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WIDE Switzerland Conference
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Political Practice and Movements: Shaping the Glocal Space

Workspace on political activity/actions on national, regional and international level. Discussion with *Elena Laporta*, Oltro Tiempo, Spain; *Kinga Lohmann*, Karat, Poland; *Ulrike Minkner*, Uniterre; *Christa Luginbühl*, EvB, Clean Clothes Campaign, as well as *Paula Rodríguez Modroño*, *Christa Wichterich* and *Andreas Zumach* (speakers from the morning sessions).

Annemarie Sancar (facilitation) introduces the three possible strategies to act (according to the Input by Daniela Gottschlich), namely to resist ('on the street'), to lobby and participate ('in the institutions') and to think in open spaces for new and innovative ideas, utopia and vision (in 'think spaces') on 3 different levels (every day/municipality, state and global partners).

A. Inputs

Elena Laporta, Oltro Tiempo, Spain

Three approaches to how women engage in Spain:

- a. *Doing politics in new political parties*: they politicized themselves in the movement, also women, but not necessarily with feminist objectives;
- b. *Women running for Utopia*: for new constitutional process and radical transformation of structure und institutions;
- c. *NGO & CSO supporting women in crisis* directly in the everyday life (alleviation, counselling etc.).

Challenges: What obstacles are feminists facing when entering the political parties arising from the movements led by already politicized citizens (e.g. *podemos ganar*)? How to deal with different goals among feminists, how to face the political and economic crisis without institutional power? How do feminists - women without any affiliation or alliance with neoliberal forces - get involved? Should they have a more feminist touch in order to give a new constitution? How would a constitution look like if it was feminist?

It is important for feminists to reflect their expectations and share experiences! A radical transformation of institutions is needed and at the same time it is crucial to work directly with women hit mostly by the crisis by returning to the streets, raising voices, including clear feminist objectives into the political agenda.

Kinga Lohmann, Karat, Poland

The story is about the activities at the local level exposing the conditions in a supermarket. The story is about a female worker fighting against the exploitative system of a specific international textile chain based in Portugal. She went to court accusing her employer, wins 10'000 euros indemnification, supported by a legal firm. Why did neither female politicians, nor trade unions or feminists get involved or take up the issue? Because they are not familiar enough with legal and economic cases! This single case is positive but it does not influence the underlying causes as long as it is not taken up by the ministry (e.g. equal opportunities), by trade unions



or feminist organizations. Without having experiences with the capitalist system other than the individual exploitation, the case is not politicized and ends with the compensation. Is it a question of ‘legal illiteracy’? Karat took the case (contacting the legal defender) and underlined its relevance to understand the bigger picture of the economic structure of supermarkets, the neoliberal ways of exploitation of female polish labor forces and the impact on their standard of living in a transitional economy. So, the fact that this case was put on the political agenda was a positive although not planned impact.

Christa Luginbühl, EvB

Clean clothes campaign analysis the way the (young/female/migrant) workers in the textile industry are depicted in the media: a) victimization of women (working long hours) and b) women being absorbed by the formal labor marked as a mean of emancipation. Both images are to some extend true.

However, the way these chains and the respective work are organized globally and their mechanisms of exploitation are rarely taken up as an issue. That is the starting point for EvB to launch the campaign. The main challenge is to attack the firms, without jeopardizing the jobs on which these women depend as they are the breadwinner in the family, and choosing the right slogan, targeting the right actors and rules.

The mindset in Switzerland encourages donations. But EvB wants people to get involved and to change their habits. In the south the challenge is to strengthen people in social movements as counterpart to business, namely to build CSO networks and an international solidarity chain, building movements around consumers and producers and no top down campaign or international coordination. People need the freedom on national level to design their own campaigns (they may be very different in consumer and producing countries). A strong civil society is needed, not only along supply chains, but also along solidarity chains. What is meant by solidarity chain? It is about engaging for change, getting active as a consumer, being feminist, live solidarity with workers.

Ulrike Minkner, mountain farmer at 2000 meters altitude, vice president of Uniterre and member of the women's group. Uniterre is a member organization of Via Campesina.

In Switzerland, 3 initiatives have been launched to change the Swiss Constitution in order to make agriculture more sustainable. The one from Uniterre is on ‘food sovereignty’, taking up this important concept in the struggle against the neoliberal agriculture policy, which goes for fewer but bigger farms, consuming more energy compared to the food produced for consumption. The proposed changes of the initiative are: a different distribution of labor, including between men and women; a valid employment contract for all people in the agricultural sector, especially addressing the (discriminated) legal and social security situation of women; the right to grow one’s own seeds; strengthening local structures (instead of tax transfers or subsidies); prohibition of genetic engineering; transporting the message that hunger can only be overcome locally; and that growing industrialization of agriculture is not the solution, but the problem.

Uniterre fights for employment contracts, minimal wages and pension system for women workers in agriculture, as well as resisting neoliberal free trade development of the sector. Free trade inter alia hampers independent seed production. In many European countries it is already forbidden to trade with home grown seeds. Old variety and bio diversity can still be found in home gardens (often run by women) – agriculture companies offer only small variety with fertilizer and herbicide included. One goal of Uniterre is to stop rural-urban migration due to difficult living conditions on small farms. Uniterre calls for tax relief for manual and sustainable approach that could guarantee basic living standards and the right of subsistence production, as stipulated by the world agriculture report of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, that poverty will only be overcome locally. Uniterre further engages in medical care, child care, care for the elderly and more.

The agricultural lobby celebrates the so called international year of family farmers in 2014, inspired by the fact that e.g. only 4.8% of all farms in Switzerland are managed by women. Questions as to, what ‘family farming’

mean when looking at the dominant development in Swiss agriculture and beyond? Is it a way to reinforce a traditional picture of ‘small agriculture’ which is about to disappear? Discussion: Should we not benefit from the International year of family farmers as an opportunity to get some funds? How can we deal with the contradictory dynamic between needing institutional structures to get funds and the need to criticize these institutions?

B. Discussion

Do our organizations lack institutional power? What are the constraints of movements, which are not institutionalized? Do we rather lack money or institutionalization to bring about our requests?

Elena Laporta: Main protests and shadow reports can be realized without money. It is important to overcome funding problem. We have to be creative and normative and remain activists at the time.

Paula Rodríguez Modroño: It depends on what you do. Do you want to transform from the inside or the outside? There are two big feminist movements in Spain: a) old institutions with links to parties and b) new generation, more radical and who want to stay outside, CSO movements. BUT in many instances the CSO movements are partnered with other organizations. For example, the occupation movement had a lot of problems in convincing the grassroots movement – so they needed the experience of the institutionalized groups. We need institutionalized organizations. We need the access to the parties (more than money). We need to fight on all levels. Many groups from the movement are now building new parties. If they stay outside they do not get access to power (e.g. Podemos).

Annemarie Sancar: Did the SDGs (sustainable development goals) depoliticize the discourse? What happens if institutions use the same concepts as feminists? Can they?

Elena Laporta: The institutionalization of feminism is only lip service. The institutions depoliticize the words gender mainstreaming. But we don't have any feminist politicians right now. It could change in the future. But the new parties do not include any feminist perspectives if we don't pressure them. They have no own interest to implement feminist claims regarding violence, care, etc. You cannot be neoliberal and feminist at the time!

On the debate in Spain: Doubts around inside outside separation. 15M and Occupy are not outsiders, they are within the system. The picture in Spain is more complex – outside Spain you can't have a realistic picture: the diversity is still there between the different feminist movements. For example the position on abortion in Andalucía, there are great debates on the usage of the word abortion and whether sexual and reproductive rights are more successful in order to attract support. There we have problems to align the different feminist groups. Also with the young women, they have different strategies, they do not want to join a fixed agenda. They want to be creative, sometimes just punctual. The only thing they do with us is going to the demonstration, but we have no joint programs. Strategies and places are different. The CEDAW report was drafted by 52 NGOs and feminist organizations. We didn't plan so on our own, we were invited by the government. For many it was the first time they linked up with feminists from the development NGOs. But sometimes we fail by not finding a common understanding.

Kinga Lohmann: Many women participated in the Beijing Conference, they facilitated the implementation and NGOs watched over the state plan of action. But then all NGOs left Poland and the EU entered. This politicized the women NGOs. But their watchdog function is weak. Money is probably important, as well as the source of support. We have i.e. an initiative of business women who organize a yearly congress with a lot of money. This year we had the 5th congress and it attracted with its neoliberal agenda a few thousand women. Now it is women who set the national agenda regarding gender equality! This is what can happen if there is money.

Participant X: The crisis and CEDAW process helped NGO in Spain to re-politicize abortion and women rights. So NGOs focusing on poor women in the global south only became involved in the Spanish and Bask agenda. They learned about CEDAW and analyzed the effect of neoliberal policies. They also linked with international NGOs and became more effective and sharper in their analysis.

Annemarie Sancar: Ursula Keller said we need a broad feminist network on all societal levels – is that so? Is there a missing middle between the micro-activist worlds of ‘the grass root’ and the institutions? Do we miss the spaces where structural changes are decided upon?

Ulrike Minkner: How to link a movement with constitutional change? With our referendum we didn’t join the national year of family farming, but we use it as a mean to be out in the street and lobby among NGOs. No political party except the young socialists, but around 30 Groups and NGOs are supporting us. This is how we avoid too much compromise.

Andreas Zumach: I would welcome an international campaign for food sovereignty in all our countries (north and south) as a counteraction against EU and US opening their market and subsidizing their own production. The international trade of food should be stopped.

Whether or not to link up with others shouldn’t be discussed on an abstract level. It depends on the issue. If you decide to go inside you need a strategic goal. Example: In Köln they wanted to build a four line highway in a neighborhood that would have been destroyed. They built a committee and knocked on every single door and gained 75% support. But this wasn’t enough to pull through. They decided to enter the social democratic party for this strategic goal - only to win this one case. 3 years later they won. As a result some got coopted and smelled the career possibilities. Some left immediately – and others stayed to work on specific issues and left upon a scandal in migration policy. But it is true, all those who went inside had to be controlled in order not to get coopted.

Christa Wichterich: WIDE worked on trade issues inside and outside. Participated in the meeting negotiations – but on the other hand they participated in protests. Inside they weren’t successful. Was it a waste of time? It’s difficult to know. There are many such experiences of women going into parties and institutions, e.g. in Uganda, where through affirmative action and quotas women went in to parliament. Many have been coopted. And the idea of being a critical mass and changing from within has not materialized. In Germany we are fighting for quota in corporations. Faced with the threat of a new economic crisis Merkel no longer wants to integrate women. Also women from the conservative party refused to do so. They argue a women quota could endanger the companies and corporations and request that women withdraw their call for better representation.

Annemarie Sancar: What is meant by solidarity chain? What exactly is the wage-floor initiative in Asia?

Christa Luginbühl: Clean Clothes Campaign was facilitating the fight for living wages. The wage-floor initiative reacts to the threat that companies move out of a region or country, if they find better conditions elsewhere. The initiative calls for regional minimal wages, adjusted by exchange rate and purchasing power. The campaign also tries to include the care work aspect and underlines that the wage has to cover the living costs of a second person, who can take care of the children and the reproduction. This notion has been debated extremely. Companies want a much lower wage level. Further we face the problem that many NGOs are managed by donation, they are instrumentalized by their donors. They can’t criticize anything. EvB wanted to refuse donations by corporations, which is not easy, as we all need a living. But it is more important to safeguard the intrinsic motivation. In the end we decided to accept donations but no partnerships that would bind us.

Ulrike Minkner: We organized a speech on TTIP and WTO in Biel, where ca. 20 men and 2 women participated. But shortly afterwards in the same city a referendum was launched to force the city to reorganize the public canteens. The city had hired a company from Basel to deliver food and they delivered twice a week prepared and frozen food. Women were totally against this unsustainable and ecologically questionable concept in a region of major unemployment. But the city council refused to reconsider, as it would break WTO standards. Suddenly all these women were interested in TTIP.

Andreas Zumach: About inside and outside. In 1998 or 2000 it was right for NGOs to put a lot of power in the fight against the WTO meetings. In Seattle at the ministerial conference the violent demonstrations were necessary to gain publicity! But later on in Cancun nobody gained from the protests. Movements should have turned back to their governments and demand a change. They should have re-shifted their strategy. In the last

years they harvested only frustration at these meetings, where they couldn't influence anything. For many the participation became another form of inside. Suddenly lobbying and traveling became attractive to members of the movements, they became members of power groups and entered a new dynamic. Unfortunately too many are proud of being member of these processes.

Participant from Kulu (WIDE+), Denmark: When you think you achieved something, you are only at the start. Denmark is a small country and decided to escape to bilateral agreements after WTO had been blocked. Now-adays everyone talks about climate and environment, nobody knows anymore what is happening within WTO. It's difficult for NGOs to keep going over so many years.

Annemarie Sancar: Regarding the agreed language issue, in all debates there is a lot of debate on agreed language. Is it really important? Everything is constantly changing, but we are defending the golden treasure of agreed language. Is not the struggle around words and definitions the process we need?

Andreas Zumach: Words and commas are important in all organizations.

Participant from Kulu (WIDE+): Our agreed language 20 years ago is better than what we get nowadays. Since then neoliberal governments and politicians have gained power. We face a new corporate world.

Annemarie Sancar: Who has the power to define which agreed language is the right one?

Christa Luginbühl: It reflects a common understanding of shared values. But there is a big need to re-discuss this language as it has to be understood by the basis.

Andreas Zumach: Some of the earlier agreed language could be secured in the SDG even though Vatican and Saudi Arabia tried to block it. Interestingly the same actors would never respect agreed language in a WTO meeting.

Participant from Poland: Feminists lost the case concerning the issue of the anti-abortion law against the Catholic Church. The young now adopt this language of the church.

Participant from Spain: Are we talking about agreed wording or agreed of values and concepts? When the ruling party in Spain mentions structural violence against women this carries no meaning. They use the same words but they become entirely empty.

Annemarie Sancar: Who can participate in the process of production of agreed language? Who uses this language? Which language can be used as a product?

Christa Wicherich: All this agreements built on the assumption that states comply with their promises even if they are not binding. And the agreed language is an instrument to hold them accountable. It can be used to be constructive and it is no obstacle to re-discuss the feminist viewpoints. The problem is that often we are not so clear ourselves in our visions.

Participant X: It can be very interesting to read the reservations of a certain country in human rights law and CEDAW. Agreed language is a frameset that helps to analyze, who are your potential partners.

Conclusion: We need to re-shift strategies, i.e. go back to the local level, and re-shift mindsets.

Report: Christine Michel, Nina Schneider and Annemarie Sancar, WIDE Switzerland