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FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION WATCH: WOMEN CROSSING THE LINE

An Action Approach for Strengthening Collective Power

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Some of the details and nuances of the original paper have been omitted for brevity's sake.

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I. Introduction: Feminist Transformation Watch

The Feminist Transformation Watch (FTW)¹ emerged from processes of feminist popular education and movement building and is designed to support the creativity and courage of women who are questioning, confronting and transforming power. A constantly evolving methodology and political action approach, the FTW was created by the Petateras², women activists and popular educators from the Americas with long histories of working for equality and social justice. While similar in some ways to the 'Watch' concept used by human rights activists, it does not solely monitor and denounce violations. It generates webs of solidarity and highlights and documents positive actions that women are taking in the face of repression. Through these actions - that range from negotiating platforms with political parties to resisting government corruption and violence - women are seeking to challenge and transform systems and practices of power and patriarchy. To support them, FTW mobilizes women from Mesoamerica and beyond to become eye-witness observers and on-line champions of these efforts, lending their voices and credibility in defense of women crossing the line. Using strategies of solidarity, communication, advocacy, and knowledge generation, FTW seeks to accompany, strengthen and publicize women's social change efforts. Based on a process of participatory research, this paper documents these efforts and is divided in three sections: 1) Introduction, 2) FTW case studies and 3) initial lessons, insights and reflections. It also includes an Appendix containing a complete discussion of insights found in the original document.

FTW: Synopsis of Process

A FTW typically involves a series of steps that are adapted to meet the needs of a specific context. The FTWs take place during difficult political moments when women are working to challenge and transform power in some way. In general the process has included the following elements:

- Individual *Petateras* in a given country request a FTW -- calling on the regional *Petateras* for solidarity and support in their actions to challenge power; they develop a plan for an observer delegation that includes setting up and coordinating a schedule of activities and interviews, arranging logistics such as free lodging provided by local women, in-country transportation, etc.
- The regional coordinator issues a call to the rest of the *Petateras* and their networks across the Americas inviting women to join an onsite international delegation; allied organizations of the *Petateras* (e.g. FIRE- Feminist International Radio Endeavor, JASS, etc.) are tapped for media, communications, advocacy and outreach to an ever wider circle of women and their allies.
- The international observer delegation accompanies women in their actions -- providing them visibility, documenting the situation and their efforts to change it, facilitating media coverage, exchanging ideas on strategy, and building links for ongoing collaboration. Sometimes *Petateras* in other countries organize simultaneous actions of solidarity that increase public awareness and press coverage internationally.
- In consultation with in-country *Petateras*, members of the delegation write a report of their findings that is then disseminated and publicized through the array of organizations and networks that are allied with the effort. The findings are used to press for needed political changes and to generate knowledge for strengthening women's movements and alliances.
- More recently, FTW's have involved an additional advocacy step. Building on the FT Watch findings, a delegation of women leaders from Honduras came to Washington DC to provide testimony and lobby key institutions. Facilitated by JASS, the delegation had meetings with a range of groups -- the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, US Congress and State Department, and the broader human rights and women's rights community.

¹ In Spanish, FTW is known as '*Observatorio de la Transgresión Feminista*'.

² A group of women activists and leaders from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Canada, and the United States who are working to strengthen social movements with a feminist perspective, to expand the personal and collective power of women, and to promote more democratic, responsible and inspiring leaders.

To date, there have been eight FT Watches as well as a series of separate activities in response to specific political situations that require urgent action. Of the eight, three have been studied in depth: Nicaragua, Mexico and Costa Rica. This paper provides an overview of the FTW approach, the *Petatera* process and the contexts from which the FTW originated. It includes a review of the three experiences and the two most recent FTWs in Guatemala and Honduras. It concludes with lessons and reflections that are emerging about the challenges of collective power, movement building, political change strategies and the FTW and *Petatera* processes themselves. By exploring the complicated dynamics of women coming together in a variety of contexts, the paper surfaces both the problems and promise of such collective initiatives. The cases highlight the real-life struggles of women working to overturn deeply embedded practices and mindsets of patriarchy that shape their societies and their own lives.

The Context Shaping the FTW: Implications for Action

The context motivating women's efforts to transform power reflects both struggle and hope. The increasing powers of patriarchy and related forces of corporate globalization, neo-liberalism and fundamentalisms are attacking the rights of women and their capacity to live in dignity -- even threatening people's survival on the planet. While these powers seek to delegitimize and co-opt social movements and disparage feminist struggles and leadership, there is a resurgence of groups across societies coming together to challenge these dynamics. As feminists and women's rights activists reflect over this context, many have questioned their own almost exclusive focus over the last several decades on advocacy and work with governments, political elites and public institutions. Similarly, in analyzing the conflicts that shape their organizations and struggles, they have seen that without alternative visions and practices of power, they can too easily fall into the same male mindsets and models of domination that they are seeking to overcome. This questioning has led them to recognize the crucial need to reinvent, re- imagine and rebuild women's personal and collective power in ways that not only challenge and change policy but that strengthen each person's ability to overcome those mindsets and behaviors in their own lives. In this struggle for wholeness and integrity, broader and more inclusive forms of organization, activism, reflection, connection and leadership are required that can inspire, mobilize and tap the concerns of an ever wider range of women -- from feminists and women in other movements to women in general -- working across boundaries of class, race, religion, ethnicity and age. The basic challenge is the same -- transforming the overarching paradigm of patriarchy into one that is life-affirming, caring, and holistic, one that respects all expressions of life and is grounded in power relations based on equality and happiness for all.

Origin: *Petateras* and Imagining and Rebuilding Feminist Movements

The FTW initiative originated in September 2006 in Panama at a Mesoamerican gathering organized and facilitated by Just Associates (JASS)³ entitled "Imagining and Rebuilding Feminist Movements."⁴ Through multiple approaches of feminist popular education, the workshop's flexibility and creativity set the stage for a rich dialogue between some 30 women activists from Mexico, Central America and the United States. Together they assessed the power dynamics of patriarchy and other contextual forces affecting them, analyzing their own political change strategies and imagining new prospects for political action and collaboration. The common and urgently felt need to overcome the divisions between and within feminist movements and to build greater levels of trust helped lay the groundwork for creating a safe space of openness, respect and confidence. This environment of trust was enhanced by the interaction between the group and the facilitators. For example when tensions and divergent opinions arose regarding the agenda, the facilitators allowed the conflict to surface, opening up a dialogue so that ideas could be

³ A global network of feminist activists and academics working to build new forms of women's power in support of a just, sustainable world.

⁴ Funded with the generous support of HIVOS, a Dutch international development organization and the Global Fund for Women, a private foundation working on women's rights.

discussed and changes could be made in the program. This willingness to share power and negotiate differences reinforced the voice, involvement and sense of safety and trust of the participants thus increasing the creativity, energy, and enjoyment of being together.

In their reflections, activists identified the broken threads of the current social fabric that reinforce women's subordination, poverty, fragmentation, and gender violence. In contrast, they imagined a beautiful weave of cloth that incorporates everyone's human rights and freedoms in a finely crafted tapestry of evenly balanced threads that ensures the coexistence and survival of all living beings and the earth itself. They began exploring how to design this new fabric of social connections based on reciprocal and ecological relationships, capable of eliminating patriarchy in all its different forms and inspiring and nurturing a more just and healthy world. The new weave took the form of an everyday palm mat⁵, *petate* in Spanish, made up of a web of diverse threads woven together into a strong and sturdy whole, united by feminist principles of autonomy, interdependence,⁶ and the right to choose. It is made even more powerful by values of equality, honesty, trust and respect. The image of the hand-woven *petate* gave the group a common identity and moved them to adopt the name of *Petateras* -- palm weavers. Creating this new social fabric invariably involves the need to highlight and strengthen the collective power of women, their personal transformation processes, and their struggles to challenge subordination. In Spanish, these struggles that confront oppressive social norms and boundaries created by patriarchy are sometimes called processes of *transgresión feminista*.

Drawing on this analysis, the *Petateras* formulated the idea of the *Feminist Transformation Watch* to accompany and highlight women's political actions of resistance and transformation in crucial moments of decision and change. They asked JASS to facilitate and accompany the initiative in a process of incubation which JASS agreed to do in collaboration with other women's organizations including Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE), the Nobel Women's Initiative, and feminist movements and groups in the region.

FTW Intentions and Purpose: Strength and Renewal

As part of an overall process of building and renewing women's movements and leadership in Mesoamerica, the FTW seeks to strengthen, encourage, protect, publicize and legitimize feminist and other women's rights activists, their organizations and their strategies to challenge power.

Strategies and Implementation: From Solidarity and Visibility to Generating Knowledge and Advocacy

To date, the FTWs have been activated at the request of specific *Petateras* when women's groups or networks are defying power and social norms in contexts where democracy and its institutions are being attacked and where the role of the state as a protector of human rights is being undermined.

As the FTW evolves, it is expected that women's rights activists everywhere will be able to use this approach, applying and adjusting it to their circumstances. Because it is organized and directed by women themselves, its diverse and flexible strategies can be tailored to their needs and reinforce their action agendas. The approach combines solidarity, alliance-building, communication, advocacy, and knowledge generation. It mobilizes resources and solidarity, bringing together women from local groups, neighboring countries, and the world community to be witnesses and observers to these actions and to share their experiences more broadly. Six women Nobel Peace Prize Laureates have been active supporters since the beginning of the initiative as have countless activists from the region. The FTW encourages and depends on building strategic relationships and connections between women and social movements as well as with

⁵ A common and important item in humble households throughout the region, usually woven by women and used in everyday activities.

⁶ In Spanish – *autonomía interactiva*.

alternative media outlets. Through communication and outreach approaches designed in collaboration with Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) and others such as CIMAC, AMARC and the Points of Encounter Radio, the FTW increases the scope of its impact and affirms women's rights to speak with their own voice. In collaboration with JASS, the approach includes systematic learning and constructive analysis of the FTW process itself and the local action strategies in order to produce lessons and knowledge about the real-life challenges of social transformation and movement building.

These components are complemented by the evolving nature of the FTW that includes a range of different activities and variations on the approach, such as: a) *in person FT Watches* that mobilize women to be eyewitnesses and accompany the actions *in situ* ; b) *virtual FT Watches* that include observers who follow the actions through the internet and publicize them in their respective countries, c) the *Petatera* Bulletin that provides information on the struggles and lessons emerging from the Watches and the work of the *Petateras*, d) the *Petatera* radio program on FIRE that spotlights women's voices and experiences and establishes direct connections between them, e) FIRE's documentation that archives the *Petatera* programs and FTW history, f) the Nobel Peace Laureates' statements of solidarity, g) statements and letters of solidarity from the *Petateras*, other feminists from the region and people and institutions beyond, h) public events held in front of embassies and other institutions to legitimate and highlight women's actions i) the development and production of materials, coordinated by JASS, that summarize the knowledge and practical lessons emerging from the FTW and the transformation strategies and j) delegations to lobby and connect with institutions and groups in Washington facilitated by JASS. As can be expected, the FTW faces the ongoing dynamics of power present within its own structures as well as within the different contexts in which it operates.

Currently, eight FT Watches have been held in support of a variety of action strategies⁷: 1) in Nicaragua, November 2006, on an effort to promote a women's rights agenda and women candidates through negotiation and alliance-building with a political party; 2) in Mexico, April 2007, on an initiative to publicize and learn from women resisting and challenging authoritarian regimes and policies; 3) in the United States at the US Social Forum, July 2007, on the FTW approach and the experiences of US social movements; 4) in Costa Rica, September 2007, on a campaign and national mobilization against the ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, where feminists provided important leadership; 5) in Guatemala at the Social Forum of the Americas, October 2008, on strategies and building connections that brought together women's rights activists from across the Americas; 6) in Mexico City at the XI Feminist Encuentro, March 2009, on fundamentalisms and strategies to counteract them throughout the region; 7) in Guatemala, May 2009, on efforts to confront violence against women (the first FTW that incorporated a fact-finding mission to document violations more formally); and 8) in Honduras on actions by Honduran Feminists in Resistance in support of democratic processes and women's rights that denounced violations occurring in the aftermath of the June 28th coup.

⁷ Within the framework of the *Petateras* and the FTW, a variety of other specific expressions of solidarity have been undertaken: in Honduras, backing the participation and denunciations of women on a hunger strike protesting government corruption and the dismissal of the head of the Women's Institute for signing a letter criticizing the Nicaraguan government; in El Salvador, denouncing and demanding the end of threats, including death threats, against the Salvadorian Women's Association. Also follow-up actions have been taken in the case of Nicaragua's FT Watch. Given the gravity of the situation and the risks and death threats feminists confront, a permanent FT Watch has been activated. It continues to support women as they undertake hunger strikes and other actions to challenge the authoritarianism, the repression and the criminalization of therapeutic abortions by Daniel Ortega's government.

II. THE FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION WATCHES: Nicaragua, Mexico. Costa Rica. Guatemala, Honduras

This section includes a brief review of five of the eight FTW experiences. The cases provide a glimpse into the complicated dynamics of developing movements, alliances and strategies to challenge the webs of patriarchy and power that discriminate against women and undermine the common good. The cases include a summary of: 1) the purposes of the individual FTW and the actions it was intended to support, 2) the contextual forces affecting the efforts, 3) the key local actors and actions being spotlighted by the FTW and the dynamics and challenges involved in carrying out the change strategies, 4) the FTW process and its specific activities and dynamics, and 5) the preliminary impacts of the joint efforts.

NICARAGUA FTW: NOVEMBER 2006

Intentions and Purpose: The Nicaraguan Watch was convened during the 2006 elections to support a feminist effort that sought to: a) build an alliance with a progressive political party and negotiate the inclusion of a feminist agenda within its platform and feminists within its slate of candidates for the legislature and b) promote and expand women's informed participation in the elections so they could hold officials accountable once elected.

Context: During the last three decades, the political participation of Nicaraguan women has been significant, not only in elections but also in social and revolutionary movements, in government posts, and in advocacy campaigns to advance democracy and gender equality. However, while the Sandinista revolution (1979 – 1990) offered opportunities for women to gain certain concessions and expand their rights, the party in power, the FSLN, kept women's efforts in check and reinforced party adherence through its control over AMNLAE, the large umbrella women's organization. As feminists increasingly reflected over this situation, they saw the need to exert their own autonomy and independence and by the late 1980s began forming non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and separate structures with their own agendas, apart from party authority and control.

Feminist political change efforts have resulted in serious attacks by parties, government officials and organizations that are known for their corruption and fundamentalist beliefs, both religious and economic. This backlash continues today, threatening women's organizations and activists and dividing their efforts. Advances gained by women in the 1980s, such as support for reproductive health, continue to be undermined by successive administrations allied with conservative religious forces. Institutionalized corruption has left public entities devoid of all legitimacy and the office of president immune from prosecution for such acts as rape (a charge faced by the current president).

The electoral process highlighted by the FT Watch took place in a context where uncertainties related to the electoral system and other questionable maneuvers threatened people's right to vote and the very integrity and transparency of the process, undermining the ability of non-traditional groups to participate in the elections.

Actors, Actions, National Dynamics: Since the late 1970s, Nicaraguan women's organizations have been characterized by their creativity and capacity to build support and power and to engage in political struggles and advocacy campaigns. Nevertheless, the organizational and political experience and connections forged in the revolutionary period of the 1980s have been fragmented and splintered over time. Even when women agree about the need for autonomy, their organizations have supported views and actions at odds with one another that weaken their ability to join forces. At the same time, feminists

face internal fragmentation and the power of religious fundamentalism, that is widely accepted within most political parties.

After three years of debate and discussion, MAM (Autonomous Women's Movement) was officially formed in February 2006 by feminists with long revolutionary histories within the FSLN. It worked to ensure equality and women's rights as well as a more open, inclusive democratic political system. Realizing that the 2006 elections offered important possibilities for influence and potential allies, MAM's leadership opted for an alliance with MRS (Movement for Sandinista Renovation), a party of many ex-Sandinistas who had left the FSLN in protest over authoritarianism. The MRS shared many of MAM's concerns and provided the best opportunity for them to participate directly in the elections. Given time constraints, the decision to work with MRS was made with only limited debate and was not an easy one – people having different interpretations of the strategy both within and outside of MAM. Many recognized the transformational nature of reaching agreements on platforms and candidacies with political parties on the basis of respect and autonomy. Such gains, it was believed, could influence government and promote wider political change. Nevertheless, there were concerns that the accelerated pace of electoral processes would have a negative impact on the group since the fast pace of politics left little time for collective decision making. Similarly, some saw that MAM's public citizen role and identity might be obscured after the elections. Various questions emerged. Most importantly, how was MAM going to pursue its political commitment going forward – from a position in civil society or from political party structures?

In order to maintain its autonomy in the alliance with MRS, MAM first defined its priority demands so that it could better negotiate. Once again different rhythms of operation affected the process. MAM's ability to negotiate effectively was complicated by the fact that they moved at a slower pace than MRS due to their internal discussions over strategy. Despite this challenge, MAM successfully negotiated the inclusion of its political agenda into the party's platform and its list of feminist candidates in the MRS electoral slate. One of the agreed upon agenda points included support for therapeutic abortions, an issue being used by MRS' opposition forces, particularly by the FSLN, to forge a political alliance with the Catholic Church and thus gain more votes.

The FT Watch: Activities and Dynamics: The FTW was convened at the request of two members of MAM⁸ during the first JASS/*Petatera* gathering in Panama in September 2006, where the FTW idea originated. Even though its methodology and activities were still largely undefined, the urgency and opportunity for solidarity motivated the group to take on the challenge. The call for solidarity resulted in 21 observers raising their own funds to make their way to Nicaragua and countless others participating virtually via internet and FIRE radio. FIRE also broadcast the first installment of radio *Petatera* and transmitted coverage in English. AMARC, Points of Encounter Radio and other media groups transmitted as well. The observer delegation received training in election monitoring, met with MAM and MRS, interviewed key groups such as other political parties and international organizations and monitoring missions, observed the elections, and did interviews for radio and internet broadcasts. Facilitated by JASS, six women Nobel Peace Laureates sent expressions of solidarity as did other groups.

Impacts: For the first time in Nicaragua's history, a women's group negotiated an alliance with a political party in order to participate in an electoral contest and ensure that women's rights were at the forefront of a party platform. MAM successfully negotiated the placement of 4 feminist candidates on the slate, the

⁸ One was a member of JASS' regional team. Even though there had been no time to consult with MAM, they assumed the responsibility of organizing the FTW because it offered a unique opportunity to generate solidarity and support for the movement and its actions.

acceptance of its five major planks in the MRS agenda, and gender training for MRS leaders. With the FSLN-Ortega victory however, these achievements were not put into practice except for the leadership training. Despite these setbacks, MAM's effort helped increase women's voice and made their feminist agenda visible, especially support for the protection of therapeutic abortion. Even though the FTW was not covered by Nicaraguan commercial media, through its alliance with FIRE, the FTW did broadcast, 10 hours of interviews the day of the elections including a Nicaraguan perspective on local reactions and concerns. In collaboration with JASS, the first *Petatera* Bulletin was produced which helped consolidate the emerging *Petatera* network in Mesoamerica. In addition, the process reinforced the commitment to develop a learning strategy for producing and sharing lessons and knowledge with women both inside Nicaragua and beyond.

MEXICO FTW: APRIL 2007

Intentions and Purpose: The Mexican FT Watch was convened in 2007 at the 'Women in Resistance' gathering in Oaxaca to support and legitimize the protest efforts of women in the Oaxacan People's Assembly⁹, denounce government repression and violence against all Mexican women, publicize the struggles and resistance of other Latin American feminists, and share experiences and learn from one another.

Context: During 2006, the state of Oaxaca was the site of deepening conflicts, similar to those occurring in the rest of the country. These included: certain groups attaining office through electoral fraud, the State being hijacked by powers such as organized crime and the Catholic church, mounting violence perpetrated by drug trafficking and militarization, and increasing inequality caused by the expansion of neoliberal policies. These dynamics had provoked a growing wave of demonstrations, protests and citizen actions in which women played a protagonist role, even though they sometimes faced resistance from within their own social movements when they took on leadership positions and advocated for women's concerns. Federal and local governments responded to these legitimate citizen efforts to hold them accountable by repressing and criminalizing social movements.

Actors, Actions, and National Dynamics: As a result of the highly contested 2006 elections, a broad range of activists, journalists, labor union members, peasants, legislators and feminist organizations based in Mexico's national capital formed a loose grouping called the *Espacio Feminista*¹⁰. Without a predefined program of action, *Espacio* focused on condemning specific violations of women's rights and political corruption such as police attacks on activists in Atenco¹¹ and electoral fraud in the presidential campaign. When feminists from the Oaxacan organization, the *Colectivo Huaxyacac*¹², called on colleagues from *Espacio* for support in response to government repression and violence against women in their state, the Mexico City group organized a 'Feminist Caravan' of some 16 people to Oaxaca to show their solidarity -- bringing a letter of support from feminists across Latin America and meeting with women from the Oaxacan People's Assembly. Given the gravity and urgency of the situation and the courage of local women, members of *Espacio* proposed an international gathering in support of Oaxacan women's efforts

⁹ The Assembly was the principle grouping of Oaxacan organizations and activists, formed as a result of the conflict with state government to coordinate actions, negotiate with authorities, and design an integrated agenda aimed at overcoming inequalities, poverty and state violence. It was made up of different sections of the teacher's union, civil society organizations, indigenous movements, women's groups, and student collectives, etc.

¹⁰ The number of participants and organizations varied depending upon the kinds of actions and activities being proposed; a core of about 25 activists from different sectors remained constant -- coming from a mix of groups including 8 feminist organizations, a national peasant organizations and independent labor unions.

¹¹ A community that suffered serious government repression that resulted in massive arrests and cases of rape and sexual abuse.

¹² A network of feminist organizations and other civil society organizations with women's programs who joined forces to promote a women's equality agenda in Oaxaca. Members of the *Espacio Feminista* had been involved in some efforts together and in building closer relationships between them. Some of the network also served as spokespeople for the Oaxacan People's Assembly.

to challenge power, a meeting where strategies from across the region could also be showcased and shared.

While *Espacio's* proposal to the *Colectivo* on jointly convening the meeting was well-received, the organizations had to confront the challenges and mistrust derived from past experiences where certain groups dominated and co-opted events to the exclusion of others. Groups from Mexico City had been known to impose their own agenda and strategies on such occasions. These situations were often compounded by a lack of communication and understanding between feminists and women in other social movements. To resolve these tensions, a coordinating team was formed that included organizations from Oaxaca and Mexico City to make decisions together. As a way of ensuring buy-in and reducing misgivings, it emphasized that the sole purpose of the gathering was to express solidarity and exchange ideas and not to form another network or organization. While the team developed a strategy intended to bring women from other social movements into the process, time limitations hampered its realization, thus generating questions and doubts on the part of those women who felt excluded. Other people ended up not being able to attend -- some due to sexist dynamics within their movements, others because of government threats of arrest. Difficulties in communication with the Zapatista¹³ movement hampered their participation.

Despite the problems, some 200 activists from Mexico, Latin America and the U.S. came together in Oaxaca. For three days, they participated in panels and plenary sessions listening to testimonies and descriptions of strategies. Even though there was not enough time to delve into issues with any depth, sharing personal and collective stories of struggle created a climate of solidarity that transcended many political differences. One sex worker who had been raped by police, spoke out and convinced others to do the same. Despite death threats, their testimony led to the arrests of eight officers. *"In this way, I am able to recover my dignity. I have learned that, independent of work, I have the right to decide and no one can nor should force me to anything I do not want to do...I feel that it is time...to take back my life...to give myself the opportunity to be happy, to feel fulfilled and productive....Now I feel that nothing can stop me."* The gathering ended with a statement of solidarity, a march through the streets, and a celebration that honored everyone's contributions. Through FIRE, CIMAC, AMARC AND JASS, information about the event was broadcast and shared with a wider audience.

The FT Watch: Activities and Dynamics: The Mexican FTW was convened at the request of a member of the *Espacio Feminista* who also was a founding member of the *Petateras*. Putting together the FTW, however, proved challenging for everyone involved. At their inception in Panama, the *Petateras* asked JASS to assume the responsibility for coordinating the FTWs, and along with FIRE, for supporting communication efforts. JASS, at that moment, was immersed in consolidating its regional teams and designing internal decision making and communication processes with them. The wave of energy and array of proposals that the Panama generated, while inspiring, placed heavy responsibilities on JASS at a time of major transition. To fulfill all the internal and external demands meant that the JASS global office had to operate at an accelerated pace, while the volunteer members of the Mesoamerican team, due to the responsibilities demanded of them by their own organizations, couldn't match the rhythm or respond to all the attempts at communication or consultation. This dynamic generated a series of disagreements and misunderstandings both within JASS and with the Mexican colleagues organizing the Oaxaca gathering, expectations never being fully clarified. Not surprising, moments of tension ensued. One member of the JASS regional team raised several doubts about the nature of the Mexico meeting but

¹³ The Zapatistas represent a movement of indigenous peoples in Mexico that defends their rights and works to build a State that respects and ensures the full participation and inclusion of ethnic groups in society.

could not stay for the team discussion where the topic was fully aired and the differences surfaced. Others also had questions about whether the gathering itself met the *transgresión* criteria of challenging power in an innovative way. The debate ultimately led to the approval of the FTW and a JASS colleague's eventual withdrawal from the regional team. With JASS trying to clarify the team's different perspectives, its internal organizational dynamics made planning the FTW with those responsible for the event much more tenuous and difficult¹⁴. This situation underscores the need to clarify several aspects of the FT Watch strategy such as the type of support and alliances desired, the decision making structures, and what constitutes a strategy of *transgresión*.

Impacts: The Mexico gathering succeeded in creating a safe and trusting environment where women from diverse political backgrounds could feel confident in sharing their struggles as well as their hope and pain. The participants reaffirmed the belief that women experience common struggles and concerns, despite the different political agendas of their respective movements that are sometimes promoted by the particular interests of the leadership and not of the members. One woman summarized the best of the event. *"The voices of many different women are present here. We are realizing that the situations we face as women are very similar...This gathering helps us build sisterhood and come away stronger because we know we are not alone."* Through the feminist media groups, women's resistance strategies and contributions to combating corruption and gender violence were showcased and broadcast to national and international audiences.

COSTA RICA FTW: SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2007

Intentions and Purpose: Within the context of a national protest campaign, the Costa Rican FT Watch was convened to support the actions of the feminist movement to stop the Costa Rican government from ratifying the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)¹⁵.

Context: Democracy on the Verge of Extinction: CAFTA had been used to legalize a range of proposals and policies aimed at transforming the region into a single market for global corporations and business interests. International powers and foreign governments worked behind the scenes in an almost clandestine fashion, successfully pressuring all governments in the region, with the exception of Costa Rica, to pass CAFTA and avoid major public debates. By contrast, in Costa Rica, widespread questions were raised about the treaty that resulted in an unprecedented series of massive protests. As a result, it became the only country in the region to submit the decision to a referendum. Costa Rica's history of democratic participation and relative high quality of life instilled in people an awareness of what they might lose if the treaty passed. The debate over the treaty took place in the context of very close Presidential elections where its ratification had been a burning issue and, at a time, when the accelerated implementation of neo-liberalism had weakened the country's historic 58 year-old welfare state. Similarly, the democratic social fabric that had been the mainstay of the nation's relative peace and stability was being unraveled. International corporate power and the US government saw winning a quick approval of the treaty as crucial to demonstrating CAFTA's legitimacy and as a way to forestall further resistance, debate, and scrutiny of decisions already taken by other countries.

Actors, Actions, and National Dynamics: Feminist leadership in this struggle built on a long history of women's activism on social issues -- from the 1940s when they won the right to vote to 2000 when they

¹⁴ For example, there were conversations with the global office of JASS in which possibilities for collaboration and financial support of the event were discussed. Some felt that those resources were for supporting the direct activities and tasks of the FTW; others felt they were also to cover the costs of the Women in Resistance gathering itself which led to confusion among staff and colleagues in Mexico. In order to address the misunderstanding and lack of clear communication, JASS sought additional funds so that both concerns were met.

¹⁵ Women's groups in countries that had signed the North American Free Trade Agreement warned about the consequences of such treaties.

joined others to oppose the privatization of telecommunication and electricity services. In the 1990s, with the adoption of a series of public policies, women's rights were increasingly recognized and corresponding programs established. In this context, many feminists opted to work within government; others chose to work with NGOs and feminist movements to promote advocacy campaigns. Some allied themselves or formed political parties to build feminist constituencies, wanting to ensure greater democratic participation and challenge the emerging two-party system that narrowed voters' options. Still others formed alternative media and communication outlets in order to inform and support these organizational and political processes for change. Feminists sought to build alliances among this diversity of groups and individuals around agendas and issues. Yet rarely did they tackle the multiple expressions of power affecting a situation and incorporate that analysis into their selection of strategies. Nor did they define or elaborate the life-affirming more inclusive forms of power that they wanted to develop. As a result, their possibilities for weaving new more holistic and interactive strategies were limited.¹⁶

On the eve of the treaty debate, the women's movement was characterized as a set of groups organized by issues, agendas, and political ideas, reflecting multiple identities, differences in perspective and divisions over who took the lead on any one theme or issue. The fissures inside the movement, caused in part by an excessive focus on agendas and advocacy, became sharper as neo-liberalism captured and began dismantling the State. With the imposition of free trade agreements in the region, however, the women's movement realized that everything was at stake. All social gains over the years were in danger of being dramatically overturned if groups didn't come together across agendas and differences to oppose the agreement.

Within this context, a feminist grouping of activists, academics, radio journalists, lawyers, educators and artists formed *Women Against the Free Trade Agreement* (WAFTA) in March 2007 at a meeting convened by FIRE and moderated by the Women's Political Agenda. It sought to highlight and incorporate the wisdom and sentiments of feminists within the overall National No Campaign and open up opportunities for women's leadership within social movements. Within the diversity of the No Campaign, WAFTA expanded previous strategies that had focused almost exclusively on interacting with public officials and contributed its knowledge and experience to the nationwide educational program. Traveling from cities and urban areas to the most remote villages of the country, they brought their feminist-popular education methods to the effort in order to better engage, challenge and mobilize communities. They generated dialogs in which people first identified their own priorities and concerns, with facilitators then weaving in additional information that allowed people to understand and assess the implications of the treaty on their lives.

In July 2007 WAFTA members joined other individuals and women's organizations under the banner, *All Women Against the Free Trade Agreement* (AWAFTA), in order to increase their influence and visibility. Even though AWAFTA represented different experiences and political beliefs, they were able to achieve a type of alliance, based on the urgent nature of the struggle. However, when AWAFTA adopted a more conventional strategy of issuing a proclamation and failed to bring on board the diversity of women's groups, not surprisingly tensions emerged that diluted the overall effectiveness of the loose alliance. Within the context of AWAFTA and the overall No Campaign, the women of WAFTA along with FIRE and

¹⁶ Certain efforts, such as advocacy for a law that criminalized violence against women, were questioned due to their emphasis on legal remedies without taking into account the less visible forces in society that would undermine the law and its implementation -- such as cultural beliefs, conflicting emotional needs and women's dependency on men for economic survival. Those who advocated for the law pointed out the importance of recognizing these forms of violence as crimes. In general, emphasis on advocacy strategies prevailed over other complementary forms of struggle that were necessary for confronting the many different expressions of power. Hence strategies important for building personal and collective power, such as strengthening organizations, leadership, movements, consciousness-raising and critical thinking processes were not widely or systematically used.

others sponsored a communication effort to inform thousands of women about the treaty and citizen efforts to monitor violations during the referendum. This allowed them to provide the society at large with information about women's views, actions, sentiments and leadership roles in the campaign. To broaden outreach, WAFTA members put together a Quilt of Dreams that gathered messages and artistic expressions of solidarity from Costa Rica and around the world. Members engaged with people from all backgrounds traveling the length and breadth of the country and beyond. WAFTA also supported a national concert and organized a special action and awareness day – a round of educational and artistic activities -- that mobilized and energized 650 people the day before the massive national march against CAFTA.

The FTW: Activities and Dynamics: The FT Watch was convened by the WAFTA based on a proposal made by two of its members who also had been original *Petateras* since the first gathering in Panama. The idea for the FTW built on a prior meeting in March of 2007 during a *Petatera* gathering where several Costa Rican women briefed the group on the Agreement and discussed proposed strategies, an exchange that inspired everyone present. But even with that interest, the initial call to participate in the Costa Rican FTWatch didn't have the expected response. Perhaps because traditionally Costa Rica hadn't needed that type of support; perhaps because the regional and international media didn't cover the situation; or perhaps because the call came so late that people found it difficult to adjust their calendars so they could take time to leave their ongoing obligations. Nevertheless, while a bit late, the *Petateras* responded and organized a delegation of 9 self-funded observer-eyewitnesses and some 40 virtual observers, including the Nobel Women Peace Laureates.

Through the FT Watch, several elements were prioritized for observer attention and reflection. These included: resistance strategies used particularly by women, diverse organizational structures linking women with other movements, the innovative nature of their communication strategy, and the development of a feminist program that integrates different agendas and strengthens regional and international ties. All the in-country observers agreed about the importance of having been eye-witnesses to the extraordinary national movement and to the expression of people's awareness and citizen consciousness so evident in the campaign. Similarly they were energized by the opportunity to share their own country's stories about the effects and implications of the treaties in the region.

Impacts: The referendum against the treaty lost to the Yes Campaign by a bare 3% margin. Various reasons have been cited for this defeat: media control, political pressure, blackmail by the US government and embassy, intimidation by big business who threatened to leave the country if the treaty was rejected, and abuses of power by the government who approved the massive use of a fear and smear campaign against the leaders of the No campaign. While citizen efforts to overturn the treaty are currently dispersed and social movements are focused on the immediate demands of their own struggles, the actual experience of building a national movement provided a range of rich lessons. It created a citizen base that can be reactivated in the future and affirmed a flexibility that will allow it to take on different forms to meet the circumstances of the moment. The experience helped underscore the importance of promoting innovative strategies using the arts that bring people together such as the Quilt of Dreams and the radio programs -- approaches that are capable of both uniting people and making visible their diversity and autonomy in a context of respect and creativity.

GUATEMALA FTW- FACT-FINDING MISSION:, MAY 2009

Intentions and Purpose: The basic intentions of the Guatemalan FTW were to a) document and share analysis about the situation of femicide and violence against women and about strategies to overcome it, and b) ensure follow-up actions to strengthen international awareness and solidarity around the issue.

Context: Guatemala experienced a 30 year internal armed conflict that, officially, ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1999. Members of the military and police forces who perpetrated massacres and other violent acts against civilian populations (mostly against indigenous communities, hundreds of villages being wiped off the map during the armed conflict) were never brought to justice. Many of these perpetrators are either still in their official posts or are linked to the growing narco-trafficking and organized crime syndicates. In the aftermath of the Peace Accords, impunity has been pervasive, especially for crimes against women. Instead of diminishing, the actual levels of violence against women and general violence throughout society has steadily increased. In 2008, an estimated 830 women were murdered. This makes Guatemala the country with the highest rate of femicide in the Latin America, competing only with Colombia, a nation still facing a long-standing internal armed conflict.

The FTW: Activities and Dynamics: The Guatemalan *Petateras* put out the call for a FTW to coincide with the Nobel Women's Initiative Conference in Antigua, May 10-12. It was triggered in the wake of the March 25 kidnapping and torture of human rights activist Gladys Monterroso in Guatemala City, the day after her husband, the Human Rights Ombudsman, officially opened the Archives of the National Police. These archives contain critical information about the period of internal armed conflict and the actions of government officials which, if exposed, could be used to hold them accountable.

The international delegation and fact-finding mission consisted of 18 women from Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Spain, the United States and Canada, including activists, journalists, international law specialists, lawyers, and human rights defenders. Activities focused on visits to organizations working on women's and human rights, indigenous women's organizations, and a forum held at the University of San Carlos titled "Everyone United Against Violence". During the mission, delegates gathered information and statistics about violence against women and the impunity that undermines its eradication and increases its scope throughout society. They observed a diversity of struggles and strategies carried out by Guatemalan women and learned about the specific context and demands of indigenous women and processes of joint action amongst different social movements, and witnessed the key role of communications media. All of the visits were documented. The facts and findings gathered were compiled into a mission report, which – due to the sensitivity of the material and considerations for the safety of everyone involved – is still under review and pending dissemination.

Preliminary Findings and Impact: Working directly with the victims, survivors, and actors who fight to eradicate violence is important for reinforcing their voice, leadership, critical analysis, and collective action as well as for establishing and deepening their connections and alliances with other groups and movements. The violence in Guatemala is a structural problem, culturally rooted in inequality, racism, and the absence of state responsibility. No accountability exists that protects human rights or counters the pervasive impunity of war crimes, corruption, increasing poverty, or the dispossession of cultures, land and resources. Drug cartels and their expanding power and impunity further contribute to the violence. The growing criminalization of social movements and attacks on their struggles and leaders, particularly activists and human rights defenders, threaten their ability to operate. Yet, under these adverse and dangerous conditions, women -- their organizations, and the special mechanisms they have created for the promotion of human rights -- continue to show remarkable resilience and ingenuity in the face of violence that increasingly targets women and girls for rape and murder. Impacts are still being assessed but several offer great promise. The FTW and the related activities of the Nobel Women's Conference strengthened the credibility of women's groups involved in the effort, reinforcing relationships with key UN officials. This laid the groundwork for groups to take a leadership role in the November 2009 Latin American launching of the UN campaign "Unite to End Violence against Women" held in Guatemala. It is

anticipated that this participation will increase their legitimacy and visibility both nationally and internationally and open possibilities for further collaboration.

HONDURAS FTW-FACT-FINDING MISSION:, AUGUST 2009

Intentions and Purpose: Initially the intentions were to a) document and publicize Honduran women's strategies and the human rights violations committed against them in the aftermath of the June 28 coup d'état, and b) assess whether women's basic rights could be guaranteed in the current political context. As the process unfolded, other intentions emerged – including advocacy with international agencies and the US government and the establishment of connections with US-based women's rights and human rights groups.

Context: On the morning of June 28, 2009, the democratically elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, was forcibly abducted from his home by the military and, while still in his pajamas, was flown into exile in Costa Rica. This action amounted to a coup d'état, reminiscent of similar coups that happened throughout Latin America in the 1970s and, if unchecked, represented a dangerous precedent for further such illegal actions throughout the region. The coup leaders were mainly right-wing conservative and business elites, allied with certain US interests, who were fearful of the reforms that Zelaya was implementing such as increases in the minimum wage, closer relationships with the ALBA member countries (Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela), and a proposal to hold a referendum on revising the Constitution. They worried that a new Constitutional Assembly might overturn the favorable provisions granted in the current document drafted in the early 1980s under the supervision of the Reagan administration. They were especially worried that the one-term limits on the Honduran presidency would be changed. Large sectors of civil society immediately organized mass mobilizations protesting the coup, demanding that Zelaya be reinstated to his position. As part of the overall peaceful movement for democracy, the *Feminists in Resistance* were formed, demanding a return to constitutional order and democratic institutions, denouncing the illegality of the regime and the subsequent repression by coup forces.

The FTW: Activities and Dynamics In response to a call by Honduran *Petateras* and *Feminists in Resistance*, women from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Canada, and the United States formed a FTW delegation and fact-finding mission as part of an effort called the "Week for Women's Rights in Honduras". Between August 17 and 21, the mission held interviews with European Union and United Nations representatives as well as with other diplomats, donor agencies, local authorities and women's organizations, grassroots groups, human rights defenders, and academics. They accompanied women's groups in public events and exchanged ideas on action approaches. FIRE, in collaboration with other media groups, organized a far-reaching communication strategy that included internet broadcasts and webcasts involving 13 community radio from Latin America, Spain, Australia and the US. Mission findings were compiled in a report by the *Feminist in Resistance* and disseminated. Given the ongoing violations by the regime, the *Petateras* decided to continue their watch efforts on a permanent basis, constantly monitoring the situation and disseminating information. Facilitated by JASS, a delegation of *Feminists in Resistance* visited Washington and brought a new advocacy and alliance-building dimension to the FTW. They provided testimony to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, lobbied law makers and the administration and made connections with women activists and other human rights groups.

Preliminary Findings and Impacts: Women have been subject to rape and other acts of violence as a result of the coup. These include: being clubbed and beaten on various parts of their bodies, especially their chests and buttocks; having their breasts and vaginas groped; and being insulted and verbally

threatened. “Bitches go home and take care of your children.” Violence against women has been increasing as women’s leadership in the resistance to the coup grows. Testimonies given to the FTW have reflected the disturbing sense of fear and insecurity that many women have experienced – an ever present panic that they were about to be attacked and imprisoned. Impacts occurred on multiple levels. Women’s resistance in the face of the takeover was recognized both nationally and internationally as were the levels of violence against them. Delegation findings were included in the new UN campaign to end violence against women and will serve as part of the Honduran shadow report on CEDAW in 2010. Bonds of solidarity were forged both in the region and in the US with the women’s rights and human rights communities. Women resistance leaders gained access to US lawmakers and administration officials and won respect for their work. For JASS in particular, the impacts have been considerable. They include the consolidation of political relationships with key Washington-based players working on rights; increased legitimacy as a global advocate; expanded knowledge within the JASS team about Congress, OAS, and State Department; establishment of relationships with relevant members of those institutions; improved teamwork in coordinating logistics, doing fast-paced media and political work, and, finally, learning and having fun with colleagues from Honduras which inspires, energizes and deepens commitment.

III. INITIAL LESSONS, INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

This section provides a partial look at the preliminary insights and reflections on two major themes: movement-building and questions emerging from the Petateras process and the FTW work. For the remaining rich discussion of lessons and insights generated by the cases, please see Annex I.

Formation and Consolidation of Collective Power

The development of the *Petateras* who gave birth to the Watch strategy provides insights about what factors contribute to movement building processes aimed at challenging and transforming power. Our experience has shown that in order to develop collaborative relationships and comprehensive holistic strategies, a careful analysis of both contextual forces and the dynamics of power is needed, one that examines both their visible and invisible aspects. In addition, a willingness to take on the challenge of personal power and transformation is crucial to affirming individual wholeness and integrity and, in turn, to building inclusive forms of collective power. Recuperating the use of artistic expression that awakens people’s imagination and spirituality¹⁷ is key since it promotes connections between individuals that resonate and strengthen bonds, especially when done in conjunction with the development of a shared dream and vision of society. Similarly important is the establishment of a climate of safety, respect, and trust that allows for frank creative discussions and the surfacing of conflict, combining a willingness to be reflective and self-critical with an ability to provide constructive analysis and critique in a loving, supportive fashion. These elements have been a constant since the first gathering. In the case of the *Petateras*, the fact that previous to the Panama meeting several of the participants and facilitators had collaborated with one another for many years on education and feminist organizing efforts and had developed high levels of political trust and friendship were significant factors that contributed to the formation and consolidation of the group. All these elements, together with a compelling desire to find new ways of interacting and challenging power, helped facilitate more open relationships, more flexible and participatory methodologies, and the possibility of confronting and overcoming differences. However, it is also important to underscore that enormous amounts of time are required to understand and negotiate differences, a situation that is very difficult to manage with the heavy workloads of activists and becomes even more challenging when working across different languages.

¹⁷ The deep and magical connections between people and with nature that unite and inspire.

Through this process, the *Petateras* reached a common overall analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their political strategies and practices. They saw that the increasing power of patriarchy, has led to the unraveling of the social fabric and a growing loss of rights that had been won through long and hard struggles over time. These elements and others have contributed to the fact that the *Petatera* gatherings have resulted in the development of concrete action strategies such as the Feminist Transformation Watch and new groupings such as the *Petateras*, so necessary in today's world especially with the rise in the fundamentalist offensives against women and their rights. After three years of such gatherings and activities, the spirit, connections and relationships continue to build for multiple reasons. Among these are: the urgent need for answers to ever more complex and interrelated problems at national, regional and international levels; the enrichment of political approaches and practices through the group's reflections, outreach and learning processes sponsored by the *Petateras*, FIRE and JASS; the communication and facilitation approaches and climate of openness, reciprocity and trust they generate; the willingness to combine resources and volunteer support; and the enthusiasm for an initiative with a feminist focus that integrates the multiple dimensions and dreams of life. All these factors have strengthened the commitment and desire to protect this special space and opportunity. Despite these achievements, certain problems have complicated the effective management of this constantly evolving process, which in and of itself is complex. These include: difficulties in communication, decision making, accommodating different rhythms and demands of work, as well as in clarifying expectations, roles and identities. The desire to recognize, affirm and weave together the diverse personal, professional, political and organizational identities and develop a creative synergy out of them remains challenging and, at the same time, inspiring.

Pending Challenges and Questions

To date, the *Petatera* process and the FT Watches raise a wide range of challenges and questions. These can be categorized under three interrelated, overlapping categories: collective power, strategy development, and knowledge generation.

Collective Power

- Even though many activists share an overall analysis of power, in practice there have been divisions between them regarding what range of strategies is needed both to transform the system and their own individual and collective practice. This has produced conflicts and tensions between feminists in their movements and their relationships of trust with each other. How can these dynamics be addressed, dynamics that are inevitable as groups work to develop collective power and more inclusive leadership?
- How can broader audiences be reached and involved in order to increase and strengthen women's movements and power? How can the richness of feminism and women's reflections on their own transformation efforts be conveyed and communicated so that new generations become inspired and engaged ?
- The results of the FT Watch experiences have not been shared directly with the women carrying out the local actions, thus weakening the possibility of reciprocal learning and of enriching these processes.
- Without a strategy that emphasizes the need for broader inclusion in the FT Watch process, the *Petateras'* ability to build alliances has been shaped by the local organization's policies. The exception has been in the case of virtual Watches and communication efforts where the media groups tap their own contacts and alliances in the countries in which the Watches are being held.
- The role that JASS plays in the *Petatera* process has not been fully clarified nor has the process for inviting and incorporating new *Petateras*. In some ways this has prevented the group from growing very much beyond the initial women who developed the FTW idea.

- How do we reach beyond women who identify themselves as feminists to an ever broader population of women?
- Are we fully involving marginalized women and highlighting their struggles and actions? Where is the line between national autonomy in organizing and decision-making and the overarching commitment to include multiple voices and ensure that barriers of class, race, etc are truly bridged?

Strategies

- Despite the ability to join forces and form alliances in certain moments of urgency and crisis, afterwards the alliances dissolve and there is no long-term vision or accompanying strategies. How can this reality be addressed?
- Alliances with alternative media groups have strengthened the FT Watch communication strategy enormously, but the Watches have not been able to gain coverage in the mass media outlets that have a wider audience. What are the implications of this on our impact and visibility?
- Even though the international outreach has been very significant, there is a need to have a clear strategy to reach beyond the current feminist networks and media groups so broader outreach can be ensured.
- The FT Watches have not been able to provide follow-up to all the efforts that they have supported which has limited their ability to observe the ongoing dynamics of the processes and continue strengthening them in a consistent manner.
- During the last decades, women have focused their efforts almost exclusively on political participation and advocacy with government, parties and other visible powers to the detriment and disregard in many cases of organizing, leadership development, consciousness-raising and internal conflict resolution. In order to transform the powers of patriarchy, a diverse mix of strategies is needed to address the different expressions of power, from its more visible manifestations to the invisible ones that govern behind the throne, hidden from view, and that shape cultures and worldviews that reinforce superiority and subordination.

Knowledge Generation

- The worldviews and attitudes promoted by patriarchy are some of the principal forms of power that must be challenged. In order to transform and free people from such colonized mindsets, a greater understanding of these power dynamics is needed as well as an appreciation of the strategies that can address them.
- Similarly, how women develop, grow and transform themselves personally as feminists is a component of challenging and transforming power that has not been fully analyzed or shared yet, despite its importance. How do concepts and practices from feminist popular education strengthen these empowerment processes?
- Given the inevitable tensions and conflicts that groups face within their organizations, what lessons, insights and knowledge can be gained from women's own experience, that of other movements as well as from academic research so we can overcome these dynamics?
- A clear feminist perspective and analysis of the nature of States in the region has been lacking and requires more attention and in-depth study. This has often led to a characterization of the State similar to that of other progressive movements who do not have a feminist perspective and results in strategies that don't fully address problems of patriarchy. Similarly when long-term visions or strategies are not developed, reactive approaches aimed at the short-term becomes the norm, hampering the possibilities of promoting effective change.

APPENDIX I:

Appendix I contains further insights, lessons and reflections from Section III of the original paper that were omitted from the Amsterdam document to lighten the already heavy reading load of participants.

The Need for a New Paradigm¹⁸

As *Petateras* and other activists analyze the interrelated dynamics of patriarchy and power in the context of feminist struggles, they have begun to question some elements of their own strategies and look more deeply at how this overarching paradigm must be addressed on a variety of levels. For example, experience has shown that a so-called separate women's agenda does not really exist as such. Women's rights are not an isolated issue of exclusive concern to them nor do their rights play out solely within the arena of State institutions. Rather, women's rights relate to the entire context of life and relationships, interwoven with the multiple dimensions of women's existence and action, inseparable and connected with other dimensions of society and struggles for justice. Their experience reinforces the need to develop a new paradigm founded on a reconceptualization and reimagination of peace, democracy and the social fabric. This implies a reformulation of strategies in ways that tackle the root, often invisible, causes of problems, such as the web of patriarchy which works quietly and insidiously on the mind shaping people's consciousness, attitudes, worldviews, behaviors and relationships.

In order to envision a new paradigm, these problems and dynamics must be examined. For example, under a capitalist patriarchal State, tackling violence against women requires a more comprehensive view of peace that builds on feminist perspectives. For there cannot be peace, if half the population is submitted to violence and if the perpetrators of that violence can act with impunity solely because of their gender. When the overall peace of a society is threatened as is the case in Mesoamerica by neo-liberalism, women need to develop an integrated agenda that unites feminists as well as builds bridges with other women and groups across society to defend rights more broadly. Similarly the feminization of poverty is not an isolated women's issue. Rather it is a product of a capitalist patriarchal system that impoverishes the majority of women and their families while 'others' control, dominate and divide the world into dichotomies in order to guarantee their policies of exclusion, exploitation and subordination.

Nor is women's political participation or equal opportunity a separate issue since there can be no democracy or respect for rights, if half of society cannot hold public office or political positions, simply because they are women. The fact that democracies have been kidnapped and undermined by corruption and authoritarianism underscores the need to see these issues in relation to one another. The State and its institutions currently do not reflect democratic practice or ethics neither in their electoral processes, their mechanisms of citizen participation, nor in their judicial systems. This situation restricts the role of government to one of control -- keeping social conflict and people's struggles for justice in check. Consequently, the struggle for political participation, among other things, involves rescuing and reimagining the democratic process and its institutions.

A concern of all humanity, this analysis highlights the urgency of transforming patriarchy and its belief system, for without such changes, its power and institutions will continue to threaten people of today and tomorrow, and even nature itself. This paradigm operates on the mind and psyche, often invisibly, functioning without people's awareness. It shapes their views about the world and leaves them

¹⁸ This point was further developed in an interview with Maria Suarez.

vulnerable to manipulation and control. As a result they internalize the fundamental convictions and inequalities of patriarchy that reinforce people's ideas about what is normal and accepted in society and, therefore, not open to challenge such as who is superior or inferior, who is rich or poor. That is why questions of paradigm and worldview must be part of everything that the women's movements and feminists undertake in their struggles. Efforts must go far beyond a demand for rights to strategies of critical thinking and personal reflection. Undoing this tangled web of patriarchy requires a rethinking of how people live and interact with other beings, with nature and with the earth herself. To create this life-affirming new paradigm, we face the challenge of building visions and strategies that reflect and promote an ethical and ecological practice of solidarity, equality, respect and collaboration.

New Meanings: State, Democracy and Democratic Institutions

The FT Watches provide us insights about how these feminist change strategies involve a redefinition of the meaning and character of the State and democracy. Their experiences reveal that, while the State and its institutions have the basic responsibility for protecting human rights and the common good, they have been captured and co-opted by those in power. These forces include corporations and alliances and political pacts between parties that protect large business interests and corrupt politicians. These dynamics can be seen in examples of electoral fraud, increasing State powers concentrated in the office of the president, and the consolidation of corporate media. All these factors have led to the erosion of already limited spaces of citizen participation and to the dismantling of the social fabric and worldviews that sustain and nurture healthy and vibrant social and political relationships. Feminists pose the crucial need to redefine and give new meaning to these State institutions. This becomes a greater imperative in the face of neoliberal forces who advocate for a smaller State devoid of power to regulate the markets or defend the rights of marginalized groups such as workers, women and indigenous communities. These forces work to reinforce their narrow worldviews about small government and the primacy of the free market as a way to control debate and quell potential resistance. Paradoxically, they try to act as if the State does not exist, undermining its power, yet using that power to push its own economic model and repressive policies, many of which are misogynous as seen in Nicaragua and Mexico.

Feminist ideas and actions call for recovering the institutional framework and practice of democracy, rebuilding them on a feminist-ecological-ethical foundation as the basis for the development of a new State. They also call for creating a new social fabric woven with threads of equality and respect for human rights and the earth itself to support these life-affirming relationships. Yet currently, the State is a principal contributor to its own decline and to the increasing concentration of power in the hands of large corporations and the private sector. Feminists are working to rebuild democratic institutions, practices and visions of society within this context and complexity of power, a complexity that includes not only addressing easily visible forms of power but those that operate behind the scenes, controlling and manipulating people's worldviews and consciousness. In order to effectively challenge and transform this complex web of power, a broad range of approaches and comprehensive strategies are required, capable of confronting the multiple complications and contradictions presented by the situation.

A New Social Fabric: Transformative and Comprehensive Visions and Actions

One of the lessons emerging from the FTWatch and *Petatera* process has to do with the nature of the demands, ideas and approaches being advanced by feminists. They want to create transformative strategies in accordance with holistic visions of change that integrate an analysis of the social fabric and power into their actions. It's important to underscore that these approaches and strategies have emerged in contexts of authoritarianism and State violence where that fabric is being dismantled. A central element of these acts of defiance and resistance is that they challenge and question power and the established order in all its dimensions from the visible to the invisible -- whether governmental pacts,

behind the scenes deals, fundamentalist worldviews, right-wing conservative forces or transnational corporations. While sharpening the contradictions in society, these forces weaken the development of an institutional framework and political culture that can nurture a sense of community and common good so vital for the fulfillment of human rights. In the face of these dynamics and the power that sustains them, a wide range of actions are required to effectively overcome their consequences.

In all the *Petatera* experiences, some commonalities are found in this search for transformative approaches: a dream of a just world and healthy planet, an ethical-political foundation based on feminist principles, and the intention to contribute to the development of a new social fabric. This new weave of relations transcends the power negotiations of patriarchal politics and instead attempts to renew life-affirming connections, giving new meaning to our place on earth, our sense of wholeness and integrity, and our ability to live in harmony with all the earth's diverse expressions of life. It affirms a feminist eco-consciousness that reflects the fundamental interdependence between humanity and nature and challenges the self-destructive tendencies of our species. The ideas and activities developed by the *Petateras* are aimed at issues that question the entirety of politics, including social and ecological relationships and not just exclusively those related to women's rights. As seen in the FTW, these actions are not implemented in isolation but rather in collaboration with social movements, from local settings to global arenas, and are always aimed at ensuring the autonomy and integrity of people and organizations committed to social justice.

Women as Political Protagonists: Interactive Autonomy¹⁹ and Feminist Consciousness

Another lesson emerging from the experiences involves the importance of women's participation and their political role in society. This protagonist role, based on autonomy, interdependence, critical consciousness and feminist ethics and principles, is not developed in isolation but rather formed in relationships and interactions with others. In the Watch experiences this interaction is seen in situations where women exercise their activist role first within women's groups and then with people from other social movements, all evolving within very complex scenarios. This autonomy and ethical-critical consciousness leads women to resist and challenge power in ways that contribute and give new meaning to the concept of social fabric and the dynamics of change. For this reason, the feminist idea of interactive autonomy needs to be underscored. These are processes that affirm an individual's integrity and independence yet recognize that each person's autonomy interacts and is connected with others. As such, it is not based on isolation, marginalization or sectarianism but rather on a strong weave of diverse social relations and connections that motivate people to grow personally and to act with respect and mutual dignity. These processes support people in many ways – in the strengthening of their knowledge, synergy, self-esteem, creativity, leadership and social movements. They help contribute to increased activism, more dynamic inclusive leaders, greater levels of trust, critical thinking, feminist consciousness, and the recognition that all human interactions involve moments of difference and conflict. After all, one of the greatest ongoing challenges for activists is how to deal with the tensions and controversies that inevitably arise from their political work. And how to develop more effective, responsive and powerful forms of leadership and organization that reflect the values and ethical practices of feminism.

Weaving with Each Other and Beyond: Building Alliances

The FTWatches have allowed the *Petateras* to observe and analyze their own interactions as they come together in these efforts. As such, the reflections on their own personal behavior and attitudes in the ongoing development of this collective initiative have been vital. Similarly important has been the search

¹⁹ A concept developed by Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) through its work since 1991 in order to describe the interactive nature of people's autonomy, the fact that an individual's independence is connected and interacts with that of others.

for more holistic approaches that challenge the way patriarchy uses power and dichotomies to reinforce inequality and women's subordination. These reflections on the part of *Petateras* enhance and further their efforts to build solidarity, commitment, excitement and energy. The experience of negotiating with each other to plan and organize the Watch experiences also helped them interact and link forces with others in the process. These interactions and negotiations were carried out in the spirit of building alliances capable of creating a new practice and paradigm of equality and justice. Such collective efforts inevitably depend on responding to women's multiple needs and highlighting the diversity of their roles as activists and advocates.

An example of these dynamics was seen in Nicaragua. The regional *Petateras* negotiated with the Nicaraguan *Petateras* from MAM to provide space during the FTW for other voices from the women's movement who were not necessarily in agreement with MAM's participation in the elections. This showed the capacity among *Petateras* to recognize their multiple needs and perspectives and to find ways of negotiating with one another so they could strike a balance between their positions. This happened in a variety of the FTW and *Petatera* experiences where women negotiated differences in new ways. Instead of avoiding, hiding or denying conflict, they addressed their differences openly by putting their needs and interests on the table for discussion.

The need for further understanding and strengthening strategies that bring and keep people together is reaffirmed in all the experiences. Strategies need to respect autonomy while promoting a new practice and appreciation of what it means to connect across diverse groups. What is clear is that the more alliances are strengthened and the more women's activism and autonomy are acknowledged, the greater the impact of their actions on challenging power. Yet we need to recognize that women not only confront the fact that State powers are closing down opportunities for citizen action but that social movements find it difficult to accept women in leadership positions.

FTW experiences, both virtual and in situ, have supported the development of an independent space in which feminists of different movements and political perspectives come together. They have given visibility to women's individual experiences and roles as activists and to the diversity of their ideological positions and strategies. These experiences also have revealed some of the knots and tensions implicit in the development of alliances and processes of interactive autonomy.

- Within certain social movements, women's demands are seen as only women's issues and as efforts that divert and dilute the demands and actions of the movement itself, since according to their perspective, the latter are the more far-reaching and important.
- When feminist contributions to knowledge are considered abstract and made up of indecipherable terms and codes, their ability to enrich the political actions of women's movements and those of other social movements is jeopardized.
- Among women themselves, there are difficulties in negotiating power across different feminist positions and between women's movements and feminists. Differences are found at a variety of levels – from how issues are defined to what strategies are implemented.
- Challenges occur when women repeat and reproduce leadership styles, language, and ways of exercising of power that reinforce authoritarian positions and dynamics that are not democratic.

The *Petatera* Approach and the FTW: Foundations and Glocal Communication

The *Petatera's* approach is grounded in a feminist epistemology, principles, and political analysis. Evident in its evolving methodology, this integrated vision has generated the FTWatches and, at the same time, enriched those that have been held. It connects and draws on practice and theory to generate knowledge

and action. It is flexible and promotes the recovery, recording and strengthening of women's voices. Carried out through autonomous initiatives, it seeks to enhance them through efforts of accompaniment and solidarity. By reflecting feminist perspectives, the approach serves to strengthen their visibility as political actors in society as well as their collective power.

The *Petatera* approach has led to strategies that combine local, regional and global elements, with all actions therefore assuming a *glocal*²⁰ dimension. Accordingly, the *Petatera* communication efforts have played a crucial role in weaving together a local and national perspective with an international one. The case studies of the FTW experiences (virtual and in situ) have reflected this dynamic to a great extent. By connecting and communicating with other countries and winning the solidarity of other feminists from the region and beyond, the FTW actions have been able to link experiences and transcend borders. These connections and solidarity, in turn, have enhanced women's efforts to challenge and transform power. The communication strategy has also allowed them to exercise their human right to free expression and communication, strengthening their own autonomous forms of independent expression and the documentation of their social transformation experiences.

The FTW: Resonance, Outreach and Innovation

FTWatches, whether virtual or in situ, promote a greater awareness of the efforts by feminists and civil society to challenge and transform power. In each FTW, the particular realities of that context are discussed and analyzed which allows feminists to share their knowledge and wisdom about what is happening and provides opportunities for resonance – for others to appreciate the connections to their own situations. In this way, women's testimonies about their efforts to resist and transform power are gathered, shared, and publicized, serving to inspire and challenge other women with similar concerns to act. Women also share their innovative strategies -- some where art and politics have been joined in approaches to resist authoritarian power and policies. These include the Quilt of Dreams and the action day organized by the Costa Rican group, Women Against the Free Trade Treaty, as well as the festive peaceful occupation of Oaxacan streets during the Women in Resistance gathering by people playing music and dancing. The richness of these experiences is shared with a broader audience through the *Petatera* radio program on FIRE and the *Petatera* bulletin. Each one of these processes emerging from the *Petatera* experience gives rise to insights that enrich feminist epistemology and lead to further more systematic reflection and learning that can be shared with other feminists, women's movements and broader social movements in the region and around the world. In this way, international opportunities for expression and connection have been opened up not only for specific struggles but for supporting analysis and feminist initiatives in these contexts.

The FTW: Follow-up Actions

In order to deepen the work of the FT Watches and provide follow-up to women in dangerous and critical moments, a new category of Watches has evolved. A Permanent Watch is declared when feminists are threatened because of their challenges to power as is the case of Nicaragua. Virtual expressions of solidarity have also been developed to accompany feminist actions. In particularly risky and precarious times, *Petateras* issue alerts via the internet calling for support and publicity as a way to protect them and gain coverage for their stories and transformation efforts.

²⁰ Term that refers to combining efforts on local, national and global levels.

