

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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One Standard of Dignity

The position of women in a society provides an exact measure of the development of that society.

Gustav Geiger

Ten years ago, in a program called *Women Working for Change*, Inter Pares invited six women activists to come to Canada to share with Canadian women the work for change that they were undertaking in their countries. For five weeks the women travelled to the west, to the north and to the east, meeting with groups in towns and cities across the country to exchange ideas about women's struggles and their visions for the future.

Towards the end of their time here, one of our visitors, Farida Akhter, commented that like her sisters in Bangladesh, "women in Canada are fighting against discrimination in wages, against violence, against inequality in the social and economic position of women. But I have noticed that often they are not able to link all of these struggles from a singular perspective of social change." Farida concluded, "We must pose the question: what next? What is it that we are fighting for?"

In the years since Farida's visit, we have begun to shape an answer to her question: what we seek is, simply, one common standard of dignity for all, regardless of gender.

One of the greatest obstacles to this objective is that women throughout history have been seen not as one with men, sharing a common humanity, but rather as separate and distinct – as *other*. This belief that women are a category apart, with an "essence" different from men, is expressed in a multitude of social norms and prejudices that underlie the oppression that

women experience daily in their lives.

Women around the world share common experiences of discrimination and injustice. They are the poorest of the poor world wide. Women in all parts of the world still bear the brunt of deeply rooted sexual discrimination, which is manifested in constraints on their freedom and dignity and in pervasive violence, including rape and mutilation. In struggling for one common standard of dignity for all, we are seeking to put an end to that discrimination and injustice.

But we are also struggling for recognition of each woman's individuality, of her potential as an autonomous person to act and to make a difference in her life and in the world – as one who shares in a common humanity.

Our own experience with colleagues in Canada and in other countries has revealed the incredible potential and rich diversity of women working for change. The world is a better place today precisely where women are able to participate more fully in the social, economic and political life of their communities.

In many places in the world, young girls today dare to expect more from their lives and from the world than their mothers did. They can expect more today because so many women before them struggled to bring about change. These women risked their security and even their lives to transform the personal, economic and political relationships between women



Faris Amhed

and men in their families, their communities and in the world. They committed the myriad of courageous acts that together challenge and change conventional wisdom, and reveal new possibilities for women, and for men.

This *Bulletin* relates some experiences of people, women and men, who struggle together to promote one common standard of dignity for all. We present the work of people who affirm in their daily lives and in community activism what can happen when the diversity of women's voices is heard, and when women have access to resources, power to make decisions, and greater control over the fate of their lives and their communities.

Authors of Their Own Lives



Conrado de la Cruz

On Sundays in Guatemala City, the central park is filled with indigenous girls and young women, sitting under the trees or strolling in pairs along the walkways. Most of these girls, some as young as 10, work as domestic labourers or as piece-workers in the maquila factories that surround Guatemala City. They face daily discrimination for their indigenous language and dress, and are routinely paid far less than men. For many, this Sunday in the park is the one day in the month they can just be girls amongst other girls who accept them as friends and companions.

Because many lack a command of Spanish, the young people find it difficult to defend themselves against demands by their employers. Few are

aware of their rights as workers. While many welcome maquila work – which is better-paid than domestic labour – working conditions are often dangerous, and labour laws are routinely broken.

The community organization *Conrado de la Cruz* assists these young workers and their families. The *Conrado* team consists of young Mayan women who once worked in the maquilas or as domestic labourers themselves. They know the isolation and fear that comes from being young and working in an unfamiliar language, and in a hostile culture.

The *Conrado* team visits the central park on Sundays to make contact with young and vulnerable new arrivals, and to talk with them about labour rights so that they can protect themselves from abuse and exploitation. Aura Dionisio, a member of the team, emphasizes the deep love and compassion the young people have for one another. *Conrado's*

work, Aura tells us, is to support this compassion, to “humanize” the urban experience of these girls, and to assist them to find ways to transform their lives, through human and labour rights protection, and through alternative education. “The young people themselves can make decisions about their lives – but because they learn early to devalue themselves as girls, and face discrimination as indigenous people, they need to re-learn to value themselves as people with rights and abilities.”

Conrado helps the young people with these challenges, offering them an opportunity to come together to discuss their problems and interests, to go on outings, and to learn about their rights as workers, as indigenous people, as women. They provide literacy classes, and education on health and nutrition. They talk about the right of girls to education, and facilitate the girls' attendance in schools that provide classes on Sundays, talking to employers or parents

if they object. With an eye to the future, the *Conrado* team also trains young people as “animators” to take on leadership roles in the group. Already the animators teach most of the literacy classes, and some are leading workshops of their peers in labour and indigenous rights.

The *Conrado* team recognizes the difficulties that face them and the young workers. But, they assert, while indigenous girls and women in Guatemala struggle for their rights as workers, as women and as indigenous people, the most fundamental struggle is for the right to be actors and authors of their own lives.



The rights and safety of women working in maquila factories has become a major international issue. Maquila factories assemble export products such as toys, clothing, shoes and auto parts. They are located in “free trade” zones – which are usually exempt from local labour, safety and environmen-

tal standards, and receive special tax breaks. Between 70-90% of the workers in maquilas are girls and young women.

The Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) consists of over 400 individuals and community, labour, and women's groups across Canada, and works with similar groups in Latin America and Asia to raise standards and improve working conditions in maquilas. With the Labour Behind the Label Coalition, MSN has published the *Wear Fair Action Kit*, with information on working conditions in the global clothing industry, and suggestions for how consumers and activists can make a difference. Available in English and Spanish. \$6.50 including postage, bulk rates available. For your copy, contact:

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Women at the Centre

In Africa, agriculture is the most important economic sector, accounting for 30 to 60% of the gross domestic product of most countries. African women do over 80% of the labour for food production. Women also do almost all the harvesting and processing for home consumption, and carry the water and wood for the household. Food produce is marketed mainly by women; in West Africa, 80% of small-scale trading in local markets is done by women.

Yet for decades, national governments, and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, have implemented policies that ignore and undermine women's central role in production and reproduction. Numerous studies have demonstrated that promoting economic growth based on increasing exports and cash crops further displaces and marginalizes women who do not participate in this kind of work, or participate only as unpaid family labour. Indicators used by the World Bank to assess the impact of national policies on economic growth do not take into account the effects on women, especially poor women. To respond to poor rural women's needs, policy priorities would have to include labour-saving devices for women at the household level, transformation of land tenure to ensure women have control over agricultural resources, and marketing strategies to assist women traders.

Throughout Africa, more and more organizations are challenging World Bank economic prescriptions, and their own national governments, to make visible the contribution of women in development and to address women's



Bruce Paton

increasing marginalization. The African secretariat of Third World Network (TWN) is one of these organizations. TWN actively promotes social justice, which implies placing equity between women and men at the heart of its research, networking and advocacy, and making women's participation a central theme of its work.

In keeping with this principle, TWN has undertaken a critical analysis of the World Bank's gender policy. TWN argues that while the World Bank claims to integrate gender concerns into its policies, in countries where the Bank has intervened the number of women living in poverty has increased disproportionately, even in countries of high economic growth. As Sarah Ocran of TWN says: "Clearly, the Bank ... sees women

as a means to an end: efficiency and economic growth."

In addition to keeping a critical eye on the World Bank's interventions, TWN is also studying women's informal cross-border trade in Africa. TWN will examine whether formal recognition and support of these important trading relations might play a role in addressing the negative effects of the artificial economic divisions that Africa still experiences as a colonial legacy.

TWN uses its research and networking capacity to help women's organizations and advocacy groups in Africa challenge the barriers to the economic participation of women. These policy activists know that economic justice can be achieved only when women are recognized and supported in the central role they play in development.

What About Men?

Inter Pares supports women to make their lives and work visible, and to empower them in their role as leaders and as agents of change. This means that we do not see women as a "special interest group". This term is rarely valid to describe *any* group within society, but particularly, it is beyond irony to dismiss the majority of humans living on the planet as an "interest group". Women are people, and should be included as full participants – as equals among equals.

Inter Pares strives to establish women as primary partners and col-

leagues integral to all of our work. At the same time, because we live in a world where discrimination against women makes this goal so difficult to achieve, we also work with women to develop programs that are specific responses to their particular needs. We do this by supporting organizations that have developed the capacity to work authentically with women to achieve these goals.

This is not to say that we work only with women's organizations. For the world to change, men themselves must change, as well as women, and women

and men need to work together to transform their lives and communities. Most of the organizations we work with are organizations where women and men work side by side. In these organizations, many of those committed to transforming the role and conditions of women are men who desire similar change in their own lives and the lives of others, and have formed common cause with women to promote such change. Such is the case with Inter Pares itself, which centres its work around the feminist principles illustrated in this Bulletin.

One Woman's Story

In 1951, when Nanay Susing was 18, her family moved to the low-land plains of southern Negros in the Philippines. The fertile land, abundant fish and dense forests drew immigrants from many parts of the country. The family hoped to prosper as farmers, and Nanay Susing dreamed of pursuing an education.

But the municipality of Sipalay, where Nanay Susing and her family settled, also attracted logging companies that stripped the forests, causing soil erosion and depleting the variety of plants and wildlife. And in the mid-1950s, open-pit mines were dug to exploit large deposits of gold, copper, silver and lead.

Over the years, farmers in the area watched their environment deteriorate. Agricultural production decreased; there were not as many fish in the increasingly polluted waters. People in the community began to suffer new illnesses. Nanay

Susing's family did not prosper and, at 27, she gave up her dream of an education and decided to marry.

In 1996, after years of soil and water pollution from mine wastes, four tailing pond collapses galvanized the community into action. Women in the community took leadership in joining a local peasant development group, and asked the Manila-based Centre for Environmental Concerns to assist them. CEC worked with the community to identify the impacts of ecological violence, particularly on women. Nanay Susing was among the women trained by CEC to document the community's experience. Part of the approach was documenting women's stories, including Nanay Susing's.

Through sharing their stories, the women realized that mining was not the only problem they all had in common. They were also concerned about land tenure, food security, employment, and health care, and they discussed the

multiple roles women played in the community. The research project became an education and consciousness-raising process as the women enhanced their skills and knowledge.

These insights led to political action. The women organized protests directed at the mining companies, and called for fair compensation for those who suffered ill-health and lost livelihood from the mine spills. And in addition, the women of Sipalay are now developing an integrated plan to address the social and economic concerns of Sipalay, and to strengthen women's participation in community decision-making.

Nanay Susing has seen many changes in her 65 years. Though she was never able to pursue a formal education, she learned from her experiences and those of other women, and transformed this knowledge into action for a better future for women and their families in Sipalay.

The Trouble with Normal

In the early 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Mayan villagers were forced to flee the carnage of the Guatemalan government's "scorched earth" war against guerrillas. Over 100,000 people made it across the border into southern Mexico.

Women refugees in Mexico, many with husbands dead or missing and children to support, found their lives radically changed. In addition to household chores and farming, women took on day labour and marketing of produce, increasing their already full day.

At the same time, women gradually began to participate in decision-making in the refugee camps. A number of international organizations, including Inter Pares, supported programs to train young women and men as community health workers and educators. For many women, it was the first formal education they had received. Also for the first time, human rights training incorporated women's rights

as human rights. Almost all children went to school in the refugee camps, girls as well as boys – a significant change from their communities of origin, which rarely had schools at all, much less schools that girls attended.

Now the refugees are returning to Guatemala after years in Mexico. But returning women have found their expectations for continued participation in community decisions and in leadership positions complicated, now that things are "back to normal." Many men maintain that changes in women's roles threaten Mayan culture. But returning women say that they too are Mayan, and also have the right to define Mayan culture. The women have had to struggle to be included in land ownership and membership in cooperatives. Community health and education systems developed in the refugee camps have continued, but paid positions for health workers and educators have gone almost exclusively to men, bypassing

women with years of experience in the camps. And always among the first deaths in the new returned communities are women, from complications of childbirth due to lack of medical attention.

To assist women's organizations to address these problems, the Project Counselling Service (PCS), with which Inter Pares has long collaborated, is undertaking a participatory study of the changes that women returnees experienced during refuge in Mexico, and their process of reintegration into Guatemalan society. Through the study, women are discussing their role as actors in the family and in the community, and are enhancing their ability to represent their interests in the community and with governmental agencies.

Through this and other activities, PCS continues to support returnee and displaced women to ensure their authentic and creative participation in the process of reconstruction and reconciliation in Guatemala.

