

Mesoamerican Feminists Share Views for New Administration's Latin-American Policy



Washington, D.C., January 26, 2009

“Democracy in Mesoamerica cannot be understood without taking into account the situation and the role of women. While women bear the brunt of poverty and discrimination, they are also at the forefront of the struggle for human rights and participatory democracy. This fact is given less visibility, but look at the Mexican women in the Atenco land rights struggle, and in Oaxaca, where women in the Teacher’s Union and in other organizations have resisted state repression and corruption, and have demanded accountability by local governments about unjust imprisonment and assassination,” explained Marusia Lopez, Mexican women’s rights activist, in a recent meeting in Washington, DC, co-convened by JASS, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), and The Nobel Women’s Initiative (1).

Four feminist activists and scholars from Mesoamerica gathered with advocates, researchers, and representatives from 35 U.S.-based organizations, embassies, and universities concerned with US policy in Latin America. The speakers and audience shared perspectives and proposals regarding “A New U.S. Administration, A New Agenda for Latin America: Women’s Perspectives on Re-invigorating Democracy, Human Rights and Economic Stability.” The speakers were:

Marusia López Cruz, who has worked with a variety of

NGOs and social movements in Mesoamerica, (including Elige, a leading youth organization, and Consorcio para el Dialogo Interparlamentario, a powerful women’s organization bridging MPs and social movements.). Cruz works with JASS Mesoamerica to coordinate and facilitate the JASS/Petateras alliance initiative.

Patricia Ardon, a Guatemalan feminist, has been a leader in development and human rights work for 30 years, including serving as Oxfam GB’s regional representative. She is the Founding Director of Sinergia N’oj (which provides leadership training to indigenous women and social movements) and is a founding member of JASS. During the last 10 years, Ardon’s work has focused on conflict transformation and negotiation, organizational development and women’s rights.

Roxana Arroyo, a Costa Rican lawyer and long-time human rights advocate, holds a doctorate in human rights from the Universidad Carlos III in Madrid, Spain, and is a permanent consultant to the Women, Justice and Gender Program of the United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (ILANUD). Arroyo is also a visiting professor at numerous universities and a key activist in the communications strategy of the Petateras with JASS.

Maria Suarez is a highly respected Costa Rican journalist and long-time women’s human rights communication activist. A key leader in the “Women’s No Campaign to Stop the Ratification of CAFTA” in her country, she is widely known for her work as the co-director of FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavor), which has covered global and regional events for over 20 years. Suarez spent many years as a human rights activist and literacy teacher in Central America, and recently published the critically acclaimed Women, Metamorphosis and the Butterfly Effect (Farben/Norma 2007), and a theater production of it which has circulated internationally.

As Latin America faces a multitude of crises - from drug trafficking and deepening inequality, to widespread poverty and internal conflict - women’s groups are offering new voices and solutions to rebuild a tattered social fabric that threatens both

1. JASS (Just Associates) is a global network of activists, educators, communicators and scholars in 25 countries committed to strengthening the voice, visibility and collective organizing power of women to create a just world. WOLA is a nonprofit policy, research, and advocacy organization working to advance democracy, human rights, and social and economic justice in U.S. policy towards Latin America. The Nobel Women’s Initiative was established in 2006 by sister Nobel Peace Laureates Jody Williams, Shirin Ebadi, Wangari Maathai, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire bring together their experiences in a united effort for peace with justice and equality by supporting the work of women worldwide.

community and regional stability. The question of how the new Obama administration would influence these efforts is on advocates' minds across the Americas. These renowned speakers provided fresh insights about the current state of affairs and discussed their strategies for increasing US support in their efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and social justice in the Americas.



Emphasizing the vital role of women in promoting democracy, Marusia Lopez highlighted the case of the recent civic struggle against the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in Costa Rica, where women-led organizations were at all levels of resistance. She pointed out that a new US agenda for the region has to recognize the impact of neoliberal policies, the proliferation and political influence of religious fundamentalism, and the need to address women's sexual and reproductive rights. "Our countries are far from achieving equality. On the contrary, inequality and discrimination is breaking apart the society into deeper and extended forms of violence, drug abuse and dealing and persecution, as is seen in the cases of Nicaragua, El Salvador and all of the countries in the region."

just a legal issue but also requires the pressure generated by an organized civil society to hold everyone accountable to human rights... the sustainability of democracy must be based on human rights." She added that in the case of Guatemala, policies that take ethnic diversity into account are necessary. "In my country, Mayan indigenous people, at this point, know who the President of the United States is, but do not necessarily know who the President of Guatemala is! That does not speak well for democratic participation,"



Maria Suárez Toro of FIRE commented about President Obama's reversal of the "Global Gag Rule" – which was previously a major obstacle to women's reproductive health programs outside the US. Under the Global Gag Rule, US forbade the direction of subsidies to any foreign healthcare organization that provided abortion services, information, or legalization advocacy, even if the countries generally supported these activities through non-U.S. funding. In Latin America more than 95% of abortions are carried out in unsafe circumstances. The criminalization of abortion is what leads to botched abortions which remain one of the leading causes of pregnancy-related death around the world, taking the lives of nearly 70,000 women per year. Looking at the policy historically, Suarez indicated that the Global Gag Rule was first imposed by President Reagan, was then overturned by President Clinton, then reinstated by President Bush and now, again, repealed by President Obama. Maria suggested that "we must work together on gathering information to persuade decision-makers to stop these 'ping-pong policies,' where legislation gets passed and then taken away with each new administration. We can learn from what feminists, women's movements, and other social movements have done about this issue in Mexico City for example. Finally this year, as a result of lots of pressure, negotiation and bridge-building between political parties, government, social movements, feminist movements, and international solidarity, they have been able to put, for the first time in the history of Latin America, reproductive and sexual rights into the constitution of the government of Mexico City. So, no matter what US foreign policy says, Mexico already has its own law on this matter. Women are no longer at the whims of a ping pong policy."

"One of the big challenges is getting the Obama administration interested in Latin America as a region. The Bush administration put it on the backburner. The security crisis in Mexico is what is most emphasized currently. Obama, at least in his campaign discourse, did mention the need to focus on renegotiating NAFTA, labor rights, environmental and economic rights. You can't just look at solving things through free trade but we need a more integral policy for supporting economic development. There is considerable expectation to see more movement toward liberal policies in the new administration."
Maureen Meyer, WOLA.

When probed about the impact of the new law against femicide in Guatemala, Patricia Ardon described how, to this day, the Guatemalan government has adjudicated very few of the most recent 300 cases. Femicide escalates on a daily basis. Ardon clarified that, "laws are never enough because justice is not

“The good news is that the administration is putting human rights back at the center of its foreign policy. But one of the continuing challenges for this region is the historic US insistence on separating political rights from economic rights. The various free trade agreements and other aspects of neoliberal policies over the last decade have created such a complex situation of poverty, insecurity and violence, fueling immigration – that will not be addressed by a human rights agenda that only focuses on political rights. How can we push a more integrated human rights agenda with an administration that seems willing?”

Lisa Veneklasen, JASS Executive Director.

In response to questions from the audience about economic alternatives for the region, particularly given this US economic crisis and its global impact, Suarez commented that there are no shortages of scholarly and practical alternatives. Her comments were summarized by Rachel Reidner from GW University who attended the event, “Suarez ... calls rain harvesting and urban community gardens examples of ‘survival’ or ‘care economies’ where women improvise, share, generate, develop relationships, draw upon old and new knowledge, to sustain themselves and their families. Women create survival economies in the face of increasing economic inequality and impoverishment and food insecurity. Survival economies are built on women’s relationships with each other, within communities, and are tied, but not directly, to formal economy or formal market systems. Home gardens and rainwater collection do not involve wages or profits, but benefit directly women and their families and members of the community. A better term might be women’s survival economies: alternative economic systems where women create ways to survive that are not directly part of market economies, but evolve in response to economic pressures from neoliberalism.” (<http://www.womeninandbeyond.org>)



When audience members at the gathering requested recommendations for a common human rights agenda for US – Latin American relations, the Mesoamerican speakers proposed

three priorities: 1) support for social and economic rights that address the de-feminization of poverty and improve political and civil rights; 2) strategies and resources to address all forms of violence against women including declared and undeclared wars against women; peace and security; and recognition of the centrality of women’s contributions to peace efforts 3) a new economic framework that surpasses our current understanding, but continues building on the experience and frameworks of women and indigenous communities that live by alternative paradigms.

Participants at the event included representatives from a variety of organizations and institutions, including UNAIDS, Global AIDS Alliance, Women Thrive Worldwide, Embassy of Mexico, George Washington University’s Women’s Studies Department, Amnesty International, USAID, CARE, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), US Department of State, Center of Concern, Population Action International, and many others.

“We must come together and build citizen and women’s movements across all boundaries, just as this election has shown is possible.”

Maria Suarez, FIRE.

For more information

WOLA at www.wola.org

Petateras at www.petateras.org

Just Associates at www.justassociates.org

Feminist International Radio Endeavour at

www.fire.or.cr

Nobel Women’s Initiative at

www.nobelwomensinitiative.org