

6. This had echoes of the development plans of military governments in the early 1970s, in which the notorious "Point 24" alluded to women.
7. Shining Path displays relatively little "gender bias" in its choice of victims or method of assassination. With Old Testament vengeance, it often kills entire families. Local APRA party mayors and minor political functionaries were amongst its favorite targets during the final years of García's government. Many mayors were women, pressured to stand as candidates when the dangers became increasingly clear to male party leaders. The strong presence of women among the membership of Shining Path is a new topic of research. Women have always been important figures on the organization's central committee and many liquidation squads have been led by women.
8. It was in this context that the workshop which gave rise to this book was organized.
9. Contrary to prevailing stereotypes of rampant *machismo* in the interior, it proved much easier to bring men in outlying areas into the regional committees than it did to involve men in Lima.

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#### CHAPTER 5

## The Women's Movement and Public Policy in Brazil

Jacqueline Pitangui

#### INTRODUCTION

The recent political history of Latin America has followed a broadly similar pattern. In many countries, the elected governments of the early 1960s were subsequently overthrown by military coup d'états which imposed authoritarian rule over most of the continent. For many Latin Americans, the 1960s and 1970s were years of harsh military repression, involving the systematic use of violence by the state, and the suppression or control of the legislature, political parties, the press, trade unions and other organizations of civil society. For many citizens, these were years of exile and resistance. Some sectors of the opposition resorted to armed struggle to combat the dictatorial state.

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, trade unions re-emerged with new agendas and civil society was enriched by the appearance of new political actors. Defined generically as social movements, these new forms of political practice grew up and took root outside the established institutional framework of political parties or trade unions, and raised issues which went beyond the "classic" questioning of both Marxism and liberalism. The political trajectory of Latin America converged again towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s when fierce resistance to militarism brought an end to the years of military hegemony in the continent and presidential elections were held throughout the region.<sup>1</sup>

At present, many Latin America countries face the challenge of reconciling political democratization with a profound economic crisis. Whilst democratic institutions have been restored and reinforced in most Latin American countries, the economic crisis in the 1990s has made it difficult for the state to govern. The decrease in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per inhabitant between 1981 to 1989 in many countries, clearly shows the extent of the crisis. During this period Latin America as a whole had a negative growth rate of -8.3 percent [CEPAL, Anuarios Estadísticos]. With few exceptions, most Latin American countries continue to confront structural economic problems and financial crises. Neo-liberal policies, advocating state reform and the expansion of free trade agreements, form the dominant ideological orientation of this

decade. Although a few countries have been able to control inflation and increase GDP, profound social and racial inequalities prevail and poverty prevents a significant number of Latin Americans from exercising their basic social rights.

Feminism emerged as an organized and growing social movement during the tumultuous decades of the 1970s and 80s. In addition to traditional demands for political equality and an end to discrimination in the labor market, it questioned the cultural bases underpinning the devaluation of the feminine, and raised new issues relating to violence, reproductive health and sexuality. After the restoration of democratic government in the 1980s, feminism was incorporated into the state apparatus in several countries and began to influence (or sought to influence) public policy in a number of different ways. Although feminism arose as part of a wider struggle against the authoritarian state, Latin American women have acted upon and represented their experience of discrimination in different ways. Variations have occurred at the level of the problems raised, the practices adopted and over relations between the social movement, the party structure and the state. Within this broader Latin American context, this chapter focuses specifically on the Brazilian experience. It aims to reconstruct the course of the feminist movement since the 1970s, charting the struggle of Brazilian women to gain full citizenship. This chapter situates this political trajectory within the wider context of Brazilian democratization, by seeking to trace the links between wider political processes and the dynamics of the women's movement.

#### FEMINISM AND POWER: THE FIRST STEPS

At different points in history, societies have incorporated gender hierarchies into the organization of power. The nature, depth and causes of social inequalities between men and women undoubtedly vary according to the moment in time, the form and level of political organization and the specific culture of each country. In Brazil two main periods can be distinguished in the history of women's struggles to achieve equality and social justice.

#### Women's Struggle for the Vote

The first period goes back to women's struggle for the vote at the beginning of the 20th century. Although the suffragists demanded access to education and employment, they did not question the cultural configuration of society or the roots of their exclusion [Alves, 1980]. Unlike Britain or the United States, where the suffrage movement acquired the characteristics of a mass movement, the struggle in Brazil took place in the corridors, offices and ante-chambers of power, through the effective lobbying of a group of middle-class, mainly university-educated, women.

The right to vote in 1932 was ratified in 1934 by article 108 of the Constitution, which states, "voters are Brazilians, of either sex, who are legally registered". Without denying the significance of this victory in removing a basic impediment to citizenship, imposed on half the population by virtue of their sex, its effect was more important culturally than practically. Being a woman

no longer excluded one from exercising basic civil rights but did not lead to effective participation in formal power.

Women's participation in the Federal Legislature in Brazil has been extremely limited. The first woman federal deputy was elected in 1933 and in the following 63 years, only 119 women have held seats in the Federal Assembly, compared to 5,609 men. Given that current mandates run until 1999, by the turn of the century women will have held only 2.12 percent of seats. It should be pointed out that most women were elected at the end of the 1980s and the 1990s, when feminism as a social movement became both audible and visible in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

#### The Rise of Social Movements

Social movements entered the national arena in the 1970s, demanding political recognition and the need to redefine politics to include other social relations which permeate and mediate society on various levels. An analysis of the significance and scope of social movements must adopt new instruments and indicators if it is to interpret a type of political action based on solidarity and the political projection of a collective identity. For women, democracy refers not only to citizenship in the public sphere, but also to the practices of everyday life, at work, in the family, in health and education. In this sense, women's struggle to democratize the country is, at the same time, a struggle to redefine democracy itself.

After the military coup of 1964, a number of women's groups appeared on the political scene with the aim of combatting state violence and pressing for an amnesty and democratic freedoms. While these groups played a significant role in resisting government and demanding basic civic rights, they did not project themselves to transforming women's condition in society at large. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina are probably the most important expression of this form of political participation by Latin American women.

In Brazil, the women's movement became a significant political actor in the 1970s. From 1964 until the mid-70s, Brazilian civil society was largely engaged in opposing militarism, and political differences were downplayed in the interests of organizing a broad front against the authoritarian state. The military imposed a bi-party system which differentiated two large blocs; ARENA (National Renovating Alliance) which supported the regime and MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) which opposed it. Consequently, for almost 10 years the opposition sought unifying strategies to strengthen their position in the face of a cohesive army. This broad front rallied around the slogan of "a united people against the dictatorship". The "people", at this particular political moment, were not differentiated by sex, race, nor by any significant projects or utopias.

#### Emergence of a Feminist Critique

In the 1970s, feminism engaged in a critique of a number of widespread myths and stereotypes. Underlying the presumed harmonious nature of male-female

relations, feminism exposed the reality of gender inequality, domestic violence and racial prejudice. This was a productive period of recent Brazilian history since other actors, such as the black movement, neighborhood associations, human rights groups, the homosexual movement, the movement to demarcate indigenous lands, the movement of the landless and, in the 1980s, ecological groups, extended both the political terrain and the concepts of equality and participation.

However, engaging in a feminist critique was an uphill struggle given that civil society was still under military rule and the opposition was committed to forming a broad front. During the early years, the feminist movement aimed to gain political legitimacy for its agenda, to broaden its base amongst women, and to refute those critics who argued that the time was not appropriate for such a movement (as it would divide the opposition) or who dismissed their claims altogether. From 1975 onwards the feminist movement took the form of an organized political movement and widened the debate on gender inequality by incorporating new elements into the analysis of power.<sup>3</sup>

Over the decades, the Brazilian feminist movement has been faced with the immense challenge of redefining concepts, whose meanings have rigidified over the centuries, of finding new ways of exercising power and new spaces where this power can be carried out, of stressing the links between personal relationships and public organization, and of unmasking oppression. The first steps taken by feminists from 1975 in their struggle to claim full citizenship for women, involved the adoption of different methods and strategies. The extent of their success depended (and still depends) on the strength and weight of the women's agenda in the overall balance of power.

Authoritarian government was at its most repressive between 1968 and 1973, years which coincided with the so-called "economic miracle", when GDP rose by 13.6 percent annually. Boosted by these rates of growth and as a way of increasing its legitimacy, the government authorized the holding of parliamentary elections in 1974 in which the MDB, the opposition party, triumphed. From 1977 to 1978, the national political scenario favored the emergence of an important actor, trade unionism, which re-surfaced under new leadership.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRAZILIAN FEMINISM

A number of key periods can be distinguished in the recent history of Brazilian feminism, taking as a starting point the interaction between the women's movement and the formal, institutional political level. Between 1975 and 1979 a debate opened up on the condition of women in Brazil. Gender, as a political variable, made its public appearance through such issues as discrimination in the labor market, the lack of support structures for women who worked outside the home, domestic violence, and sex stereotyping in the educational system.

Initially there were few feminist spokespersons and the movement's advance went hand in hand with the process of democratization in the country. Lacking links to the executive branch of government, which represented au-

thoritarian power at both local and federal levels, and with no support from the legislature for their proposals to revise the civil code presented in 1976, feminism established links with the university, where talks, discussions and seminars were organized. The press, which was initially prejudiced, publicised their demands, criticisms and meetings. Accordingly, the movement was able to reach beyond the intellectual elite, occupy other social spaces and widen its field of action.

In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, the Catholic Church was an important ally against militarism and state violence. Initially, the women's movement sought to draw up common strategies with the Church, especially at the level of grassroots communities and pastoral action. However, this gave rise to an important debate amongst feminists. Whilst some regarded this link with the Church as necessary to widen their base of support, others argued that it would divide and weaken the movement, given the Church's stance on a number of fundamental issues relating to female identity, such as sexuality, contraception, abortion and the role of women in the Church.<sup>4</sup> These internal differences, notwithstanding, feminism in these years projected itself as a new political actor which sought to expand and gain legitimacy by advocating novel ideas on power and citizenship rights.

#### 1975-1979: Debate on the Position of Women

The first wide-ranging debate on the position of women in Brazilian society took place in 1975 in Rio de Janeiro in a seminar organized with United Nations' support as part of International Women's Year. Between 1975 and 1978 events took place in several states and the women's movement expanded both in terms of numbers, with the formation of several autonomous groups, and in terms of influence, by raising the issue of women's discrimination in numerous non-feminist organizations, such as professional bodies, trade unions, and neighborhood associations. The first explicitly feminist organization, the Brazilian Women's Center, was established in 1975 in Rio de Janeiro.

Throughout this period, issues such as domestic violence, sexual violence and sexual discrimination, including women's exclusion from economic and political decision-making, were incorporated into the ambit of legitimate politics. Placing such topics on the agenda marked an important triumph for feminism at that time. However sexuality, contraception and abortion began to be discussed in the political sphere only gradually and awkwardly, given that they raised issues which were still considered taboo in official discourse.

#### 1979-1982: Transition to Civil Society

The years from 1979 to 1982 preceded the democratization of the country and marked the transition of power towards civil society.<sup>5</sup> After the parliamentary elections of 1978, the government no longer exercised hegemonic control, and most opposition forces participated in the re-democratization process from their base in Congress. At the same time, the economic situation worsened, with a fall in the rate of growth of GDP, which was negative in 1981. The distorting effects of an accumulation process which accentuated income in-

equalities was evident in such social indicators as the rate of infant mortality, malnutrition, and maternal mortality.

Social pressure and lack of an economic and political strategy to confront the crisis led, amongst other factors, to the government's loss of ideological credibility. In the 1982 elections for state governors, candidates representing the governing party lost their seats in the main state capitals, barely attaining 36 percent of the vote. The political parties freed themselves from the bi-party structure enforced since the 1960s. At the same time, the political scene was transformed by the emergence of other social movements and new actors. As censorship eased a new political culture began to be forged during the remaining years of authoritarian rule.

The years of militarism were also years of profound economic transformation, rapid urbanization (in 1985, 72 percent of the population lived in urban areas) and industrial diversification. The state grew considerably, intervening in and controlling numerous spheres of production, without any parallel increase in investment in education and health.

The redrawing of the party map led the feminist movement to seek more contact with political parties, proposing programs and platforms which would extend female citizenship. Feminists sought to retain their autonomy with respect to party structures but recognized that these were the institutional road to power. The women's movement organized around concrete issues and presented these in a document entitled "Feminist Election Alert". In 1982 Congressional elections were held and although no federal deputy embraced the feminist ticket, several candidates did so at state level.

Other issues such as abortion, regarded both as a citizenship right and as a public health problem, became a visible problem which society could not repudiate, even whilst failing to address it. During this same period, feminists no longer regarded the Church as an appropriate ally, as they took up issues it considered taboo, such as condemning the lack of publicly funded contraceptive services and supporting the victims of domestic violence by forming a number of autonomous groups, called SOS.

The political amnesty of 1979 led to the return of many women exiles who had participated in the women's liberation movement whilst in exile in Europe. In addition, the movement's allies were bolstered by women who actively sought to transform their condition from their base within other organizational structures, such as trade unions. The university, which had initially been the movement's main political base, embraced feminism as an academic subject, and the number of theses, seminars and women's studies centers multiplied. However, as the state began to be reconquered by the progressive forces, women's historical absence from executive power became evident. An awareness that sexual discrimination is the product of historical processes, and thereby susceptible to change, brought home the need to forge alliances and occupy spaces in the power structure in order to be able to implement such a transformation. Such a task went beyond making women's issues public or influencing persons in positions of power who could put feminist demands

and recommendations into practice. It meant using state power as the means to implement large-scale change.

### 1982-1986: Growing Political Legitimacy

The debate within the feminist movement on its relationship to executive power began in 1982, when a number of opposition candidates were elected to key state governments. After two decades of confronting authoritarian governments, links between the state and civil society began to be reconstructed. The women's movement took advantage of this transformed relationship between individual, social movement and state when progressive sectors gained power and organized democratic governments at state level.

At this time, feminism presented its case for public policies specifically addressed to women directly to the government. At the beginning of the 1980s the feminist movement enjoyed a degree of political legitimacy which could not be ignored. It was no longer possible to turn a deaf ear to women's voices, nor to dismiss their claims, supported as they were with data and statistics which clearly showed their status as second-class citizens.

One current within the movement argued the case for occupying spaces in the executive power, or rather inventing such spaces by setting up new agencies specifically addressed to formulating public policies on women. Another current recommended retaining complete autonomy from the government. A third current occupied an intermediate position, agreeing to the construction of such spaces but not to filling such positions themselves. Their reservations related to the risk of cooptation by the state, of such bodies enabling the government to manipulate women's demands and proposals, and to the difficulties of working in a state apparatus tainted by years of dictatorship. In view of these dangers, a significant part of the movement supported the recommendation to create organs at state level to implement policies and to influence other government sectors in translating programs, demands and grievances into concrete government actions. In 1983 the State Council on the Status of Women (Conselho Estadual da Condição Feminina) was set up in São Paulo. Its ability to influence public policy varied according to the degree of support from the women's movement, the proficiency of its personnel and the extent of the government's commitment. However, on balance the influence of the São Paulo Council has been very positive.

### "Direct Elections Now!"

Between 1983 and 1985 one of the largest mass movements in Brazil's political history took place. Called "Directas Já" ("Direct Elections Now!"), the movement filled public squares throughout the land, sparking off a broad front against the permanency of the military regime and the federal government. At this time, the front did not involve suppressing political differences so that a diverse range of political parties, organizations and movements joined.

Although the national campaign for direct presidential elections in 1985 did not succeed, an end to the rotating military presidency became inevitable. Tancredo Neves, governor of Minas Gerais, was elected president by the elec-

toral college, reinstating a civilian government after 21 years of military hegemony. During the campaign in support of Tancredo Neves, women from all over the country urged on him the need to create a federal agency which would implement national policies on women. The campaign to create a National Council on Women's Rights was waged in the context of Brazil's re-democratization and the occupation of federal executive power by sectors which had been excluded for more than two decades.

#### *National Council of Women's Rights*

Tancredo Neves' untimely death, the assumption of Vice President Jose Sarney, and the initiation of the so-called New Republic, form part of Brazil's recent political past. The National Council of Women's Rights was created by congressional law in 1985. The Congress also voted in favor of a fund giving the Council financial autonomy. The Council was composed of an advisory board, with a president appointed by the President of the Republic and divided internally into a technical directorate, covering different work commissions, and an executive directorate. Attached to the Ministry of Justice, this agency depended for its remit on the Presidency of the Republic, which granted it autonomy of action. Over a five-year period, women from all over the country aspired to transform the position of women in Brazil from within the state.

The first years of the New Republic were full of expectation that the state would satisfy popular desires for material improvements, a fairer distribution of national wealth, child protection, and the extension of social rights in a climate of freedom and respect for human rights. Democracy, both as a goal and as a fundamental instrument of economic redistribution, was the key word of the 1980s. Women contributed by launching a debate, from the highest echelons of the public administration, on such topics as domestic violence, reproductive health, the position of women in the family and society. The National Council of Women's Rights (NCWR) organized working committees on reproductive health, violence, black women, employment, legislation, childcare support (nurseries and kindergartens), education and culture. It also carried out important work in the area of social communications using the mass media and established a Center for Information and Studies on Women (see Appendix).

#### *New Constitution and Women's Rights*

1986 was an important electoral year. Congress had the task of drawing up a new Constitution, appropriate for a democratic state. In 1985 the NCWR publicly campaigned to ensure that women were represented in the new parliament. Between 1986 and 1988 the NCWR as well as state and municipal councils and the women's movement, worked with parliamentarians to guarantee that the new constitution upheld women's rights. The campaign was very successful with 80 percent of their demands being accepted. This represented a victory not only in terms of what was included but also in terms of what was not included in the 1988 Constitution. An example of this was the omission

of any reference to "the protection of life from conception" as this represented a retreat. Even prior legislation had allowed a pregnancy to be terminated in case of rape or when the mother's life was at risk. In addition to these forms of discrimination, there is the weight of the received culture which devalues the feminine.

Brazil currently has a significant number of agencies involved in designing and carrying out public policies on women. In 1996 there were over 20 councils on women's rights operating throughout the country, and approximately 140 specialized police units serving women victims of domestic and sexual violence. These police stations are an interesting example of the state apparatus—in this instance the repressive arm of the state—being directed to support victims of violence, who are not generally recognized as such by ordinary police units. Comprised of female personnel, such units not only carry out tasks related to the criminal process, but also play a part in political education by demonstrating that such violent behaviour is not "natural" but criminal and merits punishment. In this way their very existence serves to redefine the concepts of crime and punishment.<sup>6</sup>

The National Council of Women's Rights also organized a forum of women's councils, which used to meet regularly every six months in order to plan common strategies. In a country as large and populated as Brazil, this forum became an effective body for defining and carrying out national campaigns, events and projects. One example of NCWR's dynamism is the strategy adopted by the campaign for women's rights in the new constitution. This was carried out across the whole country; in every state, organizations and local councils took up the task of spreading the message. The NCWR mounted an intense six-months' campaign on radio and national television under the slogan, "To be valid, the Constitution must include women's rights". This campaign culminated in Brasilia with a large gathering in the National Congress of representatives from all the groups and organized bodies of women. Rural women workers, liberal professionals, autonomous feminists and women linked to political parties, jointly signed a "Letter to the Deputies from the Women of Brazil", which has since become a historical document. It set out the movement's main demands in the areas of family, employment, health, education, culture, violence, general principles, and vocational and international matters. In March 1987, immediately after the installation of the Constituent Assembly (Asembleia Constituinte), the NCWR held a joint ceremony with local bodies to hand in this Letter; a ceremony which took place in every state legislature as well as in the National Congress.

Realizing that an organism such as the NCWR had political weight which could take advantage of the open and fluid national context, the feminists who directed the NCWR forced the pace, breaking through bureaucratic inertia and adopting the rituals of power as instruments of political action. Amongst progressive sectors there was consensus on the actions of the NCWR and on the part feminism played in it. There was also consensus among the more conservative sectors on the need to halt its advance.

## FEMINISM AND POWER: THE LIMITS OF STATE ACTION

Notwithstanding the significant advances made, women in Brazil still occupy a secondary position in society. With respect to the labor market, their wages are significantly lower than men's. Data show that women's average earnings were 54 percent of men's in 1991. Women carry out low-skilled jobs and are concentrated in the service sector, especially domestic services. A breakdown of the income distribution of the economically active population by sex, shows that women are amongst the poorest of the poor: whilst 58.6 percent of women live in poverty, receiving a minimum wage or none at all, the equivalent figure for men is 33.79 percent [FLACSO and CEPIA, 1993]. Furthermore, men in this situation are clustered around the minimum wage level, whilst women are concentrated in the category of those without remuneration or falling below the minimum wage. Women are largely unrepresented amongst managerial positions, and their employment rights and job security are inferior to men's. While the number of men and women working in the informal labor market has been growing steadily, women outnumber men in this category. According to data from 1991, almost half of the women employed were not registered which meant that they were automatically excluded from social benefits [IBGE-PNAD, 1991]. The situation of women rural wage laborers gives particular cause for concern as over 80 percent were not registered.

I do not intend to undertake a theoretical analysis of the concepts of state and social movement but a few words are in order here. This largely involves exploring the possibilities of alternative projects, bearing in mind the conflict they address and the connections which ensure their viability. The women's movement, as an expression of social conflict, introduces new elements into the public domain, relating to the dynamics of power, the formation of alliances and to the definition of its identity vis-à-vis other actors, such as political parties, government and legislature. The state, made up of many institutions which interact between themselves and with other parts of the political system, is subject to constant pressure as groups struggle for hegemony in exercising control. During periods of governmental change and more open political expression, conflicts between alternative projects and struggles inside the state apparatus intensify.

The Sarney Government, which inaugurated a period of rapprochement between state and civil society, allowed more room for different views to be expressed in government circles. Rather than a uniform front, state agencies were staffed by representatives of different positions, parties and programs, who jostled for space in the government machine. The creation of a Ministry of Agrarian Reform and the establishment of the National Council of Women's Rights, reflected a political commitment to social forces traditionally distanced from state power. At that time, the claims of the landless and of women became conflicts within the state itself.

### Political Opposition

However, the history of Latin America demonstrates the conservative elite's capacity to organize and determine the direction of the state. Over time the

government began to restrict the space for airing certain grievances within the state apparatus. In the legislature, alliances with conservative representatives became unavoidable, and representatives from the most progressive political parties resigned their government posts, returning either to the legislature or to society at large.

With the promulgation of the new constitution in October 1988, the National Council of Women's Rights (NCWR), concentrated on influencing the constitution and on pressing forward in the field of civil rights, and on revising penal and labor codes to make them compatible with new constitutional provisions. Despite having waged successful campaigns, exerted political influence to combat domestic violence and extend employment benefits to female domestic workers and women rural workers—the most exploited sectors of the female labor force—and having collaborated with the Ministry of Education in condemning sex stereotyping in teaching materials, in 1988 the NCWR met strong opposition from the Ministry of Justice. Such opposition was evident during the centenary of the abolition of slavery, when the NCWR planned to participate in the official celebration by organizing a forum attacking racial prejudice and discrimination against black women in Brazil. Together with a number of black organizations and the Law Faculty of São Paulo University, the NCWR planned to set up the Winnie Mandela Tribunal, which would pass fictitious judgement on the crimes committed against black women. Upon hearing of this idea, the Ministry of Justice informed the NCWR president that it was contrary to government ruling and that such activities would not be sanctioned. Although I myself, as president of the NCWR, argued that racial prejudice did not originate from the government but from society as a whole and that it was befitting for a modern, progressive and egalitarian state to condemn it, the Ministry of Justice maintained its position. However, the NCWR was able to go ahead with this action because of the backing it received from significant sectors of the National Congress and civil institutions.

Although the NCWR trod a difficult path within the state because it had simultaneously to win legitimacy with respect to other government agencies, and demonstrate that it could employ resources and implement programs efficiently, up to this point its existence had not been explicitly questioned nor had it been regarded as departing from government thinking. This was due both to the skilful way in which the NCWR operated, counting on a network of political support and involving other government sectors in its programs and above all to the fact that the state was not ideologically defined at that moment. After the Ministry of Justice's challenge, it was clear that the NCWR was not represented by the hegemonic tendency within the new configuration of state power. Nevertheless, the legitimacy it already enjoyed, enabled it to continue functioning throughout 1989, giving priority to women's health.

At the beginning of 1989 the new Minister of Justice, who held even more conservative views, attempted to reduce the NCWR's sphere of influence and action further. This is not the place to list in detail all the resources employed

by the Minister to obstruct the NCWR since, having been created by congressional law, the government could not officially close it down. Budget cuts of almost 72 percent, interference in its programming, attempts to dismiss personnel and appoint others, staff reductions, and intimidation so that the agency trimmed its actions by 80 percent (which, according to the Minister, was proportional to the advances made on the women's question) were all employed to destabilise the NCWR and check its progress.

Nationally, the women's movement and trade unions supported the NCWR, as did sectors of the National Congress and some government agencies. The State Councils also rallied to the NCWR's defence enabling it to withstand this process of destabilization for eight months. However, institutions which articulate conflicts which disrupt traditional power relations and hierarchies and demand public policies relating to sectors which have been historically invisible, can expect to meet with strong conservative resistance. The government set clear limits to its rapprochement with civil society, in this case, with the organized women's movement. When the composition of the NCWR's Board was subjected to direct political interference, its members having resisted for various months decided to resign. The crisis of the NCWR should be understood within the framework of reaccommodating political forces within the state. This resulted in a political narrowing down of the boundaries to the debate on women's position and circumscribed government action and debate in this area. Despite the fact that direct presidential elections were held in 1990, the first time since the fall of the dictatorship, the newly-elected president did not encourage the re-establishment of the NCWR. On the contrary, President Collor, who was later impeached for corruption, contributed to the destruction of the NCWR, which is only now re-emerging after the presidential elections of 1995.

The legitimacy enjoyed by the NCWR demonstrated the possibility and necessity of using power to transform the position of women and made it clear that winning space and pressing for state policies is a goal to be reconquered. As politics is a dynamic process and contexts change, women in Brazil have acquired a degree of experience in handling the intricate mechanisms of power. The NCWR, as a symbol of non-cooptation, proves to those of us who shared in the experience, that power to transform situations largely resides in the legitimacy which society confers on a set of proposals and demands. Whether or not these are attainable through the state is dependent on political circumstances. Although the experience of using the state to extend citizenship was positive, it also underlines the need to resist the state when its agencies turn against the redefinition and extension of democracy.

#### Policies on Women in the 1990s

At present public policies on women in Brazil are still carried out mainly at state and municipal level, with a significant role played by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A characteristic of the 1990s is the creation of national and regional networks of NGOs as well as other non-governmental organizations working at national level. Brazil has a National Feminist Reproductive

Health Network (REDE), bringing together more than 50 women's NGOs, a Network on Domestic Violence and a Commission on Citizenship and Reproduction.

Networking, as a form of organization and a political strategy has become increasingly relevant throughout Latin America. Feminists in this continent are also deeply marked by the impact of globalization. Brazilian women's NGOs and groups are also active in the international sphere and have participated in a number of international conferences held by the UN in the 1990s. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which took place in Rio in 1991 marked the entrance of NGOs in general and of women in particular, as visible protagonists. The 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights represented a significant development for women. Violence against women was considered a human rights violation and the affirmation that women's rights are human rights opened a debate within the UN on the universalization of human rights and respect for specific cultures.<sup>7</sup> However it was at the Population and Development Conference, held in Cairo in 1994, that women, as an articulate international political actor, most influenced the UN scenario. Over the years women have brought a gender perspective to debates on such issues as the global economy, environmental degradation, poverty, violence, peace and placed new issues such as reproductive health, domestic and gender violence on the UN agenda. In Cairo, the concepts of reproductive and sexual health and reproductive rights marked the establishment of a new paradigm and the enlargement of the conceptualization of human rights in this international forum.<sup>8</sup> The Fourth Women's International Conference, which took place in Beijing in 1995 culminated in bringing together the two paths: that of women's international conferences and that of women's presence at conferences dealing with issues such as the environment, human rights, population and social inequalities. Beijing was successful in terms of drawing up a plan of action. The extent to which recommendations are incorporated into national legislation and public policies depends on women's political weight and visibility in national arenas. As the poet Machado put it, "*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*" (The path is made as one goes along).

#### ENDNOTES

1. Presidential elections were held in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela.
2. For a more detailed description of Brazilian women's participation, see the survey of Latin American women carried out under the auspices of FLACSO and CEPIA [1993]. The research in Brazil was undertaken by CEPIA, under the coordination of J. Pitanguy and edited by T. Valdes for FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales), Chile.
3. Boschi [1983; 1987] discusses the emergence of social movements and their political impact.

4. Throughout the 1970s to the present the Catholic Church opposed the feminist agenda on reproductive health [Pitanguy, 1994].
5. For an analysis of the democratization process, see Santos [1982].
6. CEPIA has carried out two research projects evaluating public policies to combat violence against women [Barsted, 1994; 1995].
7. In the early 1990s the Center for Women's Global Leadership, at the University of Rutgers, New Jersey initiated an international campaign under the slogan, Women's Rights are Human Rights. For a reflection on the new conceptualization of human rights in the UN arena, see Bunch [1995] and Pitanguy [1994].
8. The preparatory process for the Cairo conference shows how women organized nationally, regionally and globally to make their voices heard at this forum. In Brazil, women held a national conference in 1993, Our Rights for Cairo 1994, attended a regional preparatory meeting in Mexico and an international Women's Health Conference on Reproductive Health and Justice in Rio in 1994.

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## APPENDIX:

### Summary of NCWR Activities

#### Health

- Organized the First National Conference on Women's Health, attended by health professionals, authorities, autonomous movements and representatives of the women's movement. This meeting set out basic guidelines for action in this area.
- Prepared information on reproduction and contraception.
- Liaised with the Ministry of Health to disseminate information on reproduction and with the Ministries of Health and Social Security to implement a Program of Integral Assistance on Women's Health (PAIUSM). This program was designed by women doctors who work in health groups and included a plan to control fertility, in which women themselves form the subjects of medical attention.
- Participated in the Commission on Reproductive Rights of the Ministry of Health, in the Commission to Combat Aids, and in meetings with the National Health Council.
- Coordinated the National Campaign to combat maternal mortality and prevent breast cancer and cancer of the womb.
- Organized the First National Meeting on Women's Health, a right to be conquered, in which a Charter of Reproductive Rights was drawn up.
- Held a debate on abortion and drew up legal recommendations to combat discrimination.

#### Violence

- Organized a meeting of policewomen working in specialized police units to assist victims of violence, with a view to evaluating their work, deepening the discussion on violence, and encouraging contact between policewomen, feminists from SOS groups and female academics.
- Prepared and disseminated materials on violence.
- Carried out studies of judicial sentences for crimes involving physical abuse, rape and murder of women.
- Established permanent contact with women's police units in order to provide political support and to gain access to statistics on crimes against women.

#### Employment and Rural Women

- Organized the First Meeting on Women and Employment Laws, in which a document was drawn up revising the labor code, based on recommendations from women trade unionists.
- Prepared documentation on women in the labor market, on the main employment demands of women, on labor legislation, both national and international, and on the history of women's participation in trade union struggles, amongst others.



- Offered support and technical advice to the associations of domestic servants in preparing their legal recommendations. Supported meetings and congresses of women rural workers. Prepared jointly with the Ministry of Agrarian Reform a document on violence against women and children in the countryside. Also campaigned jointly with this Ministry (which has since been abolished) for women rural workers to have the right to own land, irrespective of marital status.
- Collaborated with the Ministry of Labor in strengthening regional labor delegations to ensure that labor laws are respected, especially those referring to maternity leave.
- Set up a series of projects with UNICEF aimed at generating income-earning opportunities for women in the North East.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Mexican Feminist Movement and Public Policy-making

*Marta Lamas*

### INTRODUCTION

The early 1970s marked a resurgence of the feminist movement in Mexico. The groups behind this new wave of Mexican feminism played a significant part in introducing a new political culture and a critical cultural discourse. However, these groups have not been able to sustain or renew their initial political impact, and in the 1990s the feminist movement cannot be considered a key participant in the policy-making process relating to women.

The movement is currently disorganized and fragmented. It functions like an underground stream,<sup>1</sup> with little public participation, but with hundreds of feminists scattered amongst disparate professional and political settings. The poor political performance of the organized movement contrasts with the creativity shown by feminists who, from their public and private work niches, bring their influence to bear on the design of government programs relating to women, on the inclusion of feminist categories in the census and surveys, on developing a critique of sexism in publishing and education. A few women functionaries openly declare themselves to be feminists, yet many more act as feminists whilst not declaring themselves openly to be so. Their presence has encouraged the creation of support networks between civil servants, female politicians and feminists.

The feminist movement in some countries has become an officially recognized political actor. By challenging institutional politics and developing considerable expertise on public policy and women, the women's struggle has gained in strength and legitimacy. Society as a whole and the political parties have come to accept the reality of women's oppression and to redress it through such measures as affirmative action or quotas. In this way, women's movements<sup>2</sup> have come to form a visible political presence, which must be taken into account by the ruling group.

Why is it that feminism in Mexico has not expressed itself so strongly as feminism in Europe or North America and why has it not entered into a political dialogue with the state? The answer lies partly in the specificity of Mexican national political culture: the lack of a tradition of political mobilization,