

Women's Movements in the Global Era

The Power of Local Feminisms

Amrita Basu

Editor



A Member of the Perseus Books Group

Copyright © 2010 by Westview Press

Published by Westview Press,
A Member of the Perseus Books Group

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address Westview Press, 2465 Central Avenue, Boulder, CO 80301.

Find us on the World Wide Web at www.westviewpress.com.

Westview Press books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases in the United States by corporations, institutions, and other organizations. For more information, please contact the Special Markets Department at the Perseus Books Group, 2300 Chestnut Street, Suite 200, Philadelphia, PA 19103, or call (800) 810-4145, ext. 5000, or e-mail special.markets@perseusbooks.com.

Every effort has been made to secure required permission to use all text and art included in this volume.

Designed by Brent Wilcox

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women's movements in the global era : the power of local feminisms / Amrita Basu, editor.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8133-4444-7 (alk. paper)

1. Feminism—History—21st century. I. Basu, Amrita, 1953–

HQ1155.W686 2010

305.4209'0511—dc22

2009035873

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Boxed Information</i>	xi
Amrita Basu	1
Introduction	
AFRICA	
1 Elaine Salo	29
South African Feminisms—A Coming of Age?	
2 Shereen Essof	57
<i>Ramagwana Rakajeka: Opportunities and Challenges of the Zimbabwean Women’s Movement</i>	
ASIA	
3 Farida Shaheed	89
The Women’s Movement in Pakistan: Challenges and Achievements	
4 Kalpana Kannabiran	119
Feminist Deliberative Politics in India	
5 Naihua Zhang and Ping-Chun Hsiung	157
The Chinese Women’s Movement in the Context of Globalization	
EUROPE	
6 Elzbieta Matynia	193
Polish Feminism Between the Local and the Global: A Task of Translation	

7 Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom	229
Russian Women's Activism: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back	
LATIN AMERICA	
8 Cecilia M. B. Sardenberg and Ana Alice Alcantara Costa	255
Contemporary Feminisms in Brazil: Achievements, Shortcomings, and Challenges	
9 Elisabeth Jay Friedman	285
Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender and Sexuality in Latin America	
10 Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo	315
Toward a Culturally Situated Women's Rights Agenda: Reflections from Mexico	
THE MIDDLE EAST	
11 Islah Jad	343
The Demobilization of a Palestinian Women's Movement: From Empowered Active Militants to Powerless and Stateless "Citizens"	
12 Nayereh Tohidi	375
The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran: A Glocal Perspective	
THE UNITED STATES	
13 Julie Ajinkya	415
Intersecting Oppressions: Rethinking Women's Movements in the United States	
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	445
<i>About the Contributors</i>	477
<i>Index</i>	483

Toward a Culturally Situated Women's Rights Agenda: Reflections from Mexico

ROSALVA AÍDA HERNÁNDEZ CASTILLO

In this chapter, I share a series of reflections based on the Mexican experience on how to rethink women's rights by taking into account the cultural context of our feminist struggles, and thereby developing a gendered perspective that promotes cultural rights. These reflections emerge from several years of research on the organizing processes of indigenous women, as well as from my own experiences as a feminist activist seeking to build political alliances with the indigenous movements in Latin America.

During the past decades, the intensification of migratory flows from the South to the North and the emergence of important indigenous movements throughout the Americas have placed group rights at the center of debate and called into question universalist and liberal visions of citizenship. Demands for state recognition of cultural and collective rights, which recognize the multicultural character of nations, have reopened old anthropological debates on cultural relativism and universalism. At one end of these debates are actors who conceptualize culture as a homogenous entity of shared values and customs, without considering relations of power. At a political level, they often idealize the practices and institutions of non-Western cultures (echoing the Rousseauian ideal of the Noble Savage that the West continues to seek in its former colonies). At the other extreme are liberals who negate the rights of particular cultures and, in the case of Latin America, reject the right to autonomy for indigenous people. They reclaim values that appeal to universal citizenship rights in order to justify assimilationist and integrationist policies. Both of these visions, the essentialist and the

MEXICO

Human Development Index ranking: .829
 Gender-Related Development Index value: .820
 Gender Empowerment Measure value: .589

General

Type of government: Federal Republic
 Major ethnic groups: Mestizo (60%); Indian (30%); White (9%); other (1%)
 Language: Spanish
 Religions: Roman Catholic (76.5%), Protestant (6.3%); other, unspecified, or none (17.2%)
 Date of independence: 1810
 Former colonial power: Spain

Demographics

Population, total (millions), 2005: 104.3
 Annual growth rate (%), 2005–2015: 1.0
 Total fertility (average number of births per woman): 2.4
 Contraceptive prevalence (% of married women aged 15–49): 74
 Maternal mortality ratio, adjusted (per 100,000 live births), 2000: 60

Women's Status

Date of women's suffrage: 1947
 Life expectancy: M 73.1; F 78
 Combined gross enrollment ratio for primary, secondary, and tertiary education (female %), 2005: 96.9
 Gross primary enrollment ratio: 108*
 Gross secondary enrollment ratio: 83
 Gross tertiary enrollment ratio: 24
 Literacy (% age 15 and older): M 93.2; F 90.2

Political Representation of Women

Seats in parliament (% held by women): 21.5
 Legislators, senior officials, and managers (% female): 29
 Professional and technical workers (% female): 42
 Women in government at ministerial level (% total): 9.4

Economics

Estimated earned income (PPP US\$), 2005: M 15,680; F 6,039
 Ratio of estimated female to male earned income: .39
 Economic activity rate (% female): 40.2
 Women in adult labor force (% total): 35 (this figure obtained at the CEDAW Statistical Database)

*Gross enrollment ratios in excess of 100% indicate that there are pupils or students outside the theoretical age groups who are enrolled in that level of education.

ethnocentric, generate polarizations and leave indigenous peoples, who are the focus of this essay, unable to construct their own futures or to rethink their relationships to nation-states. However, other visions emerge from indigenous movements' political practices and daily acts of resistance that attempt to transcend the dichotomy between essentialism and ethnocentrism. These practices identify creative ways to rethink ethnic and gender identities and to construct a politics of cultural recognition that considers diversity within diversity, while at the same time promoting a culturally situated women's rights agenda.

In this chapter I first present a brief summary of the processes that gave rise to the indigenous women's movement in Mexico, and I describe the diverse political genealogies that influence a culturally situated feminist agenda. I then analyze the genesis of universal discourses on women's rights and examine how these have been globalized and institutionalized, specifically from my personal experiences with international foundations that grant fellowships to indigenous women. The chapter concludes with reflections of the processes of globalization from below that are emerging from organized indigenous women throughout the continent. These processes demonstrate that despite the economic and political power that lies beneath liberal and universalizing definitions of women's rights, indigenous women are contesting and resignifying these discourses and practices.

My focus is on indigenous women's struggles for more just relations between men and women based on definitions of personhood that transcend Western individualism. Their notion of equality identifies complementarity between genders as well as between humans and nature. It considers what constitutes a dignified life through a different understanding of people's relationship to property and to nature than liberal individualism's. This alternative perspective on women's rights, which reclaims indigenous *cosmovisiones*, or indigenous epistemologies, as spaces of resistance¹ and as tools to build gender justice, is being transnationalized by a continental movement of indigenous women, most notably as part of an international network called the Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas (Indigenous Women's Continental Alliance). In this sense, we can point to an emerging form of cosmopolitanism (de Sousa Santos 1997) or transnationalism from below, which is confronting not only ethnocentric universalism but also globalization from above.

If we consider feminism as a body of social theories and political practices that analyze and seek to change the inequality between men and women, then this budding indigenous women's movement can be seen as a new indigenous feminism. Even though indigenous women have allied with wider women's movements, they do not—in most of the cases—define themselves as feminists. Most indigenous women associate feminism with urban middle-class women

and consider feminism detrimental to their shared struggles with indigenous men. Although these preconceptions are starting to change and some indigenous women's groups in Mexico and some Mayan feminists from Guatemala (Hernández Castillo 2008) are beginning to identify with feminism, there is still a long way to go in building bridges between urban and indigenous feminists and indigenous women's organizations in Latin America.

This chapter is a call to heed the indigenous women's criticism and to contribute to the construction of political alliances. From local, national, and international standpoints, organized indigenous women's discourses and practices have come to challenge noninclusive perspectives of Latin American feminisms and to reveal the limitations of a political program based on liberal perspectives of equality and universalist notions of citizenship. Whether they adopt or reject the concept of feminisms, organized indigenous women have questioned our urban middle-class feminisms, leading us to reflect on the need to build a *politics of solidarity* based on establishing alliances that recognize and respect women's diverse interests.

Snakes and Ladders in the Road Toward a Feminist and Indigenous Women's Understanding

The 1970s represented a groundbreaking decade for Latin American feminist histories. The UN legitimized feminists worldwide demands by designating 1975 as International Women's Year and holding the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City. During this decade many countries had growing feminist movements that promoted the creation of a "cultural climate" that denaturalized oppression and violence against women. Mexico, however, was one of the few Latin American countries that fostered the development of *feminismo rural*, or civil feminism centered in rural work. This was a nonindigenous women's movement, composed of women from an urban background who chose to organize in rural areas as their life project and favored a dialogue with peasant and indigenous organizations, contributing to the future development of indigenous women's organizing.

It was during the 1970s peasant movements that feminist activists started to engage in grassroots work in rural areas of Mexico, both implementing projects for women and encouraging a gender consciousness among indigenous women. I and other members of my organization, COLEM,² were part of the generation whose feminism developed in dialogue with indigenous and peasant women throughout the country. Many of us were former leftist activists who were engaged in solidarity efforts supporting national liberation struggles in Central America and worked with popular and peasant groups in Mexico.

Based on our experience working with rural women, we believe that the feminist agendas should address the social and economic inequality that taints the lives of poor women. The history of Mexican feminism has been characterized by friction between those whose main struggle to confront gender inequality has been centered in the prochoice agenda and those who seek to build their feminist agenda upon a strategy aimed at challenging gender and class differences. This is one of the multiple obstacles that need to be overcome in order to build a truly representative national feminist movement.

Since the foundation of the Feminist Women's Coalition in 1976 and the creation of the Liberation and Rights for Women National Front in 1979, legalizing abortion and fighting against domestic violence have been the main demands of hegemonic feminism in Mexico. This feminism, essentially urban and academic—theorized from a scholarly perspective and built from the center of the country—has been hegemonic, not by virtue of commanding widespread legitimacy but by virtue of the support it has garnered in international circles, where popular and rural feminisms have been marginalized.³ The history of these feminisms is yet to be written.

Even today, Mexican scholarly histories on feminism (Bartra 2002; Lamas 1992; Lamas et al. 1995; Lau 2002) talk about “popular feminisms” when describing urban nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that supported poor urban or rural women's organizing during the 1980s, but disregard poor women who independently developed a critique of gender inequality. These women of popular sectors (urban or rural) are seen as passive, in need of feminist deliverance, and mobilized for exclusively short-range purposes.⁴ Gisela Espinoza Damián, a major activist in grassroots feminism, states that “popular feminism should not be applied to non-governmental organizations, since it was poor urban women who forged that name and adopted that identity” (2009, 87). She recommends distinguishing *civil feminism* composed of civil organizations organized mostly by middle-class professionals who work with working-class sectors from *popular feminism* in which poor working-class women or peasant women engaged in their own gender struggles and collaborated with men both to challenge gender inequality and to reposition themselves to have a greater voice in broader social movements. Espinoza Damián does not include indigenous women as part of the *popular feminism* of the 1980s, because although they were organized around economic demands, it not was until the 1990s that they started to develop their own gender demands.

During the political fervor that characterized the women's movement in the 1980s there were several joint gatherings of indigenous, peasant, and working-class women; one was the First National Women's Meeting held in 1980 in

Mexico City. This was a groundbreaking event in the history of popular feminism, because it was the first time that women of popular sectors gathered to discuss gender and class inequality in their own terms. It was organized by Liberation Theology and feminist civic associations such as CIDHAL (Communication, Exchange, and Human Development in Latin America).⁵ More than five hundred women from both rural and urban backgrounds attended the meeting. They discussed women's roles in and problems with popular movements. Indigenous peasant women from the states of Veracruz, Chiapas, Michoacán, and Morelos and from organizations such as the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization and Emiliano Zapata Peasant Union all participated in the meeting (Espinoza Damián 2009). In Chiapas, as part of the 1980s peasant movement, leftist activists and indigenous women from different parts of the state had a chance to interact at meetings, workshops, and conferences. Although formal deliberations centered on agrarian problems, women started to informally share ideas and experiences. Gender inequalities within families, communities, and organizations became conversation topics during meetings. During such dialogues, organization advisers, nuns linked to Liberation Theology, and activist scholars not only were witnesses and supporters but also actively developed their own feminist agenda, expanding the criticism against capitalist inequality and reflecting on gender and racial exclusion.

Each of the participants in these workshops and meetings brought her own specific vision of the struggle, produced from her own experience of what it means to be a *campesina*, or indigenous woman. The *campesinas* of the Emiliano Zapata Campesino Organization, the Independent Central for Agricultural Workers and Peasants, the Proletarian Organization Emiliano Zapata, and the Plan de Ayala National Coordination were principally interested in the fight for land, not just for the men but also for themselves and their daughters. The indigenous women of the Sierra, linked to organic co-ops, brought to the debate the importance of women's work in the promotion of sustainable development and shared their experiences with organic agriculture. The testimonies of many of the participants included the theme of domestic violence and their concern to develop strategies against it. In one of the *Memoirs* of these workshops, there is also concern about creating laws that recognize women rights, including the right to political participation:

We want to participate in the making of laws which relate to us and our people. We want to participate in the meetings in order to be able to be elected and respected as having authority so that men listen to us because as women we can think and make decisions and we are equal in body and blood. We

want to discuss and analyze among ourselves the importance of being a woman and, together with other women, search for a revaluation of our condition as women and as indigenous peoples. We demand recognition and respect to our campesino and indigenous women organizations in all governmental bodies and programs.⁶

A landmark event that signified coalescence of a growing civic feminism and an indigenous women's movement was the First Indigenous and Peasant Chiapas Women's Meeting held in the city of San Cristobal de las Casas in 1986, summoned by scholars and activists from the Chiapas Autonomous University and the Chiapas Indigenous Healers Organization. Sonia Toledo and Anna María Garza, promoters and chroniclers of the event, tell us how popular education methodology was used to explore with indigenous women their own conceptions of body, sexuality, and suffering. This line of work, they say, "sought to build alternative relations to those prevalent in traditionally male-dominated organizations. In spite of our own inherited divisions between the advice-giver from the advised, these kinds of meetings helped create new dynamics of reflection and understanding. Women's political work and participation were assessed; expressing feelings and self-esteem were underlined" (Garza Caligaris and Toledo 2004, 213). In spite of the structural gap between professional and indigenous women, these dialogues marked both parties' organizational processes and political agendas.

As a result of such dialogues, a number of feminist civic organizations arose that gave priority to organizing and assisting indigenous and peasant women. My experience as a feminist started in one of these organizations, COLEM. This organization grew after a series of sexual crimes against women working in NGOs in 1988 and 1989 came to light. We were originally organized as a wide front against sexual and domestic violence but soon consolidated into a civic association with legal, schooling, and health activities, including workshops on gender consciousness.⁷ Similar organizations emerged in other indigenous regions throughout the country. These included Comaletzin A.C., created in 1987, whose members fostered development with gender perspective among indigenous and peasant women in the states of Morelos, Puebla, Sonora, and Chiapas;⁸ the Center for Research and Action for Women, created in 1989 to promote indigenous women's organizing in the Chiapas Highlands and among Guatemalan refugees;⁹ Women for Dialogue, an association working in Veracruz and Oaxaca; and Women in Solidarity Action Team, working in Michoacán.¹⁰ These pioneering organizations have been followed by several others that have joined a positive dialogue with indigenous women. For instance, K'inál Antzetik, the Indigenous Women National Coordination, and many other

feminist organizations gathered in the National Rural Adviser's and Promoter's Network (Berrio Palomo 2008; Mejía Flores 2008).

The National Indigenous Women's Movement in Mexico: Reinventing Culture and Redefining the Nation

The emergence of an indigenous women's movement with gender demands is also the result of the Zapatista movement, which I will describe after providing some background on indigenous organizing. It is impossible to understand the present force of the indigenous women's movements without taking into account their experiences in the indigenous and peasant struggles of the past three decades.

From the 1970s onward, an important indigenous movement emerged in Mexico and started to challenge the official discourse on the existence of a homogeneous and mestizo nation. Alongside demands for land, cultural and political demands made an appearance that foreshadowed what would become the struggle for autonomy of the indigenous peoples. At the same time, important changes were taking place in the household economy, and new spaces for collective reflection emerged into which indigenous women were incorporated.

In the case of Chiapas, the Indigenous Congress of 1974 is considered a turning point in the history of the indigenous peoples. Beginning with that meeting, in which Tzotziles, Tseltales, Choles, and Tojolabales¹¹ participated, cultural demands were added to the peasant demands for a just distribution of land. Although academic work on the indigenous movement of that time does not mention the participation of women, from testimonies of participants we know that they took charge of the "logistics" for many of the marches, demonstrations, and encounters described in these works. The role of logistic supporters for the land struggle continued to exclude women from decision making and active participation in the organizations, although it did allow them to meet and share their experience with indigenous women from other parts of the state.

While women actively participated in peasant mobilizations, some changes in household economy took place in the 1970s that resulted in an increased participation of women in the informal trade in agrarian and craft products in local markets. It would be impossible to understand the broader political movements without taking into account the local developments that affected the indigenous households. In a context of land scarcity, the "petrol boom" of the 1970s prompted the migration of many indigenous men from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Veracruz to the oil fields, leaving their women in charge of the household. The process of monetarization of the indigenous economy may have had a disempowering ef-

fect on women in the household, arguably decreasing the significance of their domestic labor for the reproduction of the labor force (Collier 1994; Flood 1994). For many women, however, changes in the household economy were fraught with contradictions, because while their position within the household changed, their incorporation in informal trade activities brought them into contact with other indigenous and mestiza women through the creation of cooperatives that in the course of time became spaces for collective reflection (Nash 1993).

The Catholic Church, through its priests inspired by Liberation Theology, also played a major role in the creation of spaces for reflection, above all in the areas of influence of the San Cristobal Diocese (in Chiapas), Oaxaca and Tehuantepec (Oaxaca), and Tlalpa (Guerrero). Although Liberation Theology did not promote reflection on gender relations, the courses and workshops on social inequality and racism in mestizo society led indigenous women to question the gender inequalities they suffered in their communities.

In Chiapas in the beginning of the 1980s, a group of nuns began to support this type of reflection and supported the creation of the Women's Area in the San Cristobal Diocese. This encounter between nuns and indigenous women gave rise to the Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres (Diocese Coordination of Women), one of the most important spaces for the organization of indigenous women in Chiapas (Hernández Castillo 2008). With their organizational experience and their reflections on gender relations, these women have played a key role in the broader women's movement. Migration, organizational experience, religious groups, feminist nongovernmental organizations, and even official development programs have influenced the ways in which indigenous men and women have restructured their relations within the household and have reframed their strategies of struggle.

After the appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army on January 1, 1994, a set of laws were made public, including the Revolutionary Woman's Law published in *El Despertador Mexicano*, the informational bulletin of the Zapatistas.¹² Various testimonies indicate that the law was the product of a long process of consultation among Zapatista communities. Subcommander Marcos referred to this law as the "first Zapatista uprising," when chronicling the passing of the law in March 1993, and pointed out how the law challenged the traditional norms governing indigenous relationships:

In March 1993 we were discussing what would later become the revolutionary laws. . . . Susana [a Zapatista commander] had the job of visiting dozens of communities to talk to women's groups and gather the content for the women's law. When the CCRI [the main Zapatista headquarters] met to vote on the

passing of the laws, the commissions passed to the front one by one—the justice commission, the agrarian law commission, war taxes commission, rights and responsibilities commission, and the women's commission. Susana had to read out the proposals she had written from the thoughts of thousands of indigenous women. . . . She began to read, and as she read, the CCRI assembly grew restless. Voices whispered in Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Mam, Zoque and *Castilla*. Comments flew from one end to the other. Susana did not falter; she went on, tearing down everything and everybody: “We don't want to be made to marry someone we don't want. We want to have the number of children we decide we can raise. We want the right to hold posts in the community. We want the right to speak and have our words respected. We want the right to go to school and even to be chauffeurs, if we choose.” She continued until she was finished. There was a heavy silence. The Women's Revolutionary Law that Susana had just read meant a real revolution for indigenous communities. . . . That is the truth: the first Zapatista uprising was in March 1993, and was led by Zapatista women. There were no losses, and they won. Such things happen in this land. (*La Jornada*, January 30, 1994)

The Revolutionary Woman's Law has had a very important political effect in making public the gender demands shared by many indigenous women in Mexico. Although not all indigenous women know this law in detail, its existence has become a symbol of the possibility of a better life for women.

Since the Zapatista uprising, indigenous women in various regions of Mexico have started to raise their voices, not only to support the demands of their companions or to represent the interests of their communities but also to demand respect for their specific rights as women. Alongside their participation in the struggle for land and democracy, a great number of indigenous women have begun to demand that the construction of more democratic relations be extended to relations inside the household, the community, and the organization. The emergence of this new indigenous women's movement is the expression of a long process of organization and reflection in which both Zapatista and non-Zapatista women took part. Under the influence of Zapatismo, a nationwide movement—still incipient and not without contradictions—emerged for the first time articulating local initiatives to incorporate gender demands in the political agenda of the indigenous movement. In 1997, during the National Encounter of Indigenous Women, “Constructing Our History,” seven hundred women from different parts of the country created the *Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas* (National Coordination of Indigenous Women). It provides a national-level network that brings together some twenty indigenous

peoples in the states of Chiapas, Michoacán, Morelos, the Federal District, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Estado de México, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Veracruz, and Oaxaca.¹³

Indigenous women who took part in these organizing efforts have adopted the Zapatista Revolutionary Woman's Law for their own political efforts. This law recognizes women's rights to hold public office, inherit land, and make decisions about their bodies, rights that usually defy local tradition. As Margara Millan (2008) has stated, this law challenges the core of patriarchal domination because it removes family heads' control over their daughters' spouse selection and material resources, especially the land, and thereby create local spaces of power for women. This law has gained a symbolic significance not only for Zapatista women, but for many other indigenous women as well, who feel that demands they had been stressing for some time are now legitimized.

While these women have organized within their own communities to change traditions and community structures that exclude them, they also claim the right to their own culture and traditions. Within the new spaces formed under the influence of the Zapatistas, indigenous women have adopted their people's self-determination demand, while simultaneously critically challenging their communities and organizations from inside.

The National Coordination of Indigenous Women has been fundamental in the promotion of a gender perspective within the indigenous movement. The voices of many of their members are heard in the National Indigenous Congress (CNI). In the national debate over the proposal for reform of the constitution, they were prominent in challenging the static representations of tradition and vindicated the right to *cambiar permaneciendo y permanecer cambiando* (the expression, "to change while remaining and to remain while changing," refers to their will to maintain their indigenous identity and at the same time to maintain their work for changing gender roles).

In contrast to women in the national feminist movement, indigenous women have maintained a double struggle, knitting together their campaign for specific gender demands and the autonomy struggles of their peoples, and have continued to militate in the National Indigenous Congress. This double militancy, however, has met with multiple resistances, both from the feminist movement and from the indigenous movement. For many feminists, the indigenous woman's demands for indigenous autonomy and for the recognition of collective rights are considered a danger for the advancement of women's rights, and to the indigenous movement, their criticism of gender exclusion and patriarchal domination are seen as divisive. I think, however, that both movements actually benefited from this double militancy: the feminists were forced to

incorporate cultural diversity in their analysis of gender relations, and the indigenous movement had to incorporate gender in its analysis of the ethnic and class inequalities suffered by indigenous peoples.

Mexican academic feminism, influenced by anthropologists in the 1980s, incorporated contextual diversity in its perspectives on gender relations and recognized that “the asymmetry between men and women means different things in different places. Therefore, the position of women, their activities, their possibilities and the limitations they encounter vary from culture to culture” (Lamas 1986, 184). However, this recognition did not result in an inclusionary feminist agenda that took into account the specific needs of indigenous women. As I have pointed out, the agenda of the national feminist movement has centered on demands regarding voluntary motherhood and recognition of reproductive rights, and the struggle against sexual violence and for the rights of lesbians and homosexuals, and it has not included the criticism of class inequality and racism (Tuñón 1997). Although some of these demands are shared by the indigenous women’s movement (above all those regarding reproductive rights and the struggle against violence), this movement adds economic and cultural demands that are the product of the experiences of racism and exploitation that shaped their gender identities. We therefore can criticize hegemonic Mexican feminism in ways similar to Judith Butler’s critique of homophobia in North American academic feminism when she argues, “Any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender to the suppositions of its own practice establishes exclusionary gender norms inside feminism, often with homophobic [in our case ethnocentric] consequences” (2001, 9).

Even my own organization, which, like other rural feminist organizations that from the 1980s onward have been working with indigenous women, has done so on the basis of our own feminist agenda and our own definitions of gender and self-esteem that derived from our own experience. In the 1990s processes of self-critique and reframing of working methods began, and the constructive dialogue with organized indigenous women became fundamental to such processes.¹⁴ As a result of these dialogues with organized indigenous women, some of the members of feminist organizations working in rural areas have started to discuss an antiracist agenda in different feminists arenas, although in spaces that are still very marginal and have not yet impacted the main political agenda of the national feminist movement.¹⁵ The feminist methodology that we have been working with, alongside other women who are academic colleagues and activists who identify as rural feminists, is based on questioning the homogenizing, generalizing perspectives of patriarchy and what “women’s interests” are considered to be. By rejecting the idea of a preexisting homogeneous

collective subject (“women”) and by considering any collectivity to be the product of alliances between those who are different, we are presented with the challenge of building a political agenda on the basis of dialogue and negotiation. Within this task, research has a great deal to contribute in terms of knowledge and recognition of the cultural and historic specificities of social subjects. In contrast with the action research of the 1970s, this feminist proposal is not based on the premise that we have some historic truth to share but rather has the purpose of creating a space for dialogue with other women—through research and organizational work—to discuss and analyze the different conceptions and experiences of subordination and resistance. Here, I would venture to borrow the concept of *dialogical anthropology* developed by Dennis Tedlock (1990), referring to a new form of conducting ethnography in which dialogue is fundamental for text development and which proposes that the researcher is included and recognized as part of the dialogue established with those being studied. Taking this proposal beyond textual strategies, I would suggest that it can be applied to a new way of interacting in the field with social actors.

The feminist dialogical anthropology we are proposing, unlike coparticipatory research, does not intend to transform reality on the basis of a method or theory considered to be infallible. Rather, together with the social actors we work with, we seek to reflect upon and deconstruct the issues in a shared social reality—and to jointly develop a research agenda based on these dialogues that makes our knowledge relevant for those social actors.

New representations of indigenous women as active political agents who construct their own history emerged in the Mexican social sciences since the 1990s, and particularly after 1994 (see Garza Caligaris 2002; Hernández Castillo 1994, 1996; Marcos 1997; Millán 1996; Sierra 2004; and Speed, Hernández Castillo, and Stephen 2006), rejecting the tendency to construct indigenous women as passive subjects and victims of patriarchy or capitalism. It is in this theoretical reframing of the gender concept as a multidimensional category and the recognition that ethnicity and class matter that the input by indigenous women has been of fundamental importance. Their voices resonate in the documents that come out of encounters, workshops, and congresses and in articles written by and interviews with indigenous women that are published in feminist magazines and the national press.¹⁶

Parallel to this dialogue with feminism, indigenous women have maintained their exchanges with the national indigenous movement, in which they actively participate through the CNI. There they have confronted the idyllic imagery of indigenous culture that saturates the political discourse of many CNI members, indigenous leaders, and their advisers.

Although we can understand that during certain phases in the development of social movements an essentialist discourse that idealizes "*lo propio*" (what is ours) and excludes the "alien," as in the initial radical segregation of the feminist movement, may emerge, experience has taught us that such strategies only bring isolation and cancel the possibilities for forging political alliances. On many occasions indigenous women have indicated these dangers and have opted to vindicate the historic and malleable character of their cultures and to condemn those "uses and customs" that offend their dignity. Their struggle is not one for the recognition of an essentialized culture but for the right to reconstruct, confront, and reproduce that culture, not on the terms established by the state but on the terms established by the indigenous peoples themselves in the context of their own internal plurality.

In relation to the state, indigenous women are questioning those hegemonic discourses that continue to call for the permanence of a monocultural national identity. At the same time, in relation to their own communities and organizations, they are expanding the concept of culture by questioning static visions of tradition and striving for its reinvention.

The proposals and experiences of organized indigenous women point to new possibilities for rethinking the politics of cultural recognition from a gendered perspective. Their proposals go beyond liberal universalism, which in the name of equality negates the right to cultural differences, and beyond cultural relativism, which in their defense of the right to difference justifies the exclusions and marginalization of women.

Is the Recognition of Cultural Rights Bad for Indigenous Women?

Indigenous organized women in Mexico, who have decided to participate in the political struggles for indigenous autonomy and for the recognition of collective rights, face this central question of cultural rights and women. This idea has generated quite some debate in the United States and in Europe, and it is a matter of concern in the United Nations when attempts are made to reconcile international legislation on indigenous rights with international legislation on women's rights. Political scientist Susan Moller Okin brought together a group of social scientists with different views on multiculturalism to debate the potential implications of the recognition of the collective rights of "minorities" for women. She argues that there is a strong tension between multiculturalism and feminism because the former is based on the vindication of ethnic minority cultures, whereas the latter is based on a critique of patriarchy regardless

of culture. She argues that the women of such ethnic minorities, which in many cases in fact are majorities in their countries, “may be better off if the culture into which they were born is extinguished (through the integration of its members into a less sexist national culture)” (1999, 23).

Such ethnocentric feminism fails to scrutinize the problematic relation between liberalism and feminism because it starts from the simple assumption that liberalism has brought greater equity to women than these “minority” cultures in which women continue to be subjected to forced marriages, polygamy, genital mutilation, segregation, the veil, and political exclusion, to mention a few of the “backward” practices the author lists as mechanisms of control over and oppression of women. Feminists from India, like Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Lata Mani (1998), have responded to representations like those by Okin and the Mexican critics of indigenous rights by pointing out that portraying “third world” women (in our case indigenous women) as simple victims of patriarchy is a form of discursive colonialism that fails to appreciate how these women have created spaces of their own according to their own cultural dynamics.¹⁷ The liberal feminist critique of multiculturalism assumes ingenuously that a “minority” culture is the culture vindicated by the hegemonic sectors within that culture and fails to see that the practices and discourses of contestation developed by women are also part of the cultures for which respect is demanded. They also assume that they know how gender inequality functions in any society, without bothering themselves with specific contexts or histories, and then they think that on the basis of such knowledge they possess the key to the liberation of their “sisters” from the so-called third world.

In Mexico the new indigenous women’s movement that arose under the influence of Zapatism has set itself the task of reframing the demands for recognition of the multicultural character of the nation; it did so in the context of a broadened definition of culture that does not stop at its hegemonic representations and voices but instead reveals the diversity within and the contradictory processes that give meaning to the life of a human collectivity. Instead of rejecting cultural diversity because it might give rise to practices that oppress and exclude them, indigenous women decided to engage in a struggle over the very meaning of difference. Their aim is to give “cultural identity” an emancipatory and nonexclusionary charge.

In their demands for indigenous collective rights, indigenous women have supported the recognition of collective rights over land and the right to their own customary law, considered as Indigenous Law (*Derecho Indígena*). Confronting the liberal critiques of Indigenous Law, which accuse it of being backward and antidemocratic, indigenous women have pointed out the dynamic character of

their normative systems, which are continuously being reconfigured and which, in recent years, reflect the transformations and struggles these women have promoted. Two indigenous women, Comandante Esther, the Zapatista leader, and María de Jesús Patricio, a National Indigenous Congress representative, defended the constitutional reform that recognizes indigenous autonomy and Indigenous Law in their speeches before the Mexican Congress. They challenged the static representations of tradition that have been used to dismiss indigenous practices and customs, saying instead that the indigenous communities' normative systems are being reworked and that indigenous women are playing a fundamental role in that process. In this regard, María de Jesús Patricio pointed out, "We, the indigenous peoples, now recognize that there are practices that we should combat and others we should encourage and this is seen in the more active participation of women in the decisions of our community. Today, we women participate more in the decisions of the assemblies; today we are chosen to hold positions; and in general, we participate more in community life." Comandante Esther focused on enumerating the inequalities and exclusions that the current legislation permits. She argued that the constitutional reform that Zapatista women were demanding would serve to "allow us to be recognized and respected, as women and as indigenous persons—our rights as women are included in that law, since now no one can impede our participation or our dignity and integrity in any endeavor, the same as men" (*La Jornada*, April 3, 2001, 9).

Their demands for recognition of a culture that itself is in a process of change thus converge with the ideas put forward by some critical feminists regarding a politics of difference that does not mean exclusionary alterity or opposition but rather specificity and heterogeneity and where differences between groups are conceived in relational terms instead of defined by essential categories or attributes (Minow 1990; Young 1989). At the same time that we are witnessing the emergence of an indigenous feminist agenda, we are also seeing the imposition of a women's rights agenda that does not consider the specific cultural context in which indigenous women are developing their own political strategies.

Women's Rights as Globalized Localism

On June 25, 1993, United Nations member-state representatives gathered in Vienna during the World Human Rights Conference. There they agreed to include as a human rights violation any violation of women's specific rights. Women's participation and initiative during this conference pushed forward a transcendental change in human rights theory, since it was established that human rights should be enjoyed in the private sphere as well as in the public,

and, thus, there could be human rights violations in both as well. Before this point, the system recognized only those violations committed by the state within the social and political realms. Since this historical decision was made, acts done by citizens within the private sphere can generate state responsibility.

This decision was celebrated by feminist organizations throughout the world as a necessary step in the universalization of women's rights. In the Mexican city of San Cristobal de las Casas, in the heart of the Tzotzil region in the Chiapas Highlands, a small support group for women and children run by the feminist organization I worked with at the time celebrated the good news. That same year we came across a copy of a video called *The Vienna Tribunals*, in which women from all parts of the world gave testimony to shocking rights violations. Their different stories told us about rape within the domestic sphere, genital mutilations, forced marriage, domestic violence—the experience of patriarchal domination and violence brought together women from all over the world who claimed that their specific rights be recognized as human rights. This film became a keystone of our workshops on women's rights. Although *The Vienna Tribunals* moved me to tears, there was some uniformity in the voiced-over narration about patriarchy as a universal oppression and exclusion system that made me feel a little uncomfortable. My training as an anthropologist told me that comparing the raping of a woman in the United States with the forced marriage of a peasant in Africa was a parallelism that left too much context and history out.

The Vienna Tribunals could have easily influenced Mary Daly's classic work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978). In this book Daly guides us through different parts of the world, describing assorted practices like incest and suttee, female genital mutilation, and rape, all of which, according to her, have the same origin: male patriarchal domination over women. Audre Lorde's criticism in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" already showed in 1984 the lack of a context necessary to analyze African cultural practices, the reductionism of culture to patriarchal practices, and the silencing of other elements such as racism and colonialism.

My intuition and discomfort toward generalizing discourses on the effects of patriarchal domination over women's lives became clearer after listening to our Tzotzil friends' responses when confronted by my feminist coworkers about "the selling of brides" in indigenous communities. The term *selling of brides* was used by our feminist organization to denounce forced marriages that included the ritual exchange of gifts between families as part of traditional wedding arrangements. Even though several of these women were struggling within their families and communities in order to win the right to choose whom to marry for the younger generations, the idea of "selling women" seemed offensive and

disrespectful to them and their families. In spite of the good intentions of our feminist practice, our universalistic discourses did not always resonate among those indigenous women we meant to rescue from patriarchal cultures.

Considering Boaventura de Sousa Santos's theoretical proposals (1997, 1998), I would like to examine the different ways in which women's rights discourses and practices have played a role as globalized localisms (that is, local knowledge that has been globalized), inasmuch as they strive to impose visions of a free and rational individual, the legal person, as well as conceptions of freedom and liberty whose roots lie in a particular time and space: the European Enlightenment. In this sense they can be considered as local knowledge that has been successfully globalized.

At the end of World War II the cause of human rights gained worldwide attention due to the Nazi genocide and to the large number of political prisoners and exiles. This was the context in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was approved in 1948. Since then, it has become a sword with many edges against the disposed that it was meant to protect. Because it was built without the contribution of most countries and failed to recognize group rights, its emancipatory character was uncertain from the start. The concept of human rights became globalized after this declaration, and it substituted the original concept in the original draft of the *Universal Rights of Man*.

A little-known fact is that four women signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Minerva Bernardino from the Dominican Republic, Bertha Lutz from Brazil, Virginia Gildersleeves from the United States, and Wu Yi-Tang from China. This illustrious quartet struggled so that women would be considered in the declaration and also for women's incorporation as political officers of the UN. To some extent, they were also responsible for the fact that the concept of "Rights of Man" was at the end substituted by that of "Human Rights," making the declaration more inclusive.

In spite of the good intentions that might have moved the sponsors of the UN Charter, the political context in which it was written determined its double standard use according to hegemonic states' interests. During the cold war, the human rights declaration became a tool to justify U.S. intervention in domestic affairs of countries that did not comply with its interests. Such was the case with the direct intervention of the U.S. government in the overthrowing of Jacobo Arbenz's progressive government in Guatemala in 1954.

Recognizing the probable political misuse of human rights, the Executive Committee of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) prepared a document questioning the colonialist character of the declaration a year before it was approved. The document, submitted to the UN Human Rights Commis-

sion, argued that the assumed superiority of Western values had already been used as an excuse to justify control and domination over millions of people throughout the world. Accordingly, it stated, “How can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings, and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America?” (1947, 539).

There are some human rights advocates like Karen Engle who refer to the AAA statement as an example of the “expression of unlimited tolerance” that characterizes cultural relativists and as one of the “historical discredits” of contemporary anthropology (2001, 542). Nevertheless, recent fieldwork carried out by scholars like Shannon Speed and Jane Collier (2000) in the Chiapas Highlands illustrates how the Mexican government has used human rights as a tool to limit the autonomy of indigenous people. Likewise, Sally Engle Merry (2003), through her ethnographic analysis of international organizations trying to understand cultural conceptions, has revealed to us how a limited and essentialist conception of culture, thought of as customs and traditions, has been used to *culturalize* conflicts and inequalities in so-called third world countries.¹⁵ If cultural practices that generate gender exclusion, for example, are not understood in historical context, then the wider economic and political structure that feeds and gives meaning to them becomes obscured. At the same time that she explains how gender inequalities are *culturalized*, Engle Merry demonstrates how practices and conceptions of international organizations are being universalized after being deculturalized.

The same culturalizing and deculturalizing mechanisms have been present in feminist groups and international organizations in regards to women’s human rights. Ever since 1979, when the UN assembly approved the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, there has been a tendency to see women’s rights as opposing cultural practices, deculturalizing the former and simplifying the latter.

Latin American states have played an important role in this gender-inequality-culturalizing process and the deculturalization of women’s rights discourses with the contribution of feminist NGOs. The modernizing development discourse has blamed indigenous cultures for women’s exclusion, while presenting development and women’s rights as a *deculturalized* alternative.

Women’s rights as “globalized localisms” have been promoted by nation-states as part of their programs to incorporate women in development while at the same time complying with international commitments to implement public policies that promote gender equality. The underlying logic of most state programs aimed at rural and indigenous women is that development—as a universal, not culturally situated, process—would move forward more hastily if women were a part

of it instead of wasting their time unproductively. In the Mexican case the politics has focused on individuals, promoting access to credit and employment as means that would allow women to merge into the development process.

The United States Agency for International Development has been an important vehicle to globalize the women's rights agenda linked to the Women in Development perspective. The underlying logic of this perspective is that women are a barren resource that could contribute profitably to development (see Kabeer 1998). Under the influence of this sort of global discourses, to grant rights to women is part of assimilating them to the development process as a civilizing horizon of all humanity, while, on the other hand, local cultures "hinder development and exclude women."

Gender Hierarchy in Women's Rights: Complicities and Disappointments

In May 2004 I made the mistake of being part of a panel of reviewers, set up by international organizations and feminist NGOs, to allocate grant funds. Unfortunately, if you look closely, these committees turn out to be tribunals that judge poor women in third world countries. They investigate whether these women have and are working in accord with a "real" gender agenda, at least enough to receive such funding. But unlike the "Vienna Tribunals" these public judgments are not recognized as trials run by specialists that evaluate the projects offered to them, nor do we see that the power roles we play and our imposition of principles parallel the court system. At the time, the international financing was funneled through a Mexican feminist nongovernmental organization with a very high reputation, offering scholarships to indigenous women involved in sexual and reproductive rights issues in their home regions.

Perhaps naively, I thought that by partaking in these activities, I could bend the trend in the construction of wider, less ethnocentric definitions of women's rights. So I accepted the NGO's invitation to be a part of the board of specialists that would evaluate applications. The interviews and project presentations took place in a luxury hotel on the outskirts of Mexico City. Indigenous women from all over the country traveled there to make a public defense of their projects. The six reviewers were feminists: some academics, some activists. None of us were indigenous, and most were from Mexico City. Sitting in a semicircle beside the NGO's board of directors and the international funding agency's regional head, we began interviewing applicants.

One by one the indigenous women stood in front of the jury. Some spoke perfect Spanish, some a kind of pidgin, mixing Spanish with their own languages.

Some explained their projects using paperboards prepared in advance, and others preferred laptops and PowerPoint presentations while answering our questions. Then it was Amanda's turn, a Nahua woman from southern Veracruz with fifteen years of experience working as a health promoter. She chose the paperboard to explain the importance of traditional medicine for indigenous women's self-care, holistic concepts of traditional medicine on health, and the importance of rescuing them for the sake of women's health. The head executive of the financing agency, somewhat weary about the absence of women's reproductive rights references, interrupted and asked straightforwardly, "How do you define reproductive health? What has your project to do with women's reproductive rights?" Puzzled by the interruption, Amanda answered with a standard definition that she might have read in the scholarship-promotion brochures. The executive dashed back with another question: "What do you think of abortion?" Amanda was now bewildered and kept silent. So another question came through: "Do you think indigenous women have a right to decide about their bodies?" Amanda tossed back a different question: "Decide over what?" The executive seemed annoyed by the lack of sound answers. The rest of us sat silently, witnesses to evident bullying. "What do you know about feminism?" "Well," answered Amanda slowly, "I believe that it is good that we women have rights, but I don't agree with feminists that fight against men and want to separate both worlds." "Which feminists are those?" retorted the executive. "Can you name one?" Amanda was about to break into tears when I decided to question the "power performance" that we were watching, so I interrupted, saying I thought that she was mistaken about the place and the person to ask such questions, and added that "I could provide a long list of intolerant and secluding feminists." Amanda received the scholarship, and fortunately I was never again called for jury duty. Amanda's experience with reproductive rights scholarships is living proof of the ways that international organizations are influencing indigenous women's gender agendas, validating some struggles and invalidating others. National feminist organizations have been accessories to these impositions, giving way to a gender agenda that has reproductive rights, and particularly the right to abortion and birth control, as its core.

I do not mean to deny the importance of reproductive rights, but we must agree that after the International Reunion on Women and Health held in Amsterdam in 1984, the wider definitions of reproductive rights that included the right to economic and social conditions that favored women's health were replaced by a regulatory definition that narrowed the concept to birth control and abortion rights. In fact, third world feminists such as Shu-Mei Shi and Sylvia Marcos have drawn attention to the power networks underlying reproductive health discourse, its

silences, and its limitations, stating that “the global women’s health movement has focused its agenda to reproductive rights, as if other women’s health issues lacked importance. Poor women are dying of malnutrition and diseases that are curable if proper medical care is provided. They lack many other things that are required for wellbeing and survival” (2005, 147). Also, “the most extreme negative implication of demographic control through the reproductive rights rhetoric is that it is tantamount to the old imperialist eugenics paradigm. While developed countries are promoting higher birth rates due to the aging of their population, in underdeveloped or developing countries reproduction is controlled in the name of women’s ‘right to chose’ over their bodies” (ibid., 148).

At the same time that liberal definitions of women’s rights are globalized and presented as universal, the U.S. government uses the same discourses to justify military intervention in countries whose “patriarchal and antidemocratic cultures” infringe women’s rights. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood (2002) have analyzed the responsibility of the U.S. government in strengthening and consolidating the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and the Bush administration’s subsequent justification of military intervention in Afghanistan in the name of supporting women’s rights. Similar arguments have been used by the Mexican government and by national power groups to deny political rights to indigenous peoples. Faced with a growing indigenous movement that demands a constitutional reform that truly recognizes autonomy rights for Indian peoples, politicians and academics, who had never before written a line or spoken about indigenous women’s gender inequality, suddenly showed great concern that indigenous legal systems might contravene women’s rights. Fortunately, indigenous women’s organizations have confronted such fixed representations of tradition and their use to disqualify their customs. They have argued that indigenous normative systems are currently being reviewed and that women are playing an important part in this process (see Sierra 2004; and Sierra and Hernández 2005).

Indigenous women’s movements fight two fronts: on the one hand, they demand the recognition of their self-determination rights as indigenous people by the state, and on the other, they struggle in their own communities and organizations to transform their own legal systems. Nevertheless, in April 2001 Mexican deputies and senators decided to combat “the threats of traditions and customs” in order to “defend women’s rights” by limiting autonomy and local conflict-resolution mechanisms through a limited legal reform on cultural recognition. The so-called Indigenous Rights and Culture Law left out the right of indigenous people to control their own territory and established a bondage mechanism that forces native authorities to have their decisions validated by state judges and tribunals.¹⁹ Indigenous women never asked for any such protection that restricted

indigenous autonomy. On the contrary, they demanded the right to self-determination and the protection of their culture. But at the same time they have challenged their own people to redefine the meaning of tradition and custom and their right to take part in the formation of alternative autonomic projects.

Reproposing Women's Human Rights: Globalization from Below

The lived experiences of indigenous women in Mexico are not isolated experiences. Throughout the past decade on the American continents, organized indigenous women have attempted to combine the political and cultural demands of their peoples with their own gender demands. It is in these spaces that they are proposing new conceptualizations of women's rights based on greater holistic perspectives, which encompass relationships between men and women and between humankind and nature.²⁰

In 1992 the five hundredth year anniversary of the invasion of America presented an opportunity for women throughout the continent to meet and share their experiences of exclusion and of struggle as part of the indigenous movements of their countries. After the first Continental Gathering of Indigenous Women (the first held in Quito, Ecuador; the second in Mexico in 1997; and the third in Panama in 2000) as well as the Summit of Indigenous Women in the Americas (held in 2002 in Oaxaca, Mexico, and in Peru in 2005), many of these women opted for constructing their own spaces, independent of the national indigenous movements and all of the feminist movements of their countries, and later invited indigenous women's groups from other continents to participate. In this context the Continental Alliance of Indigenous Women emerged, where the indigenous peoples of Latin America converge with those of the United States and Canada. Within this continental movement, indigenous women have shared and complemented two different worlds of meaning: demands posed in terms of women's rights and demands posed in terms of indigenous worldviews (*cosmovisiones*) that generate a more integrated perspective of social subjects' relationship to their surroundings.

In the same vein as the concept of *dharma* of the Hindu culture and the *humma* of the Islamic culture, as analyzed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (1997, 49–50), which establish relationships between the part (the individual) and the totality (the cosmos), the perspectives of equity and equilibrium linked to social justice for women, as claimed by a sector of the indigenous women's continental movement, speak to a local construction that confronts, and at other times complements, the global discourse on women's rights.

On many occasions indigenous women's discourses that claim the existence of an indigenous epistemology have been classified as essentialist and been delegitimized by nonindigenous academics and activists, who have failed in large part to explore the possibilities that these discourses can hold for people whose cultures and identities have been negated by processes of colonization. Some feminist academics have been particularly critical of these discourses for the ways in which certain men of indigenous movements in Latin America appropriate the concept of *complementarity* to represent an idealized version of their cultures and societies, hence ignoring the existence of power relationships between genders. However, from another perspective, indigenous women are reclaiming the concept of *complementarity* in order to critique and question the ways in which indigenous men are reproducing colonizing relationships of power that contrast to the Mesoamerican cultural principles of duality.

The ethnocentrism of academe and of feminist activism has prevented productive dialogues from surfacing with those indigenous women who reclaim the concept of *cosmovision*. The emancipatory potential that indigenous spirituality has for these women, as well as the ways in which the concepts point to different understandings of women's rights as part of the rights of their people, has been little explored.

Despite hegemonic feminism's resistances and rejections of culturally situated perspectives, indigenous women's proposals are beginning to find important spaces within the indigenous women's continent-wide movement. For example, these new voices played a central role in the first Summit of Indigenous Women in the Americas, held in the city of Oaxaca in 2002. The prepared documents rejected the concept of feminism and reclaimed the concepts of complementarity and duality as fundamental to understanding gendered relations: "This document does not share a feminist perspective, given that for indigenous peoples, our *cosmovision* values each being, and the concept of duality maintains great importance. We have to recognize that the influence of the cultures of the invaders have partially deteriorated this vision, in the role that women play in society, and it is for this reason that this principle is no longer reflected today and we suffer great social unbalances and inequalities. In an ever-changing world based on Western cultural models it has been difficult to maintain intact indigenous cultures" (Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas 2003, 126).

This explicit dissociation with feminism is based on a stereotype of feminists as separatists who are not concerned with political alliances, which informs many of the perspectives shared by popular women's movements and unfortunately continues to be reproduced by many feminists. The reluctance to understand the genesis of these political proposals and non-Western epistemologies, as well

as the imposition of a feminist agenda that is insensitive to cultural diversity in Latin America, influences many indigenous women's rejection of the concept of feminism. Some Mayan women take this concept of cosmovision and spirituality in order to propose a concept of gender that implies the following:

a respectful, sincere, equal, and balanced relationship—what in the West would be considered equity—of respect and harmony, in which both the man and woman have opportunities, without it presupposing additional responsibilities for the woman, but rather a facilitating element. Only then can one be well spiritually, with humankind, with the earth, the sky and those elements of nature that provide us with oxygen. . . . For that reason, when we talk of a gendered perspective, we are talking about the concept of duality based on an indigenous *cosmovision* in which all of the universe is ruled in terms of duality, this sky and the earth, happiness and sadness, night and day, and they complement each other—one cannot exist without the other. If we had ten days with only sun, we would die, we wouldn't be able to stand it. Everything is ruled in terms of duality, undoubtedly, men and women. (Estela, an indigenous woman from the Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas, Moloj, Mayib' Ixoquib' [Political Association of Mayan women Moloj, Mayib' Ixoquib', Guatemala], cited in Gabriel Xiquín 2004)

It is evident that from these perspectives, the concept of complementarity does not serve as an excuse to avoid speaking about power and violence as part of gendered relations, but rather, on the contrary, becomes a tool to critique the colonizing attitudes of indigenous men and proposes the need to rethink culture from the perspective of gender equality. Each one of the principles and values is reclaimed by indigenous women as part of their cosmovision, and they are deemed fundamental to the construction of a just life for women.

In the memoirs of the First Summit of Indigenous Women in the Americas (Primera Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas) (Cumbre 2003), some of the main elements of this alternative epistemology are expressed in the following terms: In contrast to the stark individualism promoted by globalized capitalism, indigenous women reclaim the value of "*community*: by understanding this term as a life where people are intimately linked with their surroundings, under conditions of respect and equality, where nobody is superior to anybody." In contrast to predatory neoliberal development, they reclaim "*equilibrium*: which means to watch over the life and permanence of all beings in space and in nature. The destruction of some species affects the rest of beings. The rational use of material resources leads us toward balance and

rectitude in our lives.” In contrast to violence and domination of the strong over the weak, upon which is premised the liberal conception of survival of the fittest, they propose “*respect*: which is based on the indigenous concept of the elders being those who are most respected, an attitude that extends to all other beings in nature. The Earth is seen as a woman Mother and Teacher that conceives the sustenance of all beings. It is the equal treatment with other beings, under the same conditions.” In contrast to the superiority of the masculine over the feminine, which is claimed by patriarchal ideologies, they propose “*duality or dualism*: in which the feminine and the masculine in a same deity are two energy forces found in one, which permit the balance of vision and action. They represent the integrity of everything which guides us toward complementarity. By considering the Supreme as dual, father and mother, one can act with gender equity. This attitude is basic for the eradication of machismo.” In contrast to the fragmentation of the productive process promoted by *maquiladora* [offshore contract manufacturers] development, in contrast to the segregation of the labor force, in contrast to the fragmentation of collective imaginaries and the rejection of a systemic analysis that allow us to locate the links between different forms of struggle, they propose “*la cuatriedad*: which signifies the totality, a cosmic balance, that which is complete as represented by the four cardinal points, unity and the totality of the universe. By seeing both ahead and behind, by seeing to the sides, it is possible to struggle for unity. It is a force capable of transforming the inequalities that our people suffer due to neoliberal and globalized politics” (Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas 2003, 132).

Recuperating indigenous women's theorizations and recognizing their emancipatory potential does not imply an idealization of contemporary indigenous cultures. The proposals of these indigenous women speak to us of an indigenous epistemology based on important values that they want to recuperate as well as activate, which in no way suggests that they represent the cultural expression already shaping their daily lives.

To disqualify these proposals because they do not share our urban feminist perspective of equality or because they are not based on our concerns for sexual and reproductive rights, or at least not in the same way in which we understand these rights in urban and mestizo regions, means reproducing the mechanisms that silence and exclude those political movements marked by patriarchal perspectives. A questioning of our own ethnocentrism and racism is a necessary first step in establishing intercultural dialogues on the conceptualizations of women's rights and for constructing political alliances based on what we have in common, while at the same time recognizing our different visions of the world.

Notes

1. The concept of *cosmovision* is very important in the political discourse of the indigenous movements in Latin America and refers to the specific worldview that indigenous people claim to have that includes a more holistic perspective of social and natural processes. It is considered a specific epistemology to conceive and refer to the world.

2. The acronym stands for Colectivo de Encuentro entre Mujeres. COLEM also means “free” in the Tzotzil language, spoken in the Chiapas Highlands. This organization was founded in 1989 in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas to fight sexual and domestic violence, under the name of the San Cristobal de las Casas Woman’s Group and changed its name to COLEM in 1994.

3. The feminist NGOs that have centered their work in rural and indigenous areas are usually integrated by urban mestiza women. There are some experiences of indigenous and mestiza women working together in feminist NGOs, as it was the case of my own organization, COLEM A.C., in the 1990s. These rural feminist organizations, as well as the indigenous women organizations, have been excluded from the political spaces and agendas of the hegemonic feminism.

4. Mexican feminism has represented women coming from popular backgrounds following a hegemonic trend in social movement literature of establishing typologies that create an implicit hierarchy of such movements. For example, differences between “practical interest” and “strategic interests” (Molyneux 1986) or between a women’s movement and “women in motion” (Rowbotham 1992) tend to reproduce a political evolutionist perspective where scholars’ values and utopian horizons are used as universal parameters to measure women’s transformative capacities.

5. CIDHAL is one of the earliest Mexican feminist organizations with grassroots work in working-class areas, created in 1969 in the state of Morelos as an information and feminist document-distribution center. Later on it turned to popular-sector work, especially in urban areas and church-based communities. A deeper history of CIDHAL can be found in Espinosa 1988.

6. Memoirs of the workshop “The Rights of Women in Our Customs and Traditions” (1994).

7. For a complete account of this organization, see Freyeremuth and Fernández 1995.

8. Comaletzin was formed as a civic association in 1987 and stated as its main line of action “training, organizing, educating and researching considering gender as the core line of analysis” (Comaletzin 1999, 6). This association played an important role in the establishment of the National Rural Adviser’s and Promoter’s Network in 1987, which gathered together organizations interested in gender and development in several regions in Mexico.

9. The Center for Research and Action for Women was created by Gloria Sierra, Begoña de Agustín, Pilar Jaime, and Mercedes Olivera and registered in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Mexico. Their main goal was working with women uprooted due to armed conflicts (refugees, displaced, and returned) in Central America and Mexico, in order to promote the development of gender consciousness and identity, encourage them to adopt their rights as refugees, and demand their respect from UNHCR, their own refugee or displaced organizations, and the countries of asylum. They worked mainly with women organized in popular movements, refugees in Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize, and Panama, and with displaced women in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (I would like to thank Mercedes Olivera for this information). These experiences themselves were headed by a number of efforts to uphold reflections on women’s rights within peasant organizations like the Agricultural Workers Independent Center or the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization.

10. The Women in Solidarity Action Team was founded in February 1985, based on working in health and popular education with working-class groups in Mexico City and indigenous women from different parts of the country.

11. There are sixty-two formally recognized ethnic groups in Mexico whose demography sums up twelve million people, that is, about 11 percent of the national population. Among them, Tzotziles, Tzeltals, Tojolabales, and Choles are the four largest groups found in Chiapas, all from the Mayan family.

12. This law has been reproduced by the national and international press. The content of the law can be read at Speed, Hernández Castillo, and Stephen 2006.

13. An account of the National Congress of Indigenous Women and its organizational work can be found in Artúa Rodríguez 2001 and Hernández Castillo 2006b.

14. In the past eight years I have been working with organized indigenous women through co-participative research. A critical reflection on the relations between mestizo advisers and indigenous peasant women during the 1980s can be found in Garza and Toledo 2004. I participated in the process of self-critical evaluation of feminist methodologies in the Comaletzin and COLEM groups.

15. Such reflections have also developed in the spaces of encounter of Latin American feminists, as can be seen in the contents of the Workshop on Feminism and Cultural Diversity organized by Sylvia Marcos at the Eighth Latin American and Caribbean Congress. See Marcos 1999. In the Latin American Feminist Encounter, which took place in Mexico City in May 2009, there was a special panel, "Feminisms and Indigenous Women: Racism, Exclusions, and Disencounters," in which indigenous and nonindigenous women participated. But in a four-day congress, we were able to negotiate only a two-hour space for these issues.

16. A compilation of such documents can be found in Lovera and Palomo [1997] 1999. See also Sánchez 2005.

17. For other critiques of the ethnocentrism of liberal feminism, see Alarcón 1990 and Trinh 1988.

18. Sally Engle Merry (2003) uses the term *culturalize* to refer to the analytical move that explains any social or political process in cultural terms.

19. These changes are in Article 2d, Section II, of the new Law on Indigenous Rights. See *Perfil La Jornada*, April 28, 2001.

20. These new social actors are beginning to theorize their own understandings of women's rights, gender, and feminism as well as share their perspectives as part of the construction of intercultural dialogues. See C. Alvarez 2000; Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqila 2000; and Sánchez 2005.