

## **SOCIALIST-FEMINIST STRATEGY TODAY**

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Women have entered the global political stage in an astonishing array of movements. Sparked by the current capitalist war on the working class as well as the ongoing struggle around patriarchal relations, these movements provide an important arena for socialist-feminist politics. Today, unlike the past, feminist ideas are part of many anti-capitalist movements, although bringing those ideas to the centre of anti-capitalist politics is still an uphill struggle. In this essay we discuss how socialist feminist activists are shaping demands and campaigns, how they organize on the ground, how they build the leadership of working-class, indigenous and rural women, how they work within mixed gender groups and movements.

In order to do justice to the diversity of socialist-feminist strategies, we posed a set of questions to socialist-feminist scholars and activists engaged in different struggles. This essay is based on their insights. As a group, they are diverse in terms of age and political generation, social location and nationality. Susan Durr and Giselda Gutierrez are activists in the Occupy movement in Chicago and Houston, respectively,<sup>1</sup> and Esther Vivas is an activist in Spain's Indignado movement, as well as a journalist and sociologist.<sup>2</sup> Martha Ojeda, a former maquiladora worker, has been Executive Director of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras since 1996.<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Hennessy, a theorist of Marxism and sexuality, also writes on gender and labour struggles in northern Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Eleni Varikas is a political theorist based in Paris and connected to researchers and activists in Greece.<sup>5</sup> Valentine Moghadam is an expert on women in the Middle East and on Transnational Feminist Networks (TFNs) that provide crucial support and solidarity in struggles against capitalism and patriarchy worldwide.<sup>6</sup> With their collaboration, we have drawn a picture of socialist-feminist strategy that leaps from place to place and hardly presents a comprehensive view. Still, these instances of struggle reveal key aspects of contemporary socialist-feminist organizing.

## DEFINING SOCIALIST FEMINISM TODAY

We define socialist feminism broadly, to include all feminists (whether they would identify with the label or not) who see class as central but would not reduce relations of power and privilege organized around particular identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity) to class oppression. Instead, socialist feminists regard these aspects of our lives as inseparable and systematically related; the task is to show how this is so, and to use the analysis to develop effective strategies for ending the oppression of all women. Socialist feminists start where most feminists begin: that the emancipation of women must come from women ourselves, but cannot be achieved by ourselves. From this starting point, socialist feminists are especially interested in building inclusive movements organized by and for working-class, indigenous and rural women. Through the process of self-organization, through the creativity of practice, deep divisions can be overcome as new understandings of the world, new ways of working together and new views of self emerge.

Austerity, the growing precariousness of employment, the re-privatization of caring labour are reshaping women's work, their families and their communities. For some communities and groups of women – for example, Mexican maquiladora workers – this transition began decades ago; for others, it is a more recent development. But everywhere, immigration is changing the face of caring work in and outside households. Women are the majority of migrants, occupying jobs such as cleaners, health aides, nannies and sex workers, raising to new heights the importance of supporting immigrants organized against scapegoating and emphasizing that migration is a consequence of the capitalist expansion that has taken place under the rubric of structural adjustment policies and free trade agreements. These have pushed women to migrate because they lost access to land or because of deteriorating working conditions and urban impoverishment, while the number of single mothers has grown and the conditions for families have worsened.

In first world countries women's work is even more precarious than men's. The maquiladora model is being extended to more countries throughout the world and to many more industries. The crisis and the austerity imposed by capital as its 'solution' has led to the dismantling of the welfare state – particularly harming women who are more dependent on the state than men both for work (public service jobs) and for services crucial to their role as family caregivers and community members.<sup>7</sup>

The politics of austerity, exacerbated by the rise of conservative and right-wing populist and religious fundamentalist political movements, incorporates race and gender in complicated and interrelated ways. Beginning with the

Arab Spring, newly invigorated mobilizations against austerity have put class politics squarely back on the political agenda. For socialist feminists the challenge is to avoid reverting back to the ‘class politics’ of an older left, so as not to lose the focus on race, gender, sexuality, nationality oppression as an integral part of class oppression, while at the same time trying to bring a working-class, anti-imperialist and anti-racist politics to feminist organizations that are fighting back against a reinvigorated war on women. While taking different forms in different contexts this twin strategic orientation is always at the heart of socialist-feminist politics.

### ORGANIZING WOMEN WORKERS I: THE EUROPEAN PRECARIAT

Women have been negatively affected by the global capitalist assault in different ways in different places and have been ‘actively fighting back before what has been officially recognized as “the crisis”’ began, as Eleni Varikas explains. ‘Women and young people are particularly touched by unemployment and the appalling conditions of work. In Greece, three out of four young women are unemployed as compared to two out of four young men’. Indeed, throughout Europe over the last two decades, workers’ rights and work conditions have been substantially reduced, especially in the private sector. Varikas also points out that across Europe, policies on the family and on the ‘conciliation of professional and domestic life’ target women. Even when women work for wages, as mothers they are placed in a relationship to the state that is quite different from that of men.

This gendered distinction between ‘protection’ and ‘rights’ has situated women as a ‘client’ of the state rather than as a rights-bearing citizen and poses difficulties for women in organizing to reclaim their rights. Racism creates additional problems, because the legitimate motherhood of women from ‘visible’ minorities is put into question, dividing women into those who deserve and those who do not deserve the protection of the state. Visible minorities, immigrants or first generation Europeans are also blatantly discriminated against in hiring and housing. Young university graduates from immigrant backgrounds are forced to hide their degrees and other skills when applying to work even in underpaid precarious jobs.

As Varikas points out, European unions have not been willing or able to organize workers engaged in the ‘new forms of “atypical” work (which of course have become very typical)’. This has been disastrous for the possibility of resistance to neoliberalism but also has contributed to dividing workers of the private and public sector. Civil servants are presented as privileged parasites.’ Part of the problem is the co-optation and corruption of the unions

by the governing parties, especially PASOK in Greece, where unionism became a major way to enter politics. Yet the incapacity to organize the precariat even extends to such formerly powerful and radical unions as the French CGT.

Still, Varikas observes, ‘in several European countries, like France and Greece, a younger generation of women often – though not exclusively – working in precarious conditions in different sectors and levels of the public service, became actively involved within radical currents of the union movement. Some of them are feminists; many were attracted to and actually participated in the movements of “the outraged”’.<sup>8</sup> The campaign of solidarity with Constantina Kuneva in Greece is an illuminating example of the international gendered division of labour, the difficulties of feminized, precarious and immigrant labour, co-opted unions and politicians, but on the other hand, of good socialist-feminist analyses and organizing.

Kuneva, a migrant trade unionist (an ex-historian from Bulgaria who came to Greece to get medical treatment for her son), founded the All Attica Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers (PEKOP). What is remarkable about this union, Varikas stresses, is that

it is *the first union of cleaners and domestic workers* (normally considered servants and hence not to be unionized). So their intention was to express an optimistic tone (that the most subaltern and despised women could turn this identity around and organize themselves successfully), but at the same time it shows the extreme difficulties and danger of such a wonderful success. Indeed, this is why the bosses struck so hard: thugs attacked this beautiful young woman with a rare sexist violence, destroying her face and making her drink sulfuric acid. The bosses were made very anxious by the revolt of these nobodies and were certain that nobody was going to react to defend them.

The main Greek union confederation, GSEE, refused to take seriously the numerous threats against Kuneva and her son, and refused to publish the report on the conditions in the cleaning sector done by their own Research Centre until the researchers threatened to publish it online. Despite the indifference of the police and the media, the immediate mobilization of most feminist groups (on a Christmas Eve) created a wide national and international campaign which for the first time made clear the women’s quasi-slave working conditions in which they are forced to sign blank contracts by the agencies who employ them. Varikas reports that

as the campaign grew wider in force and scope, the openly gendered dimension, underlined by both cleaner unionists themselves and the initial feminist activists (i.e. the analogy between the specifically female task of “cleaning your dirt” and the impure, subaltern status of women, particularly poor women, in society), and the sexist mode of her “punishment” by the bosses’ thugs, gradually disappeared. When the progressive unions and the left, (at the best indifferent to feminism) joined the mobilization, they *rightly* stressed the exploitation of workers and the criminal action of the bosses in general and also the fact that they were immigrants, *but* they abandoned the paradigmatic gender dimension of the treatment of cleaners and of the attack on Kuneva. And hence they missed a crucial gender element of the international division of labour.

On the other hand, Varikas says, ‘one of the most interesting movements of the left in the last years, in Greece, has been the “Network of the Rights of the Migrants”, which is one of the active sources of the victory of the Radical Left in Greece. Many women and feminists are involved in this movement.’<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately not all women or even all feminists understand the importance of fighting racism by making these kinds of alliances with immigrants. Varikas argues,

racism is one of the most crucial problems getting in the way of a strong and inclusive defense of feminist conquests. Gender is at the heart of racism and race discrimination – since control of women and their sexuality are seen as the prerequisite of the purity of race, nation, etc. It is remarkable that the most common symbol of Islamist terrorism is always a woman in black wearing a scarf, a hijab or even better a burka (and not for instance a bearded man with a bomb). Even feminists within the left are divided on these issues, some taking patronizing positions towards their foreign sisters who need to be saved.<sup>10</sup>

This issue is indeed complex. As Val Moghadam points out, many feminists, including feminists from Muslim communities and majority Muslim countries, have legitimate concerns about Islamic fundamentalist political movements and support different strategies for responding to them.

#### ORGANIZING WOMEN WORKERS II: THE MEXICAN MAQUILADORAS

Maquiladora workers in Mexico, like immigrant domestic workers in Greece, are developing new forms of organizing that circumvent the

traditional, and often sexist official unions of Mexico.<sup>11</sup> The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), founded in 1989 during the NAFTA debates, is a multi-sectoral, international coalition that supports Mexican factory workers. Although CJM does not define itself as a socialist-feminist organization, their organizing strategies focus on the self-organization and emancipation of women in both workplace and community. This approach extends to CJM's coalition-building work. According to CJM's Executive Director, Martha Ojeda,

Workers' struggles cannot be isolated. No one can fight just on their own. CJM is having some success in developing local alliances as well as alliances with workers from other parts of the world. In fact CJM is a coalition of 150 organizations from US, Canada, Mexico, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Chile, Brazil, Argentina and Amsterdam. In many of the places we have had exchanges, for example, Morocco, Thailand and Sri Lanka, women workers are facing what we faced before NAFTA. Mexican maquiladora workers have years of experience fighting against free trade and multinational corporations. We share our knowledge of organizing with them and we learn from them.

In CJM's organizing, Ojeda says,

we emphasize the importance of collective leadership and the gender perspective. Workers learn how to do their own research on the companies, mapping the process of production, identifying the costs of inputs, comparing that to the prices of the products sold, identifying health and safety conditions that violate international labour law. When they work together to collect this knowledge, workers build trust and cohesion. Definitely all those women who have been involved in any of our big struggles or who have been involved in international exchanges with women from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Morocco, Argentina, Chile and Brazil find their lives changed.'

Leadership development, gender perspective and popular education are crucial to this process of change.

CJM's organizing strategy, like that of domestic workers in Greece, has been developed outside of the official unions. In Mexico, these are co-opted, corrupt and patriarchal. The independent union, the Authentic Front of Workers (FAT), is better; but, because the FAT's organizing experience is mainly in Mexico City, they have been less effective on the border where

conditions are very different. Ojeda points out that

The border was a free trade zone for many years before NAFTA, and the official unions have been protecting the companies there forever. Although they have had representatives in Juárez since NAFTA was passed, they have not been able to unionize maquiladora workers there. The FAT does operate with a horizontal collective structure and is a pioneer in including women in leadership, but in fact the organization's male leaders exercise control through the decision-making process based in FAT's centre in Mexico City.

In 1994, Ojeda was leading a struggle by Sony workers with two thousand women in the streets demanding better working conditions and salaries.<sup>12</sup>

We demanded democratic union elections, but the CTM, the largest "official" union in the region at that time, (known as a "charro" or robber union) imposed itself. Women workers were beaten, many were arrested and others put in the hospital. Antonio Villalba, from the FAT leadership, encouraged workers to affiliate with the FAT, which promised to demand collective bargaining from Sony. The workers asked Antonio if they would be the leadership of their union in Laredo, but he refused. The workers could have representation locally, but in accordance with the law, the leaders in Mexico City would negotiate with the company. They did not offer Sony workers a seat in the leadership of the union in Mexico City. So the workers did not affiliate with them. That was 1994, of course, and I welcome any changes the FAT may have instituted since then in their policies.<sup>13</sup>

### CONNECTING WORKPLACE AND COMMUNITY

Socialist feminists have recognized theoretically what many women in resistance have expressed practically – that women's role in social reproduction and their participation in wage work mutually shape each other. Martha Ojeda describes the reasons women working in the maquiladoras do not confine themselves to workplace organizing.

They see themselves as the same actors in the workplace and in the community. They make low wages; therefore they live in impoverished conditions, without decent housing or infrastructure like water, electricity, sewers and so on. Pollution in the workplace, such as toxic chemicals used in production without appropriate safety equipment and sometimes

without the knowledge of the workers, enters the community, and we find cases of birth defects, lead poisoning and other serious conditions.

One of CJM's areas of organizing on northern Mexico's border is Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, a hub for maquiladoras. In 2004, workers and their families sought to settle on formerly ejido land where they could live without paying rent and grow some of their own food. After invading the land, residents were evicted by order of the mayor of Nuevo Laredo (who was a CTM union leader), but they returned again in 2005 to claim their land. Women took the lead in organizing against the eviction and in returning to establish their community. Originally the colonia residents organized for recognition and services from the city government, but after enduring several years of the government's violence and neglect, and following several exchanges with activists from the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, they decided to channel their energies into sustaining themselves. They declared their settlement, Blanca Navidad, to be El Otro Caracol, a reference to their alliance with the Zapatistas. Women continue to play leadership roles there and residents are pursuing sustainable economic projects such as taking over a nearby water source and installing faucets on several streets, building a small clinic, solar ovens and a wind generator, and establishing community gardens of fruit trees, vegetables and medicinal herbs.<sup>14</sup>

Rosemary Hennessy describes the impact of women's activism on gender relations as 'gender adjustments' – small changes that are enacted in specific, local gendered situations.<sup>15</sup>

These adjustments are practices that transgress or revise gender norms in the particular everyday situations in which men and women live. The changes they enact or provoke are uneven. They are not won through campaigns focused on gender issues or for women's rights. Rather they are accomplished as members of a community cooperate to meet basic needs and strive for lives with dignity.

Martha Ojeda interprets these changes in the families and communities of Nuevo Laredo this way:

CJM is aware of the patriarchal burdens that limit women's activism. When we hold meetings in the communities, we arrange for daycare for children and involve the women's partners. We take a proactive role, offering workshops on the gender perspective that build consciousness of gender discrimination and women's leadership. When women are

empowered from their own perspective, as individuals, they become more confident and secure. They also become stronger speakers, able to organize press conferences, and be the public face of the movement. They also make changes in their own lives, adjusting domestic labour obligations and inspiring and educating the next generation.

CJM created a programme called Standing on Two Feet which aims to strengthen the ‘two feet’ of political education and sustainable community resources in local factory-to-community organizing efforts. The ‘Two Feet’ programme launched *encuentros* (encounters) that brought together campesino and indigenous community members from Chiapas and maquiladora workers from Nuevo Laredo.<sup>16</sup> In addition to creating a space for thinking critically about gender relations, these meetings bridged historic divisions between the indigenous people from Mexico’s south and maquiladora workers in the north. They enabled communities to learn from each other’s long history of organizing.

CJM’s Worker Empowerment Program provides an opportunity for women to develop analyses of gender relations in their homes, organizations and communities. According to Ojeda,

The women organizers involved in the CJM Empowerment Program make connections among *all forms of violence*. They learn that the root of the problem is not just a patriarchal system but also a capitalist system that behind the scenes generates violence against women, including the latest violence perpetrated by organized crime, which is also a consequence of the neoliberal capitalist regime. Women of the colonia Blanca Navidad in Nuevo Laredo, women from the maquilas, indigenous women and campesinas from Chiapas who have been involved in the *encuentros* relate violence to the lack of land rights, lack of access to decent housing and jobs, to health care and education.<sup>17</sup>

#### TAKING ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women has also been taken up by rural women organizers in La Via Campesina, an international coalition of peasants, farmers, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities from a wide diversity of locations and cultures. Women activists in Via have been organizing to reshape gender relations within their organizations and in their communities. At its founding, in 1992, Via reflected the patriarchal norms and political outlook of its member organizations – for example, all of the regional coordinators elected at the first international conference were men. According to Esther

Vivas, the formation of a Women's Commission in 1996 created the space for women within Via Campesina to organize to challenge patriarchal practices and policies.<sup>18</sup> Although special organizations for dealing with women's issues can be instruments for co-optation and marginalization, this has not been the case in Via Campesina. Annette Demarais argues that this is partly because of the (relatively) democratic functioning of the Via.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps also because the original weight of the organization was based in Latin America, where feminist ideas have had a longer presence and history.<sup>20</sup>

The Women's Commission and the separate international conferences for women activists it organized have had a significant impact on the representation of women in Via and in its member organizations. In October 2008, La Via Campesina hosted the Third International Assembly of Women. The assembly approved the launch of a campaign targeting all forms of violence faced by women in society (interpersonal as well as structural).<sup>21</sup>

Work that aims at achieving greater gender equality is not easy. Despite formal equality, women face obstacles when travelling or attending meetings and gatherings. As Annette Desmarais notes,

There are many reasons why women do not participate at this level. Perhaps the most important is the persistence of ideologies and cultural practices that perpetuate unequal gender relations and unfairness. Being involved in reproductive, productive and community work makes it much less likely [for women] to have time for training sessions and learning as leaders. It is a struggle against the tide, and despite some concrete victories, we face a long fight in our organizations; and, more generally, socially.<sup>22</sup>

Women are also disadvantaged by masculinist styles of leadership that reward charisma, comfort with public speaking and competitive debate.<sup>23</sup>

Via Campesina has established alliances with various organizations and social movements at the international, regional and national levels. One of the most significant has been with the World March of Women (WMW). According to Esther Vivas, at the Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007 in Sélingué, Mali, a meeting was convened by leading international social movements such as Via Campesina, the World March of Women, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples and others to advance strategies within a wide range of social movements (farmers, fishers, consumers) to promote food sovereignty. Women were a major catalyst as organizers and participants at this meeting which identified the capitalist and patriarchal system as primarily

responsible for the violations of women's rights – and the destruction of the environment.<sup>24</sup>

One of the interesting aspects of the coalition between WMW and Via is the way that the issue of violence against women has provided a wedge for challenging patriarchal relations as these are experienced within organizations, communities and the state. Although women's sexuality or reproductive rights are alluded to, the thrust of the connection between patriarchy and capitalism in their politics focuses on domestic and sexual violence. Within the context of so-called 'failed states', as in parts of Mexico, where violence (state-sanctioned and otherwise) is ever-present and increasingly so, and in the context of the violation of land rights and dispossession that has totally disrupted rural lives across the globe, it makes sense to connect violation and violence.

Yet we might ask whether campaigns that target ending domestic and sexual violence are more compatible with 'reformed' patriarchal gender relations and hence a more appealing starting point for women activists. Certainly, we have seen, in the US at least, a partial transformation of conservative politics where the right wing and 'law and order feminism' have made common cause around issues such as mandatory arrest laws for domestic violence as well as the racist 'rescue' politics of the international networks for abolishing sex trafficking.<sup>25</sup> Contrasting benevolent to malevolent patriarchs, this politics reflects the success of three decades of feminist organizing against domestic and sexual violence, but also its co-optation by conservatives who formerly treated opposition to domestic and sexual violence as threats to men's power equal to abortion and lesbian rights. Meanwhile, the right wing continues to fuel its movement and fill its coffers through anti-abortion and anti-gay rights politics.

Compared to campaigns against violence, the opposition to campaigns for sexual and reproductive rights is much more fierce everywhere and finds a ground of support in religious fundamentalist political organizations. Val Moghadam points out that in many transnational feminist organizations, although organizers would like to take on women's sexual and reproductive rights, they have had to put these on the back burner, while finding that violence against women is an issue that does get traction. For example, within the WMW abortion and gay rights have been dropped in order to unite women from different cultural backgrounds around a common agenda targeting patriarchy, violence against women and neoliberal capitalism.

In Morocco, feminist groups recently formed a coalition with human rights groups and associations of lawyers and physicians for the reform of the penal code including the decriminalization of abortion. Although they

understand abortion rights to be a crucial working-class women's issue, because criminalization falls heaviest on poor women, women's rights organizations have taken a back seat in the campaign, allowing physicians and health advocates to make the public case on behalf of women's health and dignity. On the other hand, women's groups were vocal and visible in the protests that followed the suicide of Amina Filali, a low-income young woman in a small town who had to marry her rapist and endure more abuse afterwards. Because such assaults tend to befall poorer women, the Amina Filali campaign is an example of cross-class solidarity and characteristic of women's rights activism in the Maghreb.

Clearly, one of the challenges for socialist-feminist strategy is to link claims for women's sexual self-determination (an issue raised by both abortion and LGBT rights) to the class-based politics around economic and social rights which are galvanizing women's organizing. This is a challenge in terms of making cross-class alliances among women – creating women's movements that reflect and represent the voices, everyday struggles, aims and worldviews of working-class women – and in terms of bringing these issues of sexual self-determination into mixed gender organizations and movements.<sup>26</sup>

Rosemary Hennessy argues that in the US, as identity politics has become increasingly disconnected from class politics and mainstream gay rights organizing and organizations have centred on a 'homonormative' strategy in order to win acceptance, the possibilities for a class-based sexual liberation politics have narrowed dramatically. Homonormative politics defines legitimate gay and lesbian identities over against those whose gender transgressions fail to enact middle-class respectability. In Mexico, something similar is going on. Management uses homophobia to undermine organizers and as a pretext for firing lesbians and gay men. Organizing in the *maquiladoras* at times has foundered on homophobia. Workshops on gender and empowerment could incorporate more discussions of sexual politics because sexual shaming can undermine organizing efforts and is a powerful tool in management's hands.<sup>27</sup>

Commenting on the difficulties of bringing the politics of sexual self-determination and sexual rights into grassroots movements or TFNs, Nikhil Aziz, Executive Director of Grassroots International (which partners with *Via Campesina*), points out that activists from the WMW and Association for Women in Development, are either queer friendly or themselves queer. 'In all of our movements there has to be constant education, awareness building and dialogue on issues such as this. *Via Campesina* was once quite far from where it is today on violence against women, and, hopefully, in terms of gender justice and equity, down the road it won't be still where

it is today – but in an even better place.’ Val Moghadam also makes the point that strategic compromises made at the formal level do not prevent activists from continuing to organize through more informal networks, organizational contacts, etc.

Susan Dirr, an Occupy Chicago activist, argues that these on the ground and informal contacts are crucial sites for socialist-feminist organizing. Although Chicago has a tradition of black feminist organizing for reproductive justice, abortion and LGBT rights are contested ground in many communities of colour. Susan agrees that education within movements is crucial, but she sees solidarity as the best strategy for changing the way that community activists feel and think about sexual self-determination. ‘As LGBT people in the Occupy movement get involved supporting community struggles, there is a lot of learning on both sides. If the person that has your back is queer, that act of solidarity powerfully overcomes differences.’

#### TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST NETWORKS

According to Val Moghadam,

in recent years, Transnational Feminist Networks (TFNs) have contributed profound analyses of neoliberal capitalism, forms of economic decision-making and capitalist hyper-masculinities that generated the present crisis, and they call for new thinking and new policies predicated on a revived welfare state and recognition of the value of the care economy. TFNs have played an important role in changing consciousness and building organization around women’s/feminist issues. Active participants in World Social Forums, they have been responsible for the increasing acceptance of women’s issues/demands within the WSF. The majority of the most prominent formal networks are composed of middle-class, professional women.<sup>28</sup> The World March of Women is more a mixed cross-class grouping which includes urban and rural women’s groups.

The Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras could be said to be a genuinely transnational network with deep alliances among feminist, urban and rural Mexican grassroots organizations.

Moghadam comments that

the absence of working-class women from [the most prominent] TFNs may be regarded as a deficit and a reflection of existing class divides. On the other hand, the presence of highly educated women within TFNs

who can critique economic policies, governance structures, security arrangements and family laws, and can put forward sound alternatives, is an advantage. That the majority of TFN activists are middle class does not mean the absence of working-class women's issues from the TFN's agendas.

Many of the founders of women's rights groups in the Maghreb and the TFNs come from the left, including socialist and communist organizations, Moghadam explains, and have a long record of working in coalitions to demand social and economic rights.

This is especially the case with the North Africa-wide Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité. Though upper middle class in origin, Moghadam points out that 'their demands for laws to prosecute sexual harassment are the result of concern about the plight of women working in factories or low-wage jobs'. As a result of rising unemployment, widening income gaps and the spiraling cost of living, feminist groups in Algeria and Tunisia have joined with the main trade union in each country and with progressive groups to practice what Moghadam calls a politics of 'social feminism', and advance the demand for what is essentially 'a democratic, women-friendly welfare state'.<sup>29</sup>

Another example: in the US, Sister Song Collective, an organization that brings together 80 national, regional and local women of colour projects working for reproductive justice, has been an important force in challenging, and to a certain extent changing, mainstream pro-choice organizations. Sister Song insists that the right to reproductive choice includes the right to have children and to raise them in safety, health and dignity – a right that is denied to many working-class women and especially working-class women of colour. Socialist feminists, influenced by women of colour organizing for daycare and against sterilization abuse, as well as access to contraception and abortion, helped to develop the unifying term 'reproductive rights' in the 1970s and the national Reproductive Rights National Network (R2N2).<sup>30</sup>

#### SOCIALIST-FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS: FROM THE ARAB SPRING TO THE INDIGNADO AND OCCUPY MOVEMENTS

The self-organization that took place in the Arab Spring, followed by the Indignado and Occupy movements in Europe and North America, has been one of the most encouraging developments in the face of the current crisis. As Rosemary Hennessy comments, 'the 99 per cent discourse represents a major intervention in mainstream US politics that brings class into focus in a way that has not been seen for decades'. However, she asks,

when women's issues surface in this movement, how are they being connected to class, analytically and politically? In the sixties and seventies, socialist feminists sought to theorize the relationship of women's place in the world to capitalism and to class. But these ideas became marginalized in academic feminism and in feminist activism.

On the other hand, theorizing by women of colour introduced the idea of an intersection between race, class gender, nationality and ability into feminist political thought that has gained real traction, at least in parts of academia and in some of the more radical community-based organizing projects.<sup>31</sup> The theoretical challenge is to connect this notion of 'intersectionality' to a Marxist feminist framework; the strategic challenge is to actually implement a political discourse and organizing practice that is not only intersectional but also moves toward a critique of capitalism and the necessity of an alternative.<sup>32</sup> But, perhaps, first things first: to bring an intersectional point of view into this explosive movement that has newly activated thousands of people. As both Giselda Gutierrez and Susan Dirr point out from their experience of working in Occupy Houston and Occupy Chicago, there is a willingness to listen and an interest in learning that has created opportunities for socialist feminists to influence other activists.

Esther Vivas finds the same to be true in the Indignado encampments.

At first, issues such as feminism, environmentalism, the rights of immigrants, etc. remained in the background as issues, as well as in the analysis of the economic and social crisis and the solutions to it. Feminism clashed with the prejudices and misunderstanding of a significant part of those in the squares. Activists came together to provide a gender perspective in the discourse and practice of the Indignado movement: "the revolution will be feminist or will not be".

These efforts varied in their success. It is unclear whether or not the gains will last, if feminists reduce their presence, work and involvement, in response to the frustrations and difficulty they face. Of course, Vivas stresses, 'the challenge of mainstreaming feminist discourse and practice within the movement of the Indignados merely reflects the difficulty of inserting it in all social movements. The M15 [the movement of 15 May 2011] is no exception.'

Socialist feminists in the Occupy movement agree with Vivas that it is important to defend the value, not just the right, of self-organization and separate organization for oppressed groups within the broader working-class

movement. Efforts on the part of women or people of colour to create separate organizing spaces or committees within Occupy have often met resistance, especially from the majority of newly activated people who almost always at first find this threatening. In addition to an emotional reaction, there is also often a misplaced understanding that ‘identity’ politics are counterposed to ‘class’ politics. Socialist feminists argue that self-organization actually provides the basis for overcoming divisions within the working class.<sup>33</sup>

In Chicago, Occupy El Barrio and Occupy The Hood each have organized around issues facing the Latino and the African-American communities. Occupy The Hood initiated an action around police brutality and requested solidarity from the other segments of Occupy. And Occupy El Barrio has been a space where the immigrant community can be involved in Occupy. Susan Dirr argues that having these separate spaces has been very helpful in preventing the fight against racism and for immigrant rights from being swallowed by the larger Occupy message around getting corporate money out of politics and against public sector cutbacks.

Education within Occupy Chicago was also important. For instance, in the early days of the movement, some of the activists arrested in an attempt to secure an encampment returned to the General Assembly outraged that the police had ‘treated us like criminals’. In response, workshops on racism in the prison-industrial complex were organized and changed the thinking of many Occupy Chicago activists.

As in many cities in the US, Occupy Chicago has been drawn into local, community-based struggles against austerity. Many of these are led by women, often women of colour, and provide openings for intersectional politics. For example, parents, mostly Latina women, organized a sit-in to protest city plans to shut down their school.<sup>34</sup> As Susan Dirr explains,

they partnered with Occupy and when Occupy activists came to the school, it was really important for people there to negotiate the relationship between the parents and Occupy. And especially to convey to Occupy people the importance of respecting the leadership of the parents. So we talked about how women of colour have had their power taken away already by the city, by the political and economic system, and how our role as allies is to encourage their empowerment, their self-organization and not to take their power away by taking over the event.

This ‘on the ground and in the moment’ dialogue can be a tightrope walk sometimes, Susan says. ‘It can get tense when Occupy people want to change the message to be about “take over public space” or “fuck the

police” instead of “save our school”. Another place for socialist-feminist organizing is in worker-community coalitions around public service cuts. The workers who will lose their jobs are disproportionality people of colour, again many women, who are reaching out to the community for support as, for example, in Chicago where women are leaders and activists in a coalition to defend mental health clinics.

Across the Occupy encampments, the success of attempts to integrate anti-racist and feminist struggles, to organize separate spaces for women and to mobilize diverse groups and build broader links of solidarity, varied greatly according to the urban political context. One key factor was whether or not the city had a history of anti-racist and feminist organizing, a strong ‘progressive’ political culture and existing grassroots organizing around anti-racism and feminist issues. In this regard Occupy Chicago, New York and Houston are revealing. In Houston, responding to sexual harassment within the camp and women being assigned to traditional ‘women’s work’ (cooking, cleaning and other support roles), activists called for a ‘safe space’ meeting for anyone who identifies as a woman, a call which sparked a firestorm. In New York, a challenge by activists of colour to the opening statement of Occupy Wall Street met resistance, but was ultimately successful.<sup>35</sup> In Chicago, a Gender Equity Committee has asked for and received Occupy support for actions. Giselda Gutierrez, a socialist feminist active in Occupy Houston, comments that ‘in cities like Chicago and New York, there has been a recent history of radical organizing, community organizing, radical queer organizing. So there are more people who have experience in coalition politics – of working with groups organized around oppression – black community organizations, Latino organizations, queer youth, etc.’.

Val Moghadam makes a similar point about political context at the national level with regard to the presence of feminism in the Arab Spring. Comparing Tunisia and Egypt, she says,

When it became clear that Tunisia’s democratic opening would invite Islamic groups to the political domain, women’s rights groups and young women staged rallies and demonstrations to demand that the country’s liberal family law remain intact, and that women’s rights advocates be included in the new transitional decision-making bodies. And they were. On the other hand, this did not occur in Egypt, the other country of the Arab Spring, which has a far more conservative culture and a far less organized and coordinated women’s movement.

Even so, Tunisian feminists and progressives are concerned about the rise of salafists, who have been insisting that women veil in public places, that alcohol be banned and that the family law be abrogated. Local feminists are also concerned that the ‘mainstream’ Islamic party, an-Nahda, may not be able to stand up to the newly-assertive salafists. A coalition of progressive parties, including one led by a woman, Maya Jribi, was formed in early May 2012 to counter this trend as well as to form a bulwark against the return of neoliberal economic policies. It remains to be seen if this coalition, the main trade union (UGTT) and the feminist groups will be able to coalesce around an agenda for a welfare state predicated on women’s rights and labour rights as well as social and economic development – and mobilize Tunisians around that agenda.

### CONCLUSION

As we have tried to convey, socialist-feminist theory and practice offers an alternative to ‘business as usual’ on the left and in the major organizations of working-class defence – unions, social movement organizations and political parties. Socialist-feminist commitment to self-organization supports organizational structures that are non-hierarchical and democratic and therefore more inclusive. Attention to intersectionality as a guide to both programme and political discourse – the demands that movements make and the language we use to support those demands – opens a ground on which deep social divisions might be overcome rather than reproduced. Understanding the ways that workplaces, households and communities are interrelated leads to more effective modes of organizing and more possibilities for coalition politics, making connections between what are often seen as very different and separate issues and struggles. Socialist-feminist visions of leadership and of leadership development promote activists’ capacities for engagement in democratic decision-making and collectivity. The recognition that affect, emotions, sexuality are always present, shaping social relations, encourages activists’ self-reflection, empathy and respect for different ways of being in the world.

Neoliberalism and the politics of austerity depend for their legitimacy on deeply embedded patriarchal and white supremacist ideas about the market and the state. In practice and in theory, socialist feminists are challenging the dualisms around which these ideas rotate. The key division here is between ‘independence’ (masculine) and ‘dependence’ (feminine) and, mapping onto this, the division between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ – those who have earned and those who have not earned the benefits of political, economic and social citizenship, including such rights as the right to a secure income

and a secure old age. Working-class women, working-class people of colour, indigenous people, immigrants, the formerly colonized, the not normatively gendered – all these and many ‘others’ fall into the undeserving category.

As global capitalism puts labouring people in competition against each other, old divisions are reproduced and new ones are created, multiplying the ‘others’. But also – from Cairo to Athens, NYC to Nuevo Laredo – we see people fighting back against exploitation, dictatorship, racism, religious fundamentalism – whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim – and violence, both personal and structural. The strategic question posed for the movements is whether they will, again, organize in forms and for goals that marginalize these others or instead find a new path forward. The strategic question posed for the left is whether socialist-feminist perspectives will finally be brought into the centre of its politics.

## NOTES

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- 1 Dirr is an activist in Occupy Chicago with a background in coalition work and queer politics; and Giselda Gutierrez has been active with immigrant rights and community organizing in Atlanta and Houston.
- 2 Vivas is an activist, a journalist and a sociologist is a member of the Centre for the Study of Social Movements at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. Her most recent book is *Planeta Indignado* (Sequitur, 2012) coauthored with Josep Maria Antentas.
- 3 Ojeda worked for 20 years in the maquiladoras, during which time she studied law and became an organizer.
- 4 Hennessy is the Director of the Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, as well as Professor of English at Rice University. Her books include *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000; and *Fires on the Border: The Passionate Politics of Organizing on the Mexican Frontera and Elsewhere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming.
- 5 Varikas is professor of political theory and gender studies at the University of Paris 8, and associate director of the research unit ‘Genre Travail Mobilité’ (Gender, Work, Mobility) at the Center National de Recherche Scientifique. Her most recent book is *Les rebuts du monde. Figures du paria (Social outcasts: Figures of the Pariah)*, Paris: Editions Stock, 2007.
- 6 Moghadam is Director of the International Affairs Program and Professor of Sociology at Northeastern University. Her most recent books are *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*,

- Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2012; and *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, forthcoming.
- 7 Nancy Holmstrom, *Capitalism: For & Against: A Feminist Debate* (with Ann Cudd), Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
  - 8 Esther Vivas argues that the deep social and economic crisis and cuts to social and labour rights which hit young women the hardest, together with the attack of the reactionary right in the Spanish government against sexual and reproductive freedoms, has created favourable conditions for the emergence of a new 'indignado feminism' among young women activists.
  - 9 Domestic workers are also organizing in the US. Leah Obias, 'Organizing Domestic Workers: The National Domestic Workers Alliance', *Scholar and Feminist Online*, Barnard Center for Research on Women, 8(1), 2009, available at <http://www.barnard.edu>.
  - 10 Leila Abu Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others', *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 2002, pp. 783-790; 'The burka ban is liberticide': Interview with Catherine Samary', *Viewpoint*, 13 August 2010, available at <http://www.viewpointonline.net>.
  - 11 According to Rosemary Hennessy, maquiladora workers were initially almost 100 per cent women but that changed when men were recruited during the 1980s and 1990s; today they are still a slim majority and in some industries they are much more than 50 per cent.
  - 12 Rosemary Hennessy and Martha Ojeda, *NAFTA from Below: Maquiladora Workers, Campesinos, and Indigenous Communities Speak Out on the Impact of Free Trade in Mexico*, San Antonio: Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, 2007.
  - 13 For an overview of working-women's organizing in and outside of unions in Mexico, see Rachel K. Brickner, 'Why Bother with the State? Transnational Activism, Local Activism, and Lessons for a Women Workers' Movement in Mexico', Working Paper 298, September 2010, published by the Gender, Development, and Globalization Program, Center for Gender in Global Context, Michigan State University.
  - 14 This is reminiscent of women's struggle to build and rebuild the Crossroads community in South Africa. See Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 1996.
  - 15 Rosemary Hennessy, 'Gender Adjustments in Forgotten Places: The North-South Encuentros in Mexico', *Works and Days*, special issue on Invisible Battlegrounds: Feminist Resistance in the Global Age of War and Imperialism, 29(1-2), 2010.
  - 16 Hennessy, 'Gender Adjustments in Forgotten Places'. See also chapter 7, in Hennessy, *Fires on the Border*.
  - 17 For a similar view of these connections from a North American perspective, see Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Color of Violence*, Boston: South End Press, 2006; and Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Boston: South End Press, 2005.
  - 18 Esther Vivas, 'Without Women There is No Food Sovereignty', *International*

*Viewpoint*, available at <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>.

- 19 Annette Aurélie Desmarais, *La Via Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*, London: Pluto Press, 2007, pp. 186-187.
- 20 According to Hennessy, the emergence of socialist-leaning state formations and the organizing taking place at the local level in towns and villages in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay are providing political openings for a politics that is de facto socialist feminist. Hennessy, 'Gender Adjustments in Forgotten Places'.
- 21 Esther Vivas, 'Without Women, No Food Security', *Against the Current*, 157(March/April), 2012.
- 22 Demarais, *La Via Campesina*, p. 282.
- 23 Susan Dirr points out that in Occupy Chicago women who did emerge as leaders were comfortable with this leadership style, but that women activists were far more likely to take leadership at the level of working committees, where these skills were much less important.
- 24 Vivas, 'Without Women There is No Food Sovereignty'.
- 25 On 'law and order feminism' see Jan Haaken, 'Stories of Survival: Class, Race, and Domestic Violence', in *The Socialist Feminist Project*, ed., Nancy Holmstrom, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002.
- 26 For a clear statement of this point see Amber Hollibaugh, 'Sexuality, Labor, and the New Trade Unionism', *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming her Way Home*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- 27 See Hennessy, chapters 4 and 5, *Fires on the Border*. See also her 'The Value of a Second Skin', in Diane Richardson, Janice McLaughlin and Mark Casey, eds., *Intersections in Feminist and Queer Theory: Sexualities, Cultures and Identities*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2006; as well as her 'Returning to Reproduction Queerly: Sex, Labor, Need', *Rethinking Marxism*, 18(3), 2006.
- 28 Some of the more prominent groups include Women in Development, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace and the Women's international League for Peace and Freedom.
- 29 For a perceptive analysis and case study of the relationship between transnational feminist networks and local organizing that engages working-class women, see Catherine Sameh, 'Signatures, Rights, Networks: Iranian Feminism in the Transnational Sphere', Doctoral Dissertation, Rutgers, 2012.
- 30 Sister Song Collective, 'What is Reproductive Justice?', available at <http://www.sistersong.net>; see also Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross and Elena Gutiérrez, eds., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice*, Boston: South End Press, 2004; and Marlene Gerber Fried, ed., *From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom*, Boston: South End Press, 1990.
- 31 For examples of intersectional analysis and activism, see Joseph N. DeFilippis, Lisa Duggan, Kenyon Farrow and Richard Kim, eds., *Scholar & Feminist Online: A New Queer Agenda*, 10(1-2), 2011-12. For a sampling of the early debates about capitalism and patriarchy see Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution*, Boston: South End Press, 1981; Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist-Feminism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979; and

- Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, eds., *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, New York: Routledge, 1997.
- 32 For one approach see Johanna Brenner, 'Intersectionality from a Marxist Perspective', in *Women and the Politics of Class*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
  - 33 Johanna Brenner and Nancy Holmstrom, 'Women's Self-Organization: Theory and Strategy', *Monthly Review*, 34(11), 1983.
  - 34 Howard Ryan, 'Chicago Occupation Challenges Corporate School Agenda', *Labor Notes*, 22 February 2012, available at <http://www.labornotes.org>.
  - 35 Manissa McCleave Maharawal, 'So Real it Hurts: Building a New Republic', *Occupy Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2011, available at <http://occupiedmedia.us>.