribution, their activity did not provoke a response from the mass of women or from women in struggle. This was because the propaganda put forward did not take into account the level of consciousness, the immediate concerns and the dynamic of the radicalisation of the mass of women. It was not because the content did not objectively have a relationship with the oppression of Latin American women.

Discussing and propagandising around 'themes' related to women's oppression—housework, violence, sexuality, abortion—did touch on vital issues for all Latin American women. But the neglect of the question of political perspectives for building a movement made it difficult to establish a political platform, necessary to unify the whole movement. In Brazil, for example, the abortion question did not motivate women from the popular layers, while the demand for childcare which they did raise was seen by the middle sectors as 'non-feminist'. Additionally, the left, which could have helped contribute to the solution of this problem in linking long-term goals to movement building, for the most part did not participate or adopted a clearly hostile attitude to the whole phenomenon. But this situation led to a crisis of the 'autonomous groups' and in many cases to their disappearance. Today, the autonomous groups exist in very few places in our sub-continent, (a few examples: the Feminist Alternative in Buenos Aires, the Libertarian Mothers in Mexico, the Lesbian Consciousness Group and the Feminist Collective for Reproductive Rights in Peru).

But some groups and many individual women—either survivors of these groups or those who saw early on their limitations—began to form other types of instruments to express their feminist concerns. This is where most of the presently existing groups and bodies defining themselves as feminist in Latin America come from:

a) Institutions of aid and/or education, mainly financed by international agencies. They give advice, investigation, seminars, publications, legal, psychological and medical aid for and with women. These centres vary greatly in the central dynamic of their concrete activity, their relation to women of the popular classes and their objectives.

Institutions which state that their goal is not to organise women but to 'promote reflection on their situation as a sex' organising educational workshops, printing pamphlets and establishing services (the Casa de la Mujer in Bolivia, Colectivo Sexualidade Saude and the Casa de la Mujer de Grajau in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the Casa de la Mujer in Buenos Aires, the Flora Tristan Centre in Peru, Casa de la Mujer and CEPAM in Quito). Despite their generally irregular relations with a few groups of working-class, peasant or poorer women, many of these institutions take political initiatives on women, although not in direct relation with the broad women's movement: the seminar on violence organised by CEPAM, attended by around 400 women, out of which came the Tribunal Against Violence Against Women in 1986; the Flora Tristan initiative to protest against the massacre of the prisoners, its participation in the women's programme of the Izquierda Unida and in the Frente Continental de Mujeres, and the creation of the Feminist Circle in Lima, Peru; the role played by the Casa de la Mujer in Bogota in the formation of the Feminist Collective in this city, are some examples.

Institutions which, despite their limits (funding among others) take a regular and direct part in the struggles of popular women, supporting in different ways (CIDHAL in Mexico, La Morada in Chile, Aurora Viva and CESIP in Peru).

Institutions which, as well as direct participation in the struggles, organise groups of women from the popular sectors (mainly shanty-town dwellers) within them (Manuela Ramos de Peru, PLEMUU de Uruguay, CAM de Guayaquil Ecuador).

Institutions which are fundamentally devoted to research (GRECMU in Uruguay) or assembling documentation (Women's Information Centre and Carlos Chagas in Sao Paulo; Cento de Estudios de la Mujer, Chile).

b) Projects of support/relations to women without funding. Some of these centre their activity on services (the Support Centre for Raped Women in Mexico). Others make films (a group in Sao Paulo and the Feminist Collective for Reproductive Rights in Peru). Others exist to establish a meeting and discussion place for women (Lugar de Mujer, Buenos Aires; Cuarto Creciente, Mexico; Casa de la Mujer, Cordoba, Argentina). Others work with women from the popular neighbourhoods (Grupo Mujeres en Accion, Bogota; the Grupo Tomasa Garces in Quito) or peasants and / or native women (Frente Amplio de Mujeres "FAM" in Cuenca, Ecuador).

But all these have a link with some section of working-class or poorer women or a concrete project to keep going, which they consider is useful for women's liberation.

c) Groups of collectives formed around the publication of a journal: the editorial team of FEM in Mexico, the oldest and most regular journal in the sub-continent; Mujer y Sociedad in Peru; the editorial collective of Cotidiano Mujer in Uruguay; the editorial team of Cuentame Tu Vida and Las Brujas in Colombia.

d) Many Christian women who through their participation in the rise of liberation theology and the corresponding civic movement have taken feminist positions. The great majority of them are active in different Christian groups which do this general work or in the institutions mentioned above. But there are some feminist Christian groups organised as such, like the Grupo de Mujeres Cristianas, a member of the Feminist Circle in Lima, or Women for Dialogue in Mexico.

e) Trade-union commissions or groupings, generally just beginning to work, whose objective is to promote the self-organisation of women with the trade unions: the Memorial group of Peru; the Women's Commission of the PIT-CNT in Uruguay; the women's commissions of the CUT in Brazil; in various trade unions in Colombia, including the telephonists and the maestros of Bogota; the Intersindical of the CGT in Argentina with a real strength in the printing union; the women's department of the National Trade-Union Coordination linked with the Vicaria de Solidaridad in Chile; Mujeres en Accion Sindical in Mexico, formed after the 1985 earthquake, primarily based in the seamstresses union.

f) Women in many left political parties are involved in an internal struggle in their organisations. We should note the strength of feminist women within the Communist Parties in Colombia and Uruguay, who already have functioning commissions and discussions in two of the biggest CPs in the sub-continent, as well as the women in different Chilean opposition parties. The feminists within the PT in Brazil have won the creation of women's commissions in different states as have the feminists in the PUM in Peru. There is a reactivation of feminist discussion in the PSUM, which is today part of a party in formation: the Partido Mexicano Socialista. The women of the Bloque Socialista of the Dominican Republic continue their work to strengthen the autonomous organisation CONAMUCA. And obviously, there are our organisations in Latin America which define themselves as feminist. Insofar as there are not usually national, and much less international, forms of coordination, the debates which traverse Latin American feminism are fragmented in each country. There is not always a dialogue between the different sectors, different cities, different regions.

With the exception of Brazil, the great majority of the organised forms of feminism are concentrated in the capital cities, as are the population and political life in our countries. This also affects the type of debate that can be had, in so far as it rather marginalises the reality of women from the provinces in feminist outlook. Although some feminists would like to concentrate on the creation of a feminist counterculture, and have a more or less esoteric vision of feminist commitment, for the most dynamic sectors of Latin American feminism the debate today centres on how to be effective in changing national reality to improve the situation of women. Given the small size of organised feminism, its non-extension to a mass level, and non constitution in a social movement, this growing concern is focused on the relation which everyone sees as necessary (or not) with mass of Latin American women in struggle, the majority of our women's movement. Faced with the economic crisis devastating our countries, the deterioration in

the standard of living and democratic rights which accompanies it, women have been forced to respond.

As the participation of women in the labour market has increased, given the need for increased income, they have also responded by being active in the social and political movements of the working people in general. In trade-union and peasant struggles the mass opposition has involved millions of women, for many in their first experience of struggle. But, at the same time, the growth in the cities, with the appearance or extension of the peripheral rings of poverty (poor neighbourhoods, shantytowns, etc), has over the last 15 years stimulated new movements whose base of support and activity is almost exclusively female—the popular urban or civic movements. These movements fight for solutions to the problems of living, services, and high prices, suffered by millions of inhabitants of these areas, who live in extremely precarious conditions.

Women, because they are responsible for the care of the family in all its aspects and most of them do not have paid jobs, with corresponding hours outside the home, are both the most motivated and the most available to participate in this type of movement, which is centred on the place of residence. Women are also the majority in the human rights movement. The committees of families of political prisoners and ‘disappeared’ which have been formed in different countries in Latin America, have women as their rank and file and driving force. In this case also, their mobilisation comes mainly from identification with their role as mother and wife and their responsibility for freeing their children, husbands and brothers from the clutches of repression.

In the best known case, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, they became the vanguard of the movement to re-establish democracy in Argentina. But this is not the only case: Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and many other countries have seen groups of this type emerge, mostly led by women who, faced with the most brutal repression, and in most cases without previous political experience, take to the streets to protect their families. It is around these two main themes: the struggle for survival and the struggle for democratic rights that the majority of Latin American women have moved. They do not see their entrance into social and political struggle as a step to defend themselves as women, nor around their demands as a sex. They do it in order to be able to carry out the obligations that society has conferred on them as women, in the logic of assuming their social identity, of being in the first instance mother and wife.

## Women fight for family and survival

Women in Latin America follow two main roads towards family survival:

\*the demand petition to an external agency (state, employer, church, etc.)

\*the attempt to solve the problem with their own resources (often combined with demands addressed externally).

The first road, with which we are more familiar, happens on a local, regional or national level, and takes the form of local groups, women’s leagues, mothers’ clubs, trade unions, organisations of peasant women, etc., which demand higher wages, food grants, land, loans, the release of prisoners, a stop to torture and many other concrete demands on the authorities. The second road also has many different organised forms: collective buying of foodstuffs by neighbours; the setting up of local groups for knitting or entertainment (in Chile for example where in many areas there is no possibility of any form of social life because of the poverty and the restrictions of the dictatorship); the introduction of neighbourhood communal cook pots on a mass scale as a way of reducing food costs and possibly improving the nutritional level of the food (this is done on a mass scale in Lima and in Chile, and was done in Uruguay before the fall of the military); the creation of productive cooperatives to increase the family income and for finance community organisations.

Women's entry into these struggles creates a contradictory dynamic: they enter into public life as mothers and wives. At the same time they come out of their homes and their neighbourhoods to confront state power, the bosses, the trade-union bureaucracy, the paramilitary groups and the local political bosses of their region or city. In short, they do precisely what the prevailing values say that a mother and wife should not do. Objectively, going out into the street, reaffirming their responsibilities as oppressed women, brings them into contradiction with this oppression. This is demonstrated in every confrontation they have with society: opposition / support, jeers / encouragement with fellow workers, neighbours, with husbands, children or other family members.

But fundamentally the contradiction is clear in each woman's encounter with herself. Conditions are created at a mass level which open the possibility for developing a consciousness of her oppression as a woman. She faces obstacles in her involvement in public political action, motivated by necessity and solidarity, and in the fight to achieve her aims. If she is going to reach her goals, if she is going to win, the conditions of solidarity, her behaviour, her conception of herself, the conditions of struggle will have to change. In order to establish new conditions for solidarity, and at the same time to improve the conditions of struggle, she will have to confront her own oppression, at least in reference to her right to political participation.

But, the recognition of this contradiction and the overcoming of it through consciously establishing political representation as women, is not automatic. Much less is the extension of this consciousness to include other aspects of oppression which they live as women and the explicit putting forward of demands specific to their position as a sex as the basis of unity in struggle. The existence of this contradiction is the objective basis for the advance in the last few years in building a movement of this type.

The conscious development of this contradiction and of a political movement based on it depends on many other factors in the class struggle (the general balance of forces between the workers and the bourgeoisie, the development, strength and relationship of the revolutionary organisations with these movements and the standpoint of these forces on the woman question, the level and forms of links between the feminist wing of the women's movement and the mass of women in action, the capacity of the state to put forward demobilising policies, etc).

However, in general terms, we can say that the central dynamic that we are seeing in Latin America is toward the favourable resolution of this contradiction: women are participating in politics as they never have before. There are advances and retreats in each country in accordance with the each particular situation, but the general dynamic is towards the shaping of a mass women's movement which more and more make specifically women's demands as part of their struggle and the basis of their unity, combined with the general demands related to survival and democracy. Let us look at general signs of progress in this sense.

**Nicaragua:** The general context of this country gives women qualitatively better conditions for an advance in their consciousness because the whole population is living a revolutionary process, and because of the concrete experience of women as women during the revolution itself. AMPRONAC was founded in 1977, secretly under the initiative of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). Its original purpose was to group women to fight for human rights and against repression. It carried out that task both nationally and internationally, and had between eight and ten thousand members by the time of Somoza's fall in 1979. Also by that time, AMPRONAC's programme advanced to include anti-sexism and anti-capitalism, while it developed widespread logistical support activities for the guerrilla movement amongst the civilian population. In addition, women's participation in actual combat units became widespread.

The August 1978 FSLN takeover of the national palace gave the country an example of a capable, armed woman commander. The young people that joined the September 1978 insurrection included not only young boys but thousands of young girls. When the insurrection failed at the end of the month, thousands of them joined the retreating combat units and, after several months training and experience, fought in the final insurrection of July 1979.

The separation of thousands of young women from their families for the first time, under combat, clandestine conditions, laid the basis for young people's questioning of women's traditional role.

Since the victory women have joined massively in all the activities and forms of popular power since this date (60% of the brigadistas in the National Literacy Crusade were women, as well as 80% of those of the People's Health Days; in 1984 they provided 48% of the People's Militia and 60% of the revolutionary vigilance committees). In the last few years, with the escalation of the war by the US government and the contras, they have taken on jobs previously reserved to men and are a majority in the high schools. Both these phenomena are due to the massive departure of men to the front.

The National Women's Association Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE, AMPRONAC's successor) and the Women's Legal Office (a government agency) have helped foment both public debate around the women's question and women's education about their rights. The new constitution made several steps forward, though there are still many problems.

One which particularly shows up is the question of decriminalising abortion. After the broad public debate around abortion it is still under study in a parliamentary committee. But the FSLN proclamation on 8th March 1987 marks a change in the revolutionary leadership's policy with regard to women. Today, they propose to combine the legal and ideological work of the AMNLAE with work in mass sectors through including mass leaders in the projects of the association. This implies big advances in the near future. This is not to say that there are not a series of important contradictions: generalised poverty, increasingly difficult economic conditions because of imperialist aggression, the general cultural backwardness and the machismo culture in particular are only some of them. But the process of self-organisation proposed today is the only counter-attack possible against these obstacles.

**Chile** : Outside of Cuba and Nicaragua this is the country where the women's movement is most developed and massive. It is organised in many neighbourhoods, in communal kitchens, buying and producing cooperatives (in 1984 there approximately 120,000 members of subsistence organisations in Santiago, 80% were women); women's fronts of the opposition political parties; peasant leagues with women's sections; the women's department of the national trade-union coordination; and feminist groups.

It is the only country where there is a really national, multi-sector coordination able to call together the masses through Women for Life and MEMCH 83. These two organisations can call protests of literally thousands of women against a military dictatorship. The call of Women for Life for celebrating 8th March 1987, gives us an idea of the form in which general democratic demands combine with specific women's demands.

The leaflet demanded 'respect for our lives and its full development with access to food, health, education, accommodation, recreation' combined with the 'elimination of all forms of discrimination against women: in laws, at work, in cultural life'. It called for 'participation of women at all levels of social decision-making' and 'an end to dictatorship and all authoritarianism'. Finally, it pointed out 'that the conquest of our full rights as women goes hand in hand with our liberation as a people'. This leaflet was signed by 450 women of all opposition currents.

From outside Chile it is a little risky to think that all these demands form a homogeneous basis for the unity of the movement. At the least, the demand for the fall of the dictatorship would seem to be the strongest and most concrete basis for unity, common to everyone. The proposals around the things directly related to the oppression of women are very general, surely as much due to the present political situation and the difficulties of concrete progress in this field as to the obvious difficulties which must exist for all the political forces to come to agreement on concrete solutions for 'eliminating all forms of discrimination against women'. Not to mention what the application of the 'participation of women at all levels of social decision-making' might mean for a Christian Democrat or left socialist, or 'an end to all forms of authoritarianism' for a feminist.

Obviously, the movement takes on in an uneven way the demands as a sex. The different demands and their being taken up as the overall basis of the movement form part of the process through with the Chilean masses are living, a process which combines the demand for democracy with the specific demands of women. But what is clearly established is Chilean women's emergence into the political life of their country as women on a mass scale for the first time in 50 years. The inclusion of a woman to represent women in the April 1986 Asamblea de la Civilidad, assembling all the social organisations of the opposition, is a first demonstration of the impact that this movement has had on Chilean society as a whole.

The level of homogeneity and progress in the specific demands of women will be seen clearly with the fall of the dictatorship and the capacity of the movement to maintain unity even with the different general political projects (parties or not) for the democratisation period. In that situation, the level of identification as a sex and the readiness of the different political forces to develop new bases of unity will be clearly seen.

**Peru** : There is a broad women's movement basically expressed through the subsistence organisms: the 100,000 women in Lima organised in the VL committees, with a metropolitan coordination and a great many other women organised in people's canteens in federations and associations with 15 to 20 canteens in each, throughout the metropolitan area. When the Izquierda Unida made important electoral gains in 1983, it instituted in six municipalities a milk-distribution programme for the population under the name 'the glass of milk' (VL-Vaso de leche). However, the VL committees only emerged in the Lima metropolitan area which was the only place where, under the initiative of the Partido Unificado Mariateguista, women organised around this programme.

Through a three-year struggle against all sorts of obstacles raised by the APRA federal government, the women's committees developed their methods of struggle, their consciousness and their political proposals. With the IU's departure from the mayorship at the beginning of this year, the women from the metropolitan VL coordination were prepared to combat the offensive launched by the new APRI local government, not primarily against the programme itself, but against the independent women's organisation which it saw, quite rightly, as a political threat. The dynamic of the Lima women's struggle and organisation has brought important political advances.

Some examples:

• The literacy programme, production workshops, some childcare projects, neighbourhood and people's canteens emerged as a result of initiatives of the VL committees. This indicates that self-organisation experiments multiply on the basis of one experience.

• The proposal from the VL of a national alternative food programme, as a result of its confrontation with national governmental policy; the participation in the conference of popular organisations (Encuentro de organizaciones populares) in which the VL committees declared their autonomy from the mixed neighbourhood organisations which had made the original agreements with the local authorities. The women defended this autonomy faced with the machismo of the masculine leaderships.

• The formation of the only real women's federation in metropolitan Lima, that of the Villa El Salvador township, with its base fundamentally in the VL committees and the canteens, a federation which now does not simply represent the problem of survival but a more general problem of women's oppression as such. The people's canteens are much more politically heterogeneous due to their diverse origins. They were first formed on the initiative of the Belaunde government through the People's Cooperation; then through the international agency FOVIDA, which has proposals on health and food; by different ecclesiastical institutions, including CARITAS, and through the VL committees. Because of these origins they are less coordinated, centralised and politicised.

However, in the national conference of the popular canteens in November 1986, organised by the Ecclesiastical Centre for Social Action, the formation of a national organism for the people's canteens was proposed. Despite the fact that the local leaders started to work very enthusiastically by zone for this proposal to become reality, when they proposed to the Lima bishopric that it intervene with the president of the republic, the project got held up, probably because of the political implications of a confrontation between the bishopric and the national government. But on the other hand, the national conference of the people's organisations, in which the members of the canteens also participated, took up the problem of the many women leaving the canteens because of their participation in the Support Programme for Temporary Incomes (PAIT).

It succeeded in negotiating with the El Agustino municipality that the women could have their PAIT day in the canteens once a week and be paid for it. This was a way of protecting the integrity of the canteens as belonging to the women, a way of defending their organisation as such. In the trade-union sector, work has started among the chemical workers and garment workers through a small nucleus of women grouped in the Memorial de la Muter. Despite the smallness of this nucleus, its initiatives forced the national leadership of the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP), controlled by the Communist Party, to organise a first metropolitan conference of working women in October 1985 and plan another for this year.

The conferences have been more of an apparatus operation, in spite the fact that they have taken up initiatives formally from the Memorial group. The sisters / comrades from the Memorial group, however, are working to build women's liberation politics from the trade-union base. The Lima Feminist Circle, which groups a good part of those women who consciously call themselves feminist, has only just begun an organised debate on perspectives. Many feminists who work with VL, the can-teens and the Memorial group, are not in this circle. Others participate and are today trying to wage a political and ideological struggle about the need for feminists to adopt as their central perspective building a women's liberation movement on the basis of the present struggles of the majority of Peruvian women. -

**Brazil** : As in the other countries, the massive migration to the cities has meant women in the neighbourhoods and favelas participate massively in the different urban movements. These movements are not nationally centralised but in some cities there are permanent and/or one-off coordinations around particular struggles. This is the case in relation to the women's movement. Of two important movements which have happened in this decade: the struggle for creches in Sao Paulo (1980-82) and for the distribution of cheap milk (1984-87).

It is very likely that the massive entry of women into industry from 1980-84 was the spark for the movement around creches, which was not channelled through the trade unions but the local communities. This struggle was started on the initiative of the feminist groups but they did not follow through with a coherent leadership of the movement. One of the reasons for this was that some of them doubted that the central demand was feminist.

Given this political vacuum, the PCdoB stepped in to give leadership. It was the only political organisation at that time in a condition to intervene in the movement. From this, the PCdoB built its mass base among women. The struggle for milk started with a general demand in the localities for food. However, the only demand to which the state responded was to distribute low-priced milk. The distribution of the milk in government stores is the responsibility of the women organised in the four regions in which the struggle was successful. Up to 2000 women come to these stores daily to buy milk, but the administration is generally the responsibility of women's associations with a very small active membership and only succeeds in involving others when there is a danger prices will rise. A regional coordination of milk stores was founded in August 1986.

In other words, the women's movement in the communities has periodic upturns when it struggles around concrete questions but, like the whole of the popular urban movement, it has succeeded neither in setting up a permanent coordination nor in establishing its own profile as a great extent. One of the central factors in the progress of the CUT

at a national level was the experience of the women peasants of Rio Grande do Sul. Given the legal ban on their membership of the unions, they organised village by village and imposed their right to union organisation equal to their husbands (small proprietors).

Through the organisation in 1985 of a conference of 10,000 peasant women, and the visit of several delegations to Brasilia to discuss with the authorities different draft laws, this successful struggle has resulted in a permanent coordination of peasant women in the state of RS and today's struggle for better work conditions and fringe benefits. The 'majority' of the feminist groups, the 'autonomistas', do not have any organic contact with this process.

Not even the 8th March is linked to women of the popular sectors. For the time being, the only form of links between a network of contacts which has been established in the annual feminist gatherings. Some 'autonomistas' do however participate in the women's commissions of the PT, commissions which have however very little weight in the party as a whole. Up until the opening of the Constituent Assembly in February 1987, the PT women's commissions had not been able to develop a party position on the new constitution.

However, with the PMDB's reversal on the abortion question, the PT has now come to the fore as one of the only national organisations capable of articulating a movement for this basic demand. The success of this campaign is very important because many of the women's struggles in the communities and in the trade unions, which today are not coordinated, plus those of the feminist groups, take place in the milieu politically influenced by the PT. This could well be an important instrument for establishing a women's movement on a stronger and more consistent political basis.

**Mexico:** This country was one of the first to see an upsurge of women's groups at the beginning of the 1980s, a process which increased in pace with International Women's Year in 1975.

At the same time, with the explosion of the economic crisis in the mid-1970s and the corresponding governmental austerity programme, this was an encouragement to a growing participation of women in the struggles against the governmental attack. By 1980, when the women's groups went into a clear crisis, the second phenomenon began to manifest itself with a wave of strikes in factories where the great majority of workers were women, particularly in the Valley of Mexico.

From 1980, there began a series of mass activities in sectors independent from the PRI- obviously minority sectors at a mass level-which were both spontaneous and encouraged by left feminists, in or outside parties. These form the basis of the advances today:

• there have been numerous women's meetings, by sector, region or nationally to examine their situation as women and look for solutions;

• from many of these meetings came different coordinating bodies of women's struggle which have had different scope and longevity.

The most notable experience is the Women's Regional Coordinator of the National Coordination of the Urban Popular Movement (CON-AMUP), which came from the first conference of the colonists women in 1983.

The Regional managed to coordinate women from more than 30 colonias in struggles for school breakfasts, tortillas (subsidy to the tortilla, the staple Mexican food) and services, as well as having its own gatherings on questions like violence against women. Despite the fact that this is led by a very sectarian left current, the experience

of the colonas in struggle, together as women has been fundamental in strengthening the urban movement itself (the Regional has come to be the backbone of the CON-AMUP in the capital) and the emergence of natural leadership cadres with a minimum of consciousness of their oppression as women. The most important experience at the trade-union level has been the seamstresses - struggle since the 19th September 1985 earthquake.

The emergence of the 19th September Union was an example not only for women workers but for the whole of the Mexican trade-union movement, showing that women are not only capable of participating in trade unions but of leading them and winning in adverse conditions. The moral authority of the seamstresses in Mexico today, despite the offensive of the government / bosses / trade-union bureaucracy against them, gives impetus to a grouping of women workers from different sectors, to relaunch initiatives which in the past have remained limited, like the coordination of state employees.

These women, who from 1984-85 waged various struggles in the government secretariats (ministries) for childcare and the rights to other benefits, disappeared with the earthquake. Today they are beginning to organise again. The social composition of the celebrations of significant dates for women (8 March, 25 November, 10 May) are a sign of the change that has taken place in the last 10 years.

Today these dates are celebrated, especially in the capital, but also in some places in the provinces, generally by contingents of women from the popular sectors. In 1987 there was the biggest march ever on 8 March-â€”about 500 women-â€”mainly from the CONAMUP Regional, from the 19 September Union and the United Coordination of Earthquake Victims. These celebrations are the main form in which the women organised by sector unite in struggle.

However, there is not any regular way in which working, peasant and shantytown women coordinate to struggle together. There is not a movement which is unified either organically or politically, or in the consciousness of the women struggling, in a complete way. It is clear that the joint mobilisations on these symbolic days are important steps in this direction, steps that would not have taken place without struggle against sectarianism, particularly in the Regional. However, another result of the last few years has been a reanimation of the feminist sectors linked to these struggles.

The emergence of the Women for Trade-union Action as a result of the 1985 earthquake and the agreement of many centres of support (institutions) on the need to find a political outlet to feminism in relation to these experiences, has led to an attempt to relaunch feminist theoretical discussion. On the basis of this and the concrete problems which confront us in mass work, we want to try to build a feminist instrument capable of contributing to building a liberation movement in Mexico.

For the moment, this concern has been expressed in the formation of a grouping called Feminist Convergence, defined by its creators as a space for discussing feminist strategy today in Mexico. The forms of coordination between the different sectors of the women's movement vary very much in their objectives, scope and duration. In many countries the contact between feminist sectors is limited to local, regional and national gatherings, in some cases resulting in the establishment of information networks between groups (Feminist Women's Network Mexico 1981-83, communication-network between groups in Brazil, Women's Network of the Adult Education Council in Latin America-L CEAL- in Uruguay) without overall political proposals. At times the network is only active to plan the next gathering or a symbolic activity for the 5th March.

But there have been coordinations of groups or individuals with the goal of taking political initiatives (Coalition of Feminist Women in Mexico 1976-80 and the recent formations the Feminist Circle in Lima and the Feminist Convergence in Mexico). In the case of the coalition of Feminist Women of Mexico, the axes of unity between the groups were also axes for political campaigns (voluntary maternity, violence against women) but its totally propagandistic character and its isolation from most women in the country meant that it went into a crisis that was its

death knell.

In the case of the recently formed Feminist Circle in Lima and the Feminist Convergence in Mexico, there have been many years experience and there are components of the groups which have close links with the popular women's movement, which means that the search for political initiatives by the sector that considers itself as feminist takes place on a different basis.

Another form of coordination has been that which links up groups of non-party women with groups of party, trade-union and for community organisation women. In the case of the National Front for the Rights and Liberation of Women (FNALIDM, Mexico, 1979-81) and the Women's Multisectoral (Argentina today), unity was fundamentally established of propagandistic bases without much impact on the mass of women, even those engaged in some sort of struggle. In both cases, the basic function of the grouping was or is to allow a certain dialogue and some political initiatives in countries which did or do not have a developed women's movement.

The Mesa de Concertacion (in Uruguay 1983-today), although it did not emerge out of a women's movement, was born out of a movement of mass upsurge, in which women had an important part in the struggle for demilitarising the state. As a result, its propagandistic and programmatic demands were known by a large part of the female population. But after the big mobilisations of women against the dictatorship and all the election activity, the Mesa turned into a place for the exchange of experiences similar to the Multisectoral in Argentina, with the added problem of the presence of women from the bourgeois parties. With the passing of the amnesty law for the military in December 1986 with the votes of the deputies of these parties, the Mesa can have little perspective of even continuing as this.

The Feminist Collective in Bogota (1985-today) is in a different situation insofar as it is the only united feminist expression in a country with an emerging women's movement. To this extent, although for the moment it is functioning as a place for discussion and exchange of information, it is beginning to take political initiatives with the mass organisations (its participation in the second national conference of the civic organisation, 1986) and is a point-of reference for them on the situation of women. '

Women for Life (Chile 1983-today) are a case of an umbrella organisation of feminists and representatives of the big mass women's movement that exists in the country today. Women from parties, trade unions and feminist groups participate as individuals. It is the only place in the sub-continent where feminists as such have this type of relation with the mass women's movement, as well as the place where the latter has developed the most, with a real national coordination.

At a continental level, there have been various contacts and opportunities for discussion mainly in the three Latin American feminist conferences (Peru, Colombia, Brazil). Other contacts were made in the conference at which the Continental Women's Front was founded at the initiative of Cuba and Nicaragua; in the international conference in Nairobi (1985); in the conference about women's political participation in the Southern Cone in 1986; and many international invitations to different women to participate in meetings, conference, seminars and national meetings. There is also a certain exchange of printed material, mainly between institutions, but extending to other sectors of organised feminism.

These contacts happen in a very uneven and sporadic way between the different sectors of Latin American feminism. However, they do not fail to stimulate debate. The way in which we participate in this discussion-both theoretical and politicalâ€"depends both on our forces and participation in the women's movement, and on the appreciation we may have of the central political problems confronted today.

Building the movement we want: Central political problems As we have already pointed out, the general dynamic which women are living today in the sub-continent is that a) as never before, more are entering social and political struggle b) this eruption puts them objectively in contradiction with their oppression. But from here, in the big jump from the transformation of these conditions into a political movement of women for their liberation, there are a series of political problems which have to be analysed and overcome.

### 1) The diversity of the demands of women in struggle

The initial demands of women usually have a local focus, for example:

• slum dwellers: water for one neighbourhood, school for another, paving or electricity for others, etc.

• workers: wage rises, no to sackings, right to promotion, etc;

• peasants: land, mills, drinking water, etc.

This puts an obstacle in the path to unity. The lack of unity and, for the same reason, contact with many more women, implies not only difficulties for winning the immediate struggle but a slowing down in the process of thinking on their oppression as a social question and not as individual or specific to their locality. However, although there are immediate demands which unite the women of a whole sector (Vaso de Leche in Lima, unionisation of the peasant women in Rio Grande do Sul etc) this does not mean that a general political movement takes shape which sees itself as a women's movement. Obviously, the unity of women, organised as such, even by sector, has a big multiplying effect in other sectors.

But insofar as it does not politically extend the movement to include women of different sectors, there is a big danger that even the strong sector could retreat in its gains. Finally, when there are advances in different popular organisations on the demands as a sex these are also very different and difficult to unite in struggle. And it is in struggle and through progress on the concrete ground of their rights that women will also see more use in organising for their demands as women. For example, in 1983 the women workers in Mexico City underground waged a struggle together with the trade union to have access to the post of driver, which was explicitly forbidden to women. The triumph of this struggle was obviously important.

But many other cases of discrimination at work have not been fought or have not been successful, partly because they were seen by their protagonists as an isolated sectoral struggle. Obviously, there were other factors which intervened in these cases, such as the attitude of the trade-union leaderships in general faced with the workers' demands. But a real factor is the diversity in the immediate concrete demands, also as a sex, for which the women fight.

Faced with this diversity in women's demands, which not only reflects different needs but also different levels of consciousness, our task is to use every opportunity to bring together struggles and establish a system of demands which can advance the shaping of "a political movement that is gradually more clearly defined as such.

For this it is important to take into account that:

• women's struggles for their own demands will be very linked to the struggles of all working people, even with the rise of their own political movement;

• in building this movement general class demands will combine with women's specific demands as the basis of

unity;

â€œ this dynamic will include therefore ups and downs in the putting forward of specifically feminist demands.

A better level of organisation of the popular movement will encourage the possibility for women to advance in the recognition and struggle for their own demands. This is because a better level of coordination and unity not only implies more possibilities of winning but also a higher level of politicisation, the establishment of a more global basis for unity and an understanding of the need to organise in an ongoing way, not only to attack one problem but a whole series of problems. In simple practical terms, it implies the possibility of a better division of labour within the organism of the struggle and more attention to a serious analysis of their reality. For example, in Mexico, the CONAMUP proposed the creation of women's coordinations throughout the country.

But only in Mexico City was there really the coming together of a number of neighbourhoods in struggle and the formation of this body. So successful was this proposal that the women's Regional of the Valley of Mexico has held workshops on violence against women with 500 participants; it was the only group which demonstrated against the population policy of the Mexican state during the World Conference on Population in Mexico in 1986; and is also the real base of the CONAMUP in Mexico City. In the rest of the country meanwhile, because, among other reasons, of the isolation of the neighbourhoods in struggle and the lack of coordination between them, this orientation has not had the same effect. However, the existence of the regional of the Federal District makes it easier for the isolated women's committees in provinces to negotiate.

The participation of those forces which have as an objective the extension of women's consciousness to include their oppression as such is more effective. For example, the fact that in Colombia there have been two congresses of the national civic movement made it easier in the second event to have a workshop with 250 delegates (from a total of 2000) that discussed the question of women. Although the coordination which came out of the conference does not want to apply the agreements of the Congress on this question they have been put forward in the framework of a budding united organisation. Without this unitary framework, these proposals would have had difficulty in reaching so many organisations.

But there is no mechanical relation between the general popular movement and the advance of women. On the one hand, obviously, it is not automatic that their consciousness will be raised. But on the other hand, we have seen that the organisation of women around their demands can be a central factor that stimulates the organisation or reorganisation of the popular movement in general (for example, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina).

### **2) Struggle for survivalâ€”How to give it a political focus**

Our method for building any movement emphasises the need for self-organisation, mass mobilisation and unity because we are convinced it strengthens the mass bodies and political consciousness. Women, particularly in the neighbourhoods and peasant communities of Latin America, have two ways of confronting the necessity of survival: to make demands on external agencies or to try and find a solution through their own resources.

We are used to applying our method of directing attention and demands at the state and the bosses. Obviously, this path to a solution for social and political problems has the enormous advantage of putting the responsibility where it should be, on society as a whole and its institutions, and more easily gives the action of masses a political character. The success of the struggles and mobilisations determines to a greater or lesser extent the progress in the overall consciousness of the masses, both about the character of the problems and their need for strength and confidence in themselves. Practice has taught us that this option is not without its dangers. One particular one is clientelism: the solution to immediate demands by apolitical force, generally the state, is exchange for political loyalty.

This practice is part of the political culture of the sub-continent and we often have to fight it in the movements we ourselves are leading. But this danger does not prevent us supporting them and trying to strengthen their consciousness of their own movements' strength. Another problem is that certain demands can involve the most active women's energies being taken up in administrative tasks. For example, the Sao Paulo dairies, won by the movement demanding better food, are self-administered and require much attention from the most conscious women. This is also the case of the CONASUPO stores under the control of Mexican peasant women.

However, we, like many sectors of Latin American feminism, although for different reasons, are very reluctant to participate in the second approach that women have adopted to confront the problems of survival: the self-solution option. Many feminists regard with disdain the communal cookpots, women's production co-ops, collective neighbourhood buying, or programmes like the Glass of Milk in Peru, pointing out that they reinforce the legitimacy of women's traditional role of responsibility for the domestic chores and family well being. While it is true that they come out of these responsibilities, we have already pointed out that they can take another direction.

But in our case, as for much of the left, the reluctance comes from a concern about the danger of 'self-helpism' and possible strengthening of the idea that the problems of our society can be solved -little by little if only individuals make enough of an effort, without using political struggle. Although this is a legitimate concern, we should not shut our eyes to the reality that thousands and millions of Latin American women are going through this experience, which also has its advantages in raising their consciousness.

The first advantage is obviously that the self-help solution pre-supposes a process of self-organisation and cooperation. This process often coincides with the traditions of the indigenous and for mestizo communities in the country side -progressive traditions-still very present in the consciousness of the Latin American masses. These can therefore result in forms of self-organisation that are very understandable for women otherwise unorganised and isolated in their homes, thus representing a step forward which helps raise their consciousness.

The second advantage is that they are solutions which do not only appear viable given the incredible poverty in which much of the population lives, but are viable as a 'partial immediate solution to these problems. It is correct to point out to the women that the solution to the problem of hunger and malnutrition of their children (and themselves) is the responsibility of the society as a whole and the state in particular. But it is not acceptable politically or even morally to limit ourselves to this when one is dealing with a state that in all its policies has shown that it turns a deaf ear to this sort of petition.

We cannot ask "in the name of avoiding the danger of self-helpism" Chilean women for example, confronted with a repressive state of fourteen years existence, to sacrifice the little that they think they can do for their children to prevent them suffering greater brain damage or even death from malnutrition. So, like the other forms of mass self-organisation of the masses, we have a responsibility to live through this experience with them.

The third advantage is that in assigning a greater value to domestic work we sow the seeds of its socialisation, in the conditions of shortage of our societies. Although, given the depth of the crisis, many governments try to promote this type of solution in order to decrease the social pressure against them (Mexico, Colombia) it is not inevitable that this is the fundamental result. The key is in the independence of the organisations from the state and the bourgeoisie, and establishing a dynamic of a growing relationship between these forms of self-organisation and the general political process of mass self-organisation.

### **3) Difficulties for the political participation of workers as women**

The ever-increasing numbers of women in the labour market represent a very big change in the daily life and world outlook of millions of Latin-American women. In contrast with the advanced capitalist countries, even their incorporation into the informal sector represents, historically speaking, a step forward. In the majority of cases, it

does not represent women being forced out of the regular wage-earning work forced into part-time-or 'exible' jobs. Rather, they are forced to leave the confines of the home, and enter into public life even though in extremely disadvantageous circumstances. But there is no automatic correlation between this fact and their integration into the political and/or trade-union struggle as workers:

• Their inclusion is basically into feminine sectors, like the services, 'feminine' industries, and the informal sector in general. Thus, as in the rest of the world, their jobs are usually similar to what they do in the home, or require great meticulousness. These two elements mask their oppression as women in their immediate experience.

• The informal sector generally implies isolated working conditions or in small workshops, where there is very often a paternalist relationship with the employer or boss.

• Even in those cases where women have entered big industry (Brazil for example, or to a certain extent Chile in the last few years) a good section of them have to put up with a double work day. Also, unlike the colonas or peasant women they cannot take their children into the union meetings, they have very restricted schedules, and the political or trade-union activities take place in the presence of the husband or father and thus they are subject to more pressure.

• The working woman continues to see herself as primarily mother and / or wife and not worker, even when she is the family's only breadwinner.

• Fellow workers often pressure her against participating, at least actively, in trade-union life; obviously however, the non-attention of the trade-union leaderships to the specific conditions of women both at work and in the trade-union activity or in the worst of cases the conscious block on their participation by the trade-union bureaucracies also reduces their possibilities.

• Most women who become trade-union activists are unmarried or childless. Therefore they usually have less identification with most women workers. Married women or working mothers once embarked on active participation in any struggle or in regular trade-union life, are confronted with a very concrete dilemma between often mutually exclusive alternatives: either trade-union activity or family commitments (children and / or husband). Unmarried or childless activists are often active only until they marry or have children. These conditions lead to a dearth of women trade-union cadre.

Apart from these difficulties, in many places there is little attention from the revolutionary organisations to trade-union work in general (Peru) and / or women's trade union work in particular, and even in cases where there is a certain stimulus today (Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador) there are the obstacles we have referred to that hold up a proper response. "For all these reasons, the organisation of working women has not increased as rapidly as their incorporation into the labour market. There is backwardness in women organising as women in this sector, compared with the community or peasant women.

However, we should not draw the conclusion that women workers' participation in the women's movement is neither possible nor important. Simply the quantity of women who have gone into the labour market has meant that, despite all the obstacles to their participation, more women are active in trade unions than ever before. And when they enter into a collective process of consciousness and struggle around their oppression as women as well as workers, they advance more rapidly and consistently politically than other sectors.

The example of the seamstresses of Mexico City is illustrative in this respect. In the short period of one year, the "seamstresses union which emerged with the 1985 earthquake, in spite of its numerical weakness, had to confront

the state and the trade-union" bureaucracy in labour struggle. But it also presented itself to the whole of the independent workers' movement with its stated intention of "contributing to the organisation of all working women, the most exploited section of the Mexican working class".

This standpoint, which goes much further than defence of immediate labour interests, was seen in practice in June 1987 when it organised a conference of working women to study the effects of the crisis among women as a step towards broader organisation of working women. These developments are closely related to the work done by feminists in unions in the last few years. This kind of work can be seen in other countries as well: the Colombian CUT's promotion of a national workingwomen's conference only a year after its founding; the acceptance of the child-care campaign by the Brazilian CUT congress; the Uruguayan PIT-CNT's promotion of regional, national and international conferences. We cannot underestimate the enormous potential of these activities for eventually putting salaried women in the forefront of the women's movement we are trying to build.

#### **4) Opposing the attempts of the bourgeois state to incorporate women's movement: maintaining class independence**

In the case of countries where the state has a relatively aggressive policy towards women, the need to respond with alternative political proposals is obvious, hence the perspective of the need to always strengthen the mass movement. Without presenting a political alternative to the state initiatives it will be more and more difficult to maintain class independence as the state will appear to the masses as more useful than the movement. Obviously, it is not always possible to entirely do this, but this must be our objective; not the adoption of a "head in the sand" attitude which in the final analysis is sterile in face of the state's attempt to advance through reforms. But this is not the only case in which we have to develop a positive policy on the sort of changes which should be made at a governmental level from now on. Many revolutionary forces are confronted with the need to propose concrete actions in the municipalities which they have won; It is the case of the PUM in Peru, the PRT in Mexico and very possibly the PT in Brazil at least. In both circumstances we have to develop a series of general criteria as a framework for elaborating proposals.

One of these is the need to distinguish between two things: services that the state is obliged to provide with the greatest control on the part of the users, and a position of accepting or promoting that the state organise women (the case of the Women Today programme in Argentina). In the case of legislative proposals it is more feasible to maintain the independence of the women's movement in proposing or supporting this or that draft law. But at the level of the executive (ministries for health, justice, social or family welfare) the form of the relationship that the movement can establish with particular state programmes is more complicated.

If we demand a programme of maternity health for example and win it, we cannot simply leave in the state's hands its form, content and application, but nor can the movement take full responsibility for it. The criterion that we can adopt is proposals for and vigilance over the programmes, but not accepting direct responsibility for their functioning. Obviously, in any Latin American country we are still far from finding ourselves in this situation of confronting bourgeois states at a national level (that is, that once movements have won their demands at a national or state level they then have to decide what to do; even the advances in Brazil were not the direct result of a mass movement). But we have seen the case elsewhere (Women's Support Centre, Colima, Mexico). It is vitally important to maintain clearly and publicly the difference between organised women and the state.

On the other hand, the objective of our initiatives as revolutionary parties in the municipalities we have won should be to increase the possibilities of self-organisation. The Glass of Milk programme is an example along these lines. Where there has been promotion of the self-organisation of women in committees at the base around this programme this has released an impressive development of the movement (the case of metropolitan Lima). Where this effort was not made the measure has not gone further than a positive social reform. But it is where there is self

organisation that the defence of the programme and basically of the women's organisations arises now after the loss of several municipalities by Izquierda Unida. And with that also a higher politicisation of this movement.

Our response to government population control policies has to be very clear. The access for the first time of millions of women to birth control, even though it is promoted for the wrong reasons, is an important step. The contradictions it creates in women's consciousness and the possibilities for their breaking with traditional morality that it provokes, not to mention the real possibility for the first time to control their maternity, are enormous changes. These positive aspects often mask the horrendous consequences to their health, well-being and personal freedom that the central thrust of the policies (lowering the birth rate at any cost) have on millions of women. However, it is these negative aspects that have, up until today, been the object of broad protests by women.

We have to be attentive to the sorts of demands women are willing to mobilise around, while continuing to make propaganda for our full programme in relation to women controlling their own bodies, including the right to free abortion on demand.

### **5) The weakness of the subjective factor.**

We can define feminism as the recognition of women's oppression, the understanding of the need, possibility and legitimacy of fighting it, and the political desire to undertake the task. We see that, at least in the past and in this period in Latin America, this is not the starting point of the activity and struggle of the majority of women. But it does develop as the result of a long and complicated process, full of ups and downs. This process is part of and has a similar dynamic to the overall process of a rise in political consciousness of the masses in general. We are not surprised by the fact that the mass of women and men do not have a revolutionary and socialist consciousness.

We use the method of the transitional programme to intervene in the movement and make it advance towards this consciousness. But we do not undertake this task alone. Today, we try to do it together with other revolutionary forces and with the vanguard of the mass movement. Although, taken together, we are still small forces in the sub-continent, we are significant factors in the class struggle. We have the same task in relation to the women's movement. Our 1979 document pointed out that we 'struggle at their side intending to show that the class exploitation is the root of women's oppression and that its elimination is the only route to emancipation' and that 'in all struggles we make every effort to educate women in an understanding of class oppression which sharpens the oppression of the most exploited'.

True. But this formulation starts from the idea that women are fighting their oppression without seeing a class difference. In our sub-continent, women struggle as 'the poor' without any or hardly any identification with women of other classes. For us in Latin America, we have to formulate our approach in reverse: women's oppression forms part of class oppression and if we do not attack it we will weaken the struggle against the class system. Because what we have to emphasise in the women's movements in our subcontinent, since it is less easily understood, is that a growing discovery and politicisation of sex oppression is necessary.

This aspect of political mass work is what is not accepted by the majority of political forces in the sub-continent. We can call this process the feminisation of the demands, organisation and political dynamic of the women's movement.

### **a) The centrality of promoting a women's movement for women's demands**

Experience shows us that women's liberation cannot be obtained by reforms alone, that a structural change in society is needed in order to create the material conditions for women's liberation. We also understand that the working class will play a key role in leading all oppressed layers in the socialist revolution necessary to begin the

building of a new society. It does not follow, however, that the working class can automatically understand and take on that role. In the case of women's oppression, sexist ideology and relative material privileges creating divisions within the working class and peasantry between men and women make this understanding difficult. It is women's organisation around their own demands which will enable the rest of society to come to grips with these contradictions. That is why the building of a women's liberation movement is key to our strategy for changing society. Without it, it is very difficult to envisage any sector of society posing a coherent political and sufficiently combative alternative to the measures constantly put forward by the state, the bourgeoisie and the Church to maintain and deepen women's oppression.

On the other hand, as we have pointed out, women organising in large social movements, even when they are organised as women, is not sufficient to ensure that they will eventually take on the fight against women's oppression as such. In order to successfully deal with the contradictions between the traditional role society imposes on women and their new experiences gained through struggle itself, women have to be able to break the confines of the old social role and create a new one. This cannot be done by simply moulding the old accepted social role to include new behaviour patterns or practices: that, in any case, would be the Bourgeoisie's answer. In a liberation perspective, the contradictions can only be overcome by creating a new concept and practice of women's role in society.

In political terms, this needs to be expressed by clear demands and proposals which deal not only with general class questions, but also with specific women's questions. In order for this to be possible, we have to be clear on the need for the existence of a clearly feminist pole within the women's movement. In practical terms, it has been shown that this need is felt by natural leaders who spring up in the survival and democratic women's movement. When they begin to confront their contradictions as women, they often seek out feminists to be able to talk over and understand what is happening to them.

This can be seen not only in the collaboration of natural leaders from the civic and union organisations with the Bogota Feminist Collective in Colombia and in Brazilian women seeking out feminist groups for different reasons, but also in the increasingly majority attendance of women from popular sectors at the Latin American Feminist Conference (the case of Bertioga, Brazil in 1985 for example).

What is needed, then, is to win these women to feminism and create a vanguard of the women's movement capable of correctly posing the fusion of general and specific demands in order to permit the emergence of a movement for women's liberation which in turn can influence all of the social movements. The emergence of this sort of movement is also the key to grouping thousands of young women, many of whom otherwise would not identify fully with demands like child-care centres or milk programmes. But the sector today which consciously wants to promote women's struggle for liberation is very small. The weakness of the subjective factor is basically shown in two sectors in a contradictory manner: among the feminist organisations, and on the left, in its majority anti-feminist.

### **b)The feminist sector**

As has been said, feminists are a very small minority of the women's movement as a whole. However, conditions today encourage feminism more than at any time in the past: the objective conditions stimulating the rise of the women's movement in general;

internationally, the existence of a mass feminist movement, with the social changes this has brought about, has much more influence than in the past. The rise of the Latin American women's movements at the beginning of the century was accompanied at an international level by the bourgeois feminist movements in Europe and the United States, and by the organisations of the Second and Third Internationals, but with very little contact between the mass of Latin American women and the latter. In the 1930s, the resurgence of the women's movement coincided much more with the workers' movement of other countries, unfortunately generally of Stalinist anti-feminist origin. Today,

the influence of European and US movement in Latin America is contradictory.

It has undoubtedly been a big stimulus and inspiration to many women. But there has also been a mechanical translation of the demands and forms of struggle. Given the lack of response of most Latin American women to these demands, a layer of feminists of the sub-continent have buried themselves in an apolitical and counter culturalist framework. The -stunted- survival of this layer is in part based on the existence of the movement in the developed countries, partly the direct intervention of the radical feminists from these countries who found a fertile ground for their demands in this layer of the petty bourgeoisie which 'does not want to organise women' and who even have a hostile and scornful position to the majority of the women's movement who are fighting for survival and democracy. They therefore seldom play a direct part in the feminisation of the women's movement as a whole.

However, there is a whole layer of Latin American feminists that today wants to find a way of playing a part in this process. This sector, together with a good number of women with in-between positions, is discussing and working to find a strategic perspective for it. For this layer, there are a series of questions around the practical solutions to needs such as:

• How to not only support with education but intervene directly in the women's movement, and lead it together with its natural leaders?

• What are the organisational and coordinating forms that can help these needs? ' Beneath these political questions, there are a series of theoretical discussions which are just beginning to be taken up:

• a global perspective based on feminism or a class perspective for feminism?

• patriarchy and the class system, what relation. and what definitions?

• what does power mean for women?

• should the feminist movement be a mass movement or not?

• does the women's movement need a vanguard or not, of what type? where should it come from?'

• what relation should there be with the social struggles as a whole and their organisations, including the left parties?'

The central question in any case is the strengthening of this fringe of feminism through the joint search for political solutions and joint work in the mass movement.

### **c) The left**

• Many sections of the reformist left, particularly coming from the Stalinist tradition, are in crisis in Latin America. In many organisations there is a questioning about their trajectory and in some, as has been mentioned, on the question of women. But they are far from having adopted a feminist (even if reformist) position. The prevailing idea is still that the organisation and struggle of women 'divides the popular classes', that feminism is petty bourgeois by definition, etc. Unfortunately, in some countries where reformism has been the dominant force of the left for many years (Uruguay and Chile for example) the political culture of the left is still dominated by its interpretation of

Marxism. For this reason, many feminists who polemicise with this interpretation confuse their criticism of a reformist trajectory with criticism of Marxism as such. On the other hand, the anti-feminist, mechanical interpretation of Marxism that these parties have imposed for decades—and which in many cases is part of their legacy to the revolutionary organisations—has been one of the fundamental reasons for the flight of many feminists from the left parties. Today the revolutionary left is strengthening but it does not easily take up feminist positions:

• the Tupamaros in Uruguay included in their initial platform after the fall of the dictatorship various points on women's rights, but work around them is not a point of great interest for its leadership;

• the Brazilian PT has women's commission animated by feminists but they are very isolated in the activity of the party as a whole. An important element for further advance in Latin American revolutionaries adopting feminism will be the developing work of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Strengthening the feminist and class-struggle subjective factor in the women's movement is fundamental in order for the vanguard which has been formed in that movement to take up the need for a struggle for their liberation, not only as 'the poor' but also as women and thus:

a) to take every opportunity to unify the movement;

b) to assure its continuity, even with its ups and downs in the mobilisations;

c) to make it possible for the movement to have a historical memory not only of immediate sectoral questions but also women's struggle for their own demands. For us to contribute better to this strengthening we have to attack the situation in our own sections.

### **6) The weakness of our instrument:** The sections

In almost all our Latin American sections women's work is being reorganised and we are reformulating our political perspective for building the women's movement. The fact that feminism did not become a mass movement and the rise of sectoral women's struggles on the basis of their immediate demands have also shown us that it is necessary to change our tactics. This effort fits into the general framework of the need to confront the question of building our sections with greater effectiveness and is part of this task. In particular, in relation to women's work the reorganisation must confront the following problem:

• to a greater or lesser extent, our sections did not perceive the central dynamic of the radicalisation of the majority of women in the sub-continent and have had to make a turn towards the mass sectors, working on the basis of the immediate demands put forward;

• the non-development of feminism on a mass scale, the non-centralisation of the general women's movement as a political movement and the sexist pressures of society as a whole are strong countervailing pressures to our maintaining consistent feminist positions (comments about 'rejecting European feminism' are heard, when it is not feminism but what has been our strategic vision of building the movement in Latin America that was a mechanical translation of the European experience);

• today there are many comrades, men and women, who have not been formed in our programmatic feminist vision and this makes difficult the elaboration of a concrete political orientation for the movement; concretely it limits the sensitivity that we can have for 'feminisation' of women's demands;

â€¢ all this means that the objective difficulties which confront women comrades (not only those who do women's work but all) have been inadequately considered by the leaderships and thus the comrades have to confront them individually;

â€¢ this last problem is also reflected in less concern in the organisations about women being included in the tasks and responsibilities of the political leadership equally with men. Obviously, the possibilities of each section to confront this situation varies with its social insertion and accumulation of cadres and, fundamentally, the degree of progress in forming a leadership team. For this reason, here we can only point out a few general political criteria for revitalising our work among women. Our general objective is to be able to elaborate concrete political orientations and implement them in the struggle itself. But to do this we need:

â€¢ to form comrades in our feminist programmatic vision;

â€¢ clarify our theoretical positions in line with the central discussion in each country to be able to intervene with the greatest clarity;

â€¢ to develop adequate organisational forms in each case to:

a) ensure efficiency and not overload the comrades in women's work with tasks;

b) ensure that the whole of the party and in first place all women comrades participate in elaborating the political position on women's work (this is not to say that all women in the party will have this as their task of intervention, but it is very important that all the women participate in the overall elaboration and are part of this process). It is a measure we can use to ensure that the party as a whole takes on the discussion and to counterbalance the pressure, emanating from society, to devalue and put to one side this discussion. We also have to take up again the practice of implementing special measures to overcome, as far as we are able, the objective obstacles which confront any women who start to be active, and which weaken the organisation:

â€¢ In relation to children: although it is true that our sections cannot establish permanent childcare services, we must in any event deal with the fact that in many areas it is indispensable to have some sort of childcare during party activities. This is not only the case for the major party events (congresses, conferences, national meetings, where we do not have a very good history on this) but in base unit meetings, more day to day meetings. At least in a place like Mexico, where there are base units in peasant and popular neighbourhoods, not to deal with the problem implies in practice that the women in these sectors cannot participate in the minimum of meetings necessary to be active members of the party. On the other hand, the presence of 5 or 10 children in a meeting of this sort obviously makes it impossible for it to take place with a minimum of coherence or attention.

â€¢ Special education measures for women comrades; we have to give special attention to Women comrades in political education to overcome the lack of self-confidence and knowledge that women suffer from. In some cases this could be special sessions for women, schools designed to meet their particular needs.

â€¢ Affirmative action: the conscious promotion of women to tasks and responsibilities, and the preferential election of women. This is the criterion we have used in the past, to uneven effect. Today, we should propose its use with an objective: in relation to the national leadership bodies, there should at least be the same (or greater) proportion of women in the leadership bodies as there is in the base of the party (not the delegates to a conference, at the base).