

A Place in Government: alibi or conquest? _____

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As we view our biological age and the length of our careers in political activism from on high (or should we say from on low?), one certainty strikes us: that there are no absolute truths. How one assesses reality depends on one's vantage point. We have had roots in the autonomous women's movement in Brazil since the 1970s, and we also participated in the group that proposed to create the São Paulo Council on Women's Conditions and the National Council of Women's Rights. Today we both work for the São Paulo Council and one of us professes a double militancy, as member of a feminist NGO.

The history of the women's movement in Brazil has been told in many ways, by many different women. We would like to look back on some of its recent history, which involved the establishment of councils, coordinating bodies, women's police precincts, and other institutions in defense of women.

Feminism came on the scene in Brazil with startling force in the late 1960s, and even more so beginning in 1975, when the United Nations officially inaugurated the Decade for Women. It was in 1975 that the Brazilian Women's Center was born in Rio de Janeiro, as the country's first feminist organization. Its explicit purpose was to set up discussion groups by encouraging a series of actions aimed at making the feminist issue visible and combating women's subordinate position

in society. Two alternative newspapers also emerged with the same goals and with oscillating regularity (indeed, like most underground papers): *Brasil Mulher* in the State of Paraná (later transferred to São Paulo, with branches in other cities), whose members did not consider it feminist initially, but which changed over the course of its 16 issues; and *Nós Mulheres*, born and raised in São Paulo, which lasted for eight issues. The women who participated in these groups, the vast majority of whom were from leftist groups, confronted deep issues: feminism or feminine? the general struggle or the specific struggle? to save the people (or the working class, depending on one's political line) or to save women and defeat patriarchy? where to begin, which issues to approach, which women to save? all women? the most oppressed? and who is the main enemy: men or capitalism? after all, who are we? what about our identity, our search for pleasure? what should we do with our sexuality? where do we situate our affection, our children, our men? are we all sisters in the struggle for equality? and what about freedom, where are we supposed to find it?

This confluence of ideas between feminists, women from grassroots movements, and women from political parties was not exempt from conflict. Political debate at this stage was characterized by a polarization of positions between those favoring the overall struggle and those who concentrated on the specific struggle.

The latter half of the 1970s was largely consumed in this indispensable discussion. By 1979, there were numerous women's groups spread around the country, with a broad range of feminist stances. Sometimes the way they were labeled corresponded to reality, but oftentimes it was pejorative:

there were the separatists, the intellectuals, the petit bourgeoisie preoccupied with sex, the proletarians concerned with combining the overall and specific struggles, the defenders of an autonomous movement, the "foreign" former political exiles influenced by the European feminist movement, etc. All this universe was part of the Brazilian women's movement.¹

Sectoral meetings of women metalworkers, chemists, and other professional categories gave rise to Women's Meetings. For the first time in history they shed their differences in order to discover similarities. The magic word incorporated by this discovery was "autonomy", although perhaps each group interpreted the term in its own way. Autonomy in relation to men (for many of the groups), autonomy in relation to political parties (for some), and autonomy in relation to government (for all). That was easy, since Brazil was in the middle of a dictatorship! Unity emerged from diversity, and even from divergence.

The Meetings were organized around discussions that "united" women, so all the rallying cries concerned undebatable issues, according to the following order of priority: the struggle for daycare centers, the struggle against birth control, and the struggle for equal pay for equal work. After these three, other issues like abortion, sexuality, and violence came up for discussion, but they were never a priority in the conclusions.

In 1980, Cristina Duarte, then editor of the magazine *Cláudia*, having participated as an observer at the 2nd Congress of São Paulo Women, made the following report to the organizers on the 3,500 women who

took part in the event: "...the majority were not too sure about the meaning of 'specific issues', neither did they show the least awareness about the role of women in society, but they knew and felt that there were 'women's problems'..."

At that time, we felt such a need to find a direction, to take to the streets, to join efforts - anything that might point to a brighter future - that state, regional, and national meetings were being held right and left. March 8th was the prime date for such events, even in the eyes of such political groups as MR-8 in their attempts to manipulate the women's movement, which grew with each passing Meeting.² Sources from this period point out that according to such political factions, feminism was emerging as a separatist or divisionary movement that tended to undermine the unity needed by the overall political movement and that it contributed little to the struggle against the dictatorship or in favor of socialism.³ This confrontation towards positions that were more inclined towards the specificities of women's issues and those in favor of the overall struggle sometimes reached the point of violence.

² "Women's Congress Comes to an Agitated Close" was the headline for the March 10, 1980, issue of *Folha de S. Paulo*: "The 2nd Congress of São Paulo Women, which began Saturday and was concluded yesterday at the amphitheater of the Catholic University, was marked by intense debate and uproar, due to activity by various political factions, which led the organizing committee to lose control of the situation several times."

"The controversies that emerged during the organization of the 3rd Congress of São Paulo Women can be summed up in a false dichotomy, namely that between women who are interested only in the liberation of the people (that abstract, sexless, colorless, and ageless entity) and those who are supposedly more interested in contemplating their own navels, in what is labeled petit bourgeois conduct, as if knowing one's self was for a privileged few, or an unimportant attitude." (*Os Velhos Conceitos Estão Desgastados*, or *Old Concepts Are Worn Out*, an article by *Nós Mulheres*, or the "We Women" group, published in *Folha de S. Paulo*, March 8, 1981).

³ "One of the difficulties faced by feminism in São Paulo, as in other areas of Brazil, is the prejudice it suffers, fed by a kind of criticism that is not directed towards its ends or means of struggle, but against

¹ Zuleika Alambert, by ignoring such controversy and concentrating on positive points, sums up this period as follows: "From a practical perspective, the proclamation of International Women's Year in 1975 sparked a broader women's movement in Brazil... Specific campaigns were launched. Feminist newspapers, albeit short-lived, appeared on the scene and played an important role in women's mobilization, organization, and struggle. A specific kind of literature on the feminine issue emerged, as multiple kinds of organizations were created that were devoted to women." (*Voz da Unidade*, 1981).

However, it did lead to a better understanding of the issue of "autonomy in relation to political parties" and thus to a strengthening of the women's autonomous movement.

Run over by democracy

During the 1978 Congressional elections, some individual feminists supported some female candidates whose platforms included a commitment to combat gender bias. The political parties, of which there were two at the time, did not incorporate any issues related to women into their platforms.

Brazil was still a dictatorship, and civil society was organizing in a thousand different ways. Following political amnesty, won in 1979, the next campaign was for direct elections. The biparty system (with ARENA on the right and MDB on the left) tended to lessen such differences in the women's movement, since it reigned absolute and left all of us in the same boat (those in the overall struggle and those in the specific struggle). Yet the biparty system was sinking, and (social) democracy and socialism were gaining ground quickly.

In 1980, the old, broad-based political Left was reorganized in various parties and factions, some of which were short-lived: social democrats, socialists, pro-socialists, communists, revolutionaries, and pinkish centrists.

Feminists reacted to this new situation in various ways. Eva Blay describes this new period as follows:

"To participate in politics was a dilemma of the 1980s. The post-dictatorship period opened up some new avenues for the women's movement: to continue working in the social movements, to enter the legislative struggle or the executive struggle. This controversy permeated the feminist

the subjective motivation of those who participate in it. Resorting extensively to ridicule, this critique pictures feminists as 'unloved'... this criticism is aggravated by the fear that feminism tends to separate women from men, undermining conjugal harmony and the unity of both in the struggle for common goals." (Paul Singer, in the article *O Feminino e o Feminismo*, or *Feminine and Feminism*, 1979).

movement as well as the women's (non-feminist) movement. The decision was essentially a partisan one. Women opted for these various paths, at times moved by group directives, at other times by personal motives." (From the article *Mulher e Estado*, or *Women and the State*, 1988.)

In 1982, during the direct elections for state governments, in some states a feminist platform was drafted and presented to the candidates. This was the case in Rio de Janeiro, with the "Feminist Alert". In São Paulo, feminists were split in their support for two different candidates, and the debate heated up when the group supporting the PMDB candidate proposed (as part of its platform) to establish a specific state governmental agency to deal with women's policy issues.

Once the elections were over, in 1983, São Paulo created the State Council on Women's Conditions. A similar council was set up in Minas Gerais, but in a different context.

Yet the honeymoon did not last long...

The São Paulo Council was the watershed in the women's movement, for those who were for and against the proposal. What was at stake was the relationship between the "autonomous movement" and government. How to ensure the movement's autonomy? What forms of organization should be pursued within government? How should women's demands be met? There was ample public debate over the Council.⁴

⁴ Participants in the debate organized by the *Mulherio* newspaper included militant feminists from various political parties, including the PMDB, or Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement, PT, or Workers' Party, and PDT, or Democratic Labor Party. They included Eva Blay, Carmen Barroso, and Elisabeth Souza Lobo. In addition to these three, the debate organized by *Folha de S. Paulo* included Maria Malta Campos and Zuleika Alambert, as well as representatives from grassroots groups and movements (the Housewives' Association, the Movement to Struggle for Daycare Centers, SOS-Women, and the Chemists' Union). *Folha de S. Paulo*, March 13, 1983, and *Mulherio*, Nov.-Dec. 1982 and May-June 1983.

At this point it is important to stress that this choice of model for the agency, whose original proposal was pluralistic and nonpartisan, was bombarded by a significant portion of the women's movement. There were those who refused to participate in any kind of government agency, because they believed their demands would be coopted by the state, by institutionalization of what was "radical, creative, and revolutionary" about feminism, thus leading to loss of autonomy for the women's movement.

There were also Workers' Party militants who acknowledged the state's role in meeting some of the movement's demands, but who opted to abstain, for more partisan than feminist reasons.

According to Ana Vicentini, "...the cry of alert by some sectors was based on the difficulty that the movement felt in facing the unavoidable dialogue to be established with government agencies and in the almost infantile refusal by some sectors to view the state as a potential interlocutor..." (Seminar on Feminism in Brazil: Viewing New Spaces, NEIM/UFBA, 1988).

In the process that preceded and included the 1982 elections, it became clear that women were rediscovering "big-time politics" and that the women's movement - organized in various discussions and sectoral action groups, in nearly all of the states of Brazil - was strengthening and encouraging women's participation in various levels of representation in society, even though this was not always intentional. In addition, the Left, which was now divided into the various hues and colors mentioned above, focused its attention on the so-called "women's issue". Thus, in 1982, members of Congress from various parties began to take public positions in favor of feminist demands. On March 8th, it became a custom for the state and Federal legislatures (which now had some feminists among their ranks) to pass motions of congratulations and support for women on "their day".

As Albertina de Oliveira Costa pointed out in her essay *Is Feminism Feasible in the*

Tropics? - residual dissatisfaction, presented at the seminar *Feminism in Brazil*, hosted by NEIM/UFBA in 1988, "The women's issue is sufficiently broad, sufficiently visible on the public agenda, and sufficiently legitimate for the leftist parties to take an interest in it." According to Albertina, it had also become evident that "...the controversy between feminists and *feminines* (was) going to last for years. That is, the controversy between the good fight and the bad fight for women." In the pathway opened up in São Paulo in 1982, there were new channels for the discussion on the "institutionalization of feminism".

A place in Brasília

In 1984, a group of feminists from São Paulo (who had been involved in founding the Women's Council there) organized a seminar entitled *Women and Politics*, with the participation of female members of the national, state, and city legislatures. One of the seminar's conclusions was to propose to the Federal government the creation of a national agency for women's advocacy.

The political negotiation for this proposal was led by congresswoman Ruth Escobar and began in the backstages of Federal government (which at that time actually included the statehouse in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais). One of the seminar's slogans was "to find a new way of making politics", but some feminists thought it was more like the "old way", since this backstage lobbying was done without prior discussion with women's groups and without the comforting consensus that was the basis for most action by the feminist movement.

Fear and rumors spread like wildfire through the women's movement around the country. The issues included the controversial participation in an administration that had not been legitimated by direct popular vote. There was even gossip about the agency's composition, as a prearranged board of "noteworthy" women, where power would be concentrated in the hands of a group led by Ruth Escobar.

During the 7th National Meeting of Feminists, held in Belo Horizonte in 1985, this discussion assumed national proportions, and all hell broke loose over the proposal to create the National Council for Women's Rights (*Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Mulher - CNDM*). Some of the feminists at the Meeting sought support for this proposal from the movement as a whole. Others were critical of the activity of existing councils⁵, and saw the National Council as a threat to the movement's autonomy. This web of power appeared to be an intricate network full of obscure, malign intentions. The **State** and the **System** were like huge organizations existing on a distant plane, apart from our worldly existence. The state was not trustworthy, and the System was a threat to us:

"...We are aware that the System, through official state agencies, acknowledges the importance and the reach of both feminist ideas and our activism and that it can no longer ignore us, and thus it has been assuming our ideological discourse... However, we know that it would be utopic to believe that feminist ideas be assumed by official state agencies...." (*Carta de Belo Horizonte*, or the Belo Horizonte Charter, April 1985).

The proposal as presented was repudiated both because of its form (as a decree) and procedure (considered undemocratic). In addition, the Belo Horizonte Charter listed all the tricks and traps that the state might use against the movement, namely: that government agencies detain economic power and can offer personal advantages, while feminist groups have nothing to offer; that "official organizations" (the term used at the time to designate government agencies) coopt feminist discourse, turning it into a fad; and that to ensure a permanent vanguard policy depends on the movement's independence, where the rationale was that "we do not intend to tag along". Still, at the end of the Meeting, "to be consistent with this stance", according to

⁵ They were referring to the São Paulo and Minas Gerais councils.

the Charter, and reaffirming their refusal to institutionalize the National Council as proposed, the signatories presented their demands:

- to create a National Council of Women's Rights through a bill of law (instead of by decree), in order to ensure ample participation by civil society and women;
- allocation of a specific budget;
- identification of the Council with the struggle against discrimination and oppression of women;
- that any member of Congress taking a seat on the Council should take leave of her elective office;
- to ensure participation by the women's movement in the elaboration, execution, and monitoring of official policies;
- that the Council express demands by the women's movement, but without trying to represent or replace it; and
- that the criterion for sitting on the Council be the prospective member's feminist background.⁶

It was clear that despite women having drafted a critical document with explicit demands, the movement's ambiguous stance still showed. In spite of discourse defending the unification of struggles and a commitment to "a new way of making politics", the feminist field was not immune to petty power struggles.

This controversy was not enough to stop the founding of the National Council for Women's Rights, which occurred in August 1985, under Bill of Law no. 7353, approved by the National House of Representatives. According to the bill, the Council's basic purpose was to formulate policies aimed at eliminating discrimination against women. This objective was split up into some specific forms of action, such as the formulation of directives, elaboration of bills of law, consultancy to the Executive Branch, issuing of expert opinions, monitoring of the elaboration and execution of government programs, and support for the development of research on women's conditions.

⁶ The Belo Horizonte Charter was published by the CIM (*Centro de Informação da Mulher*) that same year.

Despite feminists' suspicions regarding the state's multiple, Machiavellian potential for coopting the movement, the National Council for Women's Rights reflected proposals by the women's movement in its objectives, structure, and membership (council members and professional staff).⁷

Public policy: the bugbear

While various state and municipal councils and coordinating boards have undertaken important action in this field over the last ten years, we concentrate here on the National Council for Women's Rights, because of its Federal scope.

Within this perspective, the National Council acted on several different fronts: in health, for example, it accompanied the governmental program known as PAISM (the Program for Integrated Health Care for Women), participating in the committees for Studies on Human Reproductive Rights and in the official AIDS prevention campaign, in addition to a number of other activities which could be included under "health policy", like the successful pressure to block the use of an anti-pregnancy vaccine.

One of the areas where the National Council for Women's Rights was most successful was that of health care policy for preschool children. This longstanding demand by the women's movement was met with articulated action in the form of various initiatives: the Council proposed that a national agency be established to agglutinate the efforts that were dispersed among various existing institutions, and it pressured for (and got) daycare centers in Federal offices as a basic example of compliance with the legislation requiring

⁷The beginning of the National Council for Women's Rights was described thus by Maria Aparecida Schumacher in her article *The Feminine Condition, Public Policies, and the Role of the National Council for Women's Rights*, presented at the NEMGE/USP seminar in 1989: "We disembarked in Brasilia with our suitcases full of ideals and demands about the autonomy of the women's movement, and at the same time a conviction concerning the importance of gaining ground within the state as well as an awareness of the challenges and difficulties involved in this task."

daycare centers at workplaces. Furthermore, it obtained a commitment from the Ministry of Labor to do effective monitoring of compliance with this law in private businesses as well as in government agencies.

The Council's biggest effort in this sense was in getting BNDES (the National Economic and Social Development Bank) to pass a norm that made compliance with daycare legislation a requirement for financing projects, whether at the Federal, State, or municipal level.

A corollary to this work was the publication of a series of technical manuals for implementing and operating daycare centers. These manuals are still a basic reference for such work in Brazil.

As for combatting violence against women, the National Council for Women's Rights helped organize a national campaign to create Women's Police Stations (originally an initiative by the São Paulo Council⁸) all over Brazil, with professional training for the women police agents. The National Council's role in this case was to help give national consistency to a policy that had originated at the state level by organizing meetings of women working in these special

⁸The first Special Police Station in Defense of Women was created in São Paulo, under public decree n°23.769, on August 6, 1985.

Previously, the São Paulo State Council on Women's Conditions, representatives of the women's movement, and the State Secretariat for Public Security (i.e., Police Department) had drafted a joint letter of intent, with the following principles:

- that the Special Police Station be monitored by a women's committee made up of representatives of the State Council, the Bar Association, and the autonomous women's movement;

- that the women police officers participating in the Special Precinct be trained for their work through seminars and discussions with feminist organizations, under the coordination of the State Council on Women's Conditions and the Bar Association;

- that the Department of Public Security make it possible to do *corpus delicti* examination (for rape, battering, etc.) at public healthcare clinics (rather than just at the Department of Forensic Medicine); and

- that the respective police investigation be done by the Special Women's Police Station, regardless of which precinct was used for registering the complaint.

precincts, providing specific consultancy, distributing specialized literature, and encouraging women police to organize. Meanwhile, it held campaigns in the mass media to raise public awareness about the problem of violence against women.

Through such measures, the National Council for Women's Rights obtained a series of victories. Dozens of Women's Police Stations were set up in the main state capitals. At the time, the Minister of Justice met a request by the National Council for Women's Rights by encouraging the Departments of Public Security at the state level to create Women's Police Stations. He even distributed patrol cars to the needier precincts according to criteria recommended by the Council.

Understanding of such actions and the emphasis they were expected to receive varied, and there were even some humorous episodes: while some Departments of Public Security requested orientation from the National Council for Women's Rights on how to install the Women's Police Stations, others tried to keep this consultancy process a secret, since they intended to give the women of their states a "surprise present" on the 8th of March. They even asked for advice as to what color they should paint the precinct station. The State of Piauí announced proudly that the patrol cars would be bright pink! What a bright idea! Action was undertaken in other areas, like education, organizing, and struggle against racial discrimination in the program entitled Black Women.

In order to inform the public and provide groundwork for policy-making, the National Council for Women's Rights published and distributed a number of manuals, leaflets, and books on the reality of Brazilian women. Some examples of this line of work include the publications *When the Victim is a Woman*, *Comparative Labor Legislation*, and the *Report on Violence Against Women and Children in Rural Areas*, in addition to background material on the rights of various professional and labor groups.

There was a clear purpose in this work of publicizing what women were organizing

for and to use this policy of publications and publicity campaigns to raise sensitivity and political awareness (particularly among women themselves) in order to optimize the effects of the policies that were expected to emerge from such initiatives. Another, perhaps less visible facet of this action was to block proposals and projects that would have had adverse effects on women by increasing inequality between the sexes. One such proposal was that aimed at "safeguarding female labor", since a major portion of the pertinent legislation aims at protecting "reproductive activity" (and oftentimes morals and decent behavior, through the family). One episode right after the National Council for Women's Rights was founded illustrates this facet: the now-defunct Ministry for Debureaucratization presented a bill to reduce the length of the workday for women, claiming that women needed more time to devote to their children. In addition to the ideological implications of such a gender-biased division of labor, we know that whenever they talk about **protection**, the practical result on the labor market is **discrimination**. The bill was scuttled because of the negative opinion submitted by the Council.

Along these same lines, the National Council for Women's Rights vetoed the creation of a National Council for Population Issues and Family Planning, proposed under Senate Bill nº 06/85, which clearly aimed at population control.⁹

The National Council for Women's Rights also proposed and supported any initiative aimed at sweeping away the sexist rubbish that cluttered (and still clutters) various areas of legislation in Brazilian society, often in unsuspected places. The Council dealt with a series of demands by specific groups in proposing an extensive review of the issue of unhealthy working conditions in labor legislation, not only to reconsider the

⁹The document by the National Council for Women's Rights was drafted based on the opinion submitted by Council members Ruth Cardoso and Carmen Barroso.

prohibition of female labor in such activities as that of gas station attendant, but also to include some activities that did not previously acknowledge women under the law. Thus, in 1988, the Council obtained the revocation of an unfortunate norm passed by the Navy in 1964 which prohibited women from taking part in commercial fishing.

The Council was also successful in having the Ministry for Land Reform extend the right to land ownership (in the form of deeds) to include women. Previously, only men had enjoyed this right.

Until the National Council for Women's Rights was created, the state in Brazil had no specific public policies pertaining to women, except for a few programs in the field of health. The policy pursued by the National Council for Women's Rights thus led to important changes in the national scenario. Whether such changes were great or small, permanent or passing, is still a difficult issue to assess, but there is no doubt that they are part of the Brazilian historical process.

Is it true that in through this activity, Brazilian women have gained access to mechanisms of political power?

Could such "actions" have jeopardized the feminist movement's autonomy? Might they even have led to the movement's apathy? Whatever the answers are to these questions, we are still left with the discouraging reality that we have not tamed the bugbear, because politics can often devour social demands, turning beautiful proposals into bureaucratic services (take as examples the current situation of the PAISM - Program for Integrated Health Care for Women and that of the Women's Police Stations).

The National Council for Women's Rights through the looking glass: inside out and outside in.

In order to understand the National Council for Women's Rights, it might be necessary to split it in two: one Council involved in government, acting according to the dictates of expected official conduct, and the other clearly committed to serving as a representative channel for the women's movement.

This duality was expressed in the national campaign to include women's voices in the Constitutional Congress leading up to the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. This campaign was launched just after the Council was founded and was a priority throughout its four-year lifetime. The campaign was to defend feminist proposals in the Constitutional Congress, against the government, such as a 120-day maternity leave and legalization of abortion, among other proposals. Suffice it to mention that the entire country was involved in the possibility of passing new laws, and that because of its commitment to women, the National Council for Women's Rights embraced the task of drafting issues that had real potential for changing women's conditions.

The Council invested in a public-awareness campaign that included television, billboards, and other media resources, meanwhile organizing or helping to organize debates, meetings, and seminars all over the country to discuss drafting proposals. All of this culminated in a National Meeting that released a Women's Letter to Members of the Constitutional Congress. The Council closely monitored work by the various drafting committees, maintained constant communications with women in the various states, provided information on the negotiation of various proposals, and created a veritable national lobby, the "lipstick lobby" as it came to be known.

In analyzing the short lifetime of the National Council for Women's Rights, from 1985 to 1989, one could say that its work was devoted much more to networking with the women's movement than with the government itself, of which it was a part. It had the merit of never having worked in a partisan sense or of having peddled influence. Neither was it "maternalistic", since it always held women's groups responsible for discussing and proposing demands in their own best interests.

Still, although it met the demands of the 7th (National) Meeting (of Women), it proved incapable of ensuring its own survival within the state apparatus. A one-time Minister provoked the Council members into resigning

collectively, and he subsequently named a new board, which in no way was identified with the women's movement. Feminist groups joined unanimously in repudiating the government's stance, declaring that from then on they failed to recognize the Council as a legitimate party for dialogue. To complete the disaster, soon after, during the "Collor era", a provisional decree cancelled the Council's administrative and financial autonomy.

We should not fail to note that whatever assessment is done of the ups and downs of the National Council for Women's Rights, it should take into consideration the context of the Federal Administration of which the Council was a part. While it did emerge at a time of great mobilization by Brazilian society, converging in the process of drafting a new Federal Constitution, the Council's effective room for maneuvering within government gradually shrank as conservative positions within the Sarney Administration gained strength. This situation was aggravated by a "waning" of mobilization by civil society, with the people submerged in plan after plan to combat inflation. Thus, in its last two years of activity, the Council's possibilities for articulation and dialogue were clearly limited.¹⁰

The shine of sequins

Riding on the "success" of the National Council, state and municipal councils emerged in various parts of the country. Some of them were based on demands from different organized women's groups, while others had exclusively electoral motives. Jussara Reis Prá, in an article entitled *Feminist Articulation in the Democratic Restructuring Process: women's mobilization in southern Brazil*, presented at the NEIM/UFBA seminar in 1988, illustrates this model: "The Rio Grande do Sul State Council for

¹⁰One example of this loss of political space was the deactivation of the Commission for Reproductive Rights, in the Ministry of Health, the role of which was to deliberate on the PAISM, or Program for Integrated Health Care for Women. Both the National Council for Women's Rights and representatives from the women's movement had seats in this Commission.

Women's Rights was established by a governmental decree in 1986, at the end of the Jair Soares Administration.... The way it was set up caused discontent among activists from the women's movement. Their main criticism was the fact that the Council had been created from the top down, without consulting the people involved in the emancipation of women. It is interesting to note that the majority of the future Council members only found out about it when they received the Governor's invitation, which had been printed for the inaugural ceremony."

Regardless of whether the respective councils were created from the top down or from the bottom up or whether they have had support from women's groups (not to mention the various degrees of democracy in discussing the model to be used), they have all faced similar difficulties, some of which are elementary, such as a lack of material, financial, and human resources. This is valid for both the São Paulo Council, whose story we have already told, that of Rio de Janeiro, one of the few founded on the basis of demands by autonomous feminists and various political parties, and the Women's Coordinating Board in the São Paulo city government, based on a model proposed by Workers' Party feminists. In spite of all the pitfalls, over the course of this decade the government agencies proposed by women have based their action (with varying degrees of success) on an attempt (whether planned or unplanned) to "deal with women's issues" where they were most felt.

In the void left by the deactivation of the National Council for Women's Rights, the National Forum for Chairwomen of Councils on Women's Conditions and Rights was founded in 1989, as a channel for political and technical articulation between the various State and municipal government agencies in charge of policies devoted to women. This Forum now consists of ten State and three municipal councils.¹¹

¹¹The Forum includes the following: the São Paulo State Council on Women's Conditions, the Ceará

A hard-won victory!

One can take a narrow view of public policy as a chain of measures aimed at direct government action in a given area under its jurisdiction, as a form of intervention in a specific social reality. If we take such a view, we should acknowledge that the councils' actions have been based on limited interventions and local actions that have failed to lead to the implementation of the public policies demanded by women as a whole.

It is essential to understand the "two-edged sword" which institutionalization of women's demands entails. On the one hand, the councils have brought public debate over women's rights and equality into the national scenario. In so doing, they have provided such issues with visibility and legitimacy. On the other hand, their actual power to intervene has proven incapable of permeating the government apparatus in order to implement such policies. Still, it is true that in terms of implementing socially relevant public policies, the Brazilian government has been ineffective in general, and not just in relation to policies concerning women.

We might attribute this fact to the country's precarious political traditions, where each passing administration in the healthy democratic rotating process becomes a Pandora's box. One should also mention the government's "human resources policy", which promotes a breakneck turnover of political cadres according to criteria and interests that do not correspond to the country's real needs in terms of training human resources.

State Council for Women's Rights, the Rio de Janeiro Council for Women's Rights, the Rio Grande do Sul State Council for Women's Rights, the Paraná State Council on Women's Conditions, the Rio Grande do Norte State Women's Council, the Alagoas State Council for the Defense of Women's Rights, the Federal District (Brasília) Council for Women's Rights, the Minas Gerais State Women's Council, the Mato Grosso do Sul State Council for Women's Rights, the Natal (Rio Grande do Norte) Municipal Council for Women's Rights, the Belém (Pará) Municipal Council on Women's Conditions, and the Salvador (Bahia) Municipal Women's Council.

We women have faced particular difficulties in dealing with the duplicity between government and state. Among other reasons, the very configuration of women's councils and similar agencies has brought issues into the state apparatus which it has been unable to assimilate.

According to Jacqueline Pitanguy, former chairwomen of the National Council for Women's Rights, "The experience of agencies such as women's councils has certainly been extremely positive, in spite of all the roadblocks resulting from difficulties in articulation between these various agencies (which represent the modern, democratic side of the state and which grow stronger to the extent that civil authority grows stronger) and the state organization that still maintains strong authoritarian vestiges." (*Mulher e Políticas Públicas*, IBAM/UNICEF/1991).

As we evaluate today the results of the pathway taken by the women's movement in Brazil, we find that while we become enmeshed in the limits established by the state structure itself in our relationship to public power, we are also able to affirm that in terms of defending substantive issues in the feminist struggle, the movement's autonomy is not running any risk.

In 1989, as now in 1993, during the process in which the National Council for Women's Rights ran its course, as well as in the recent attempt to reorganize it, the feminist movement has made it clear that it has no interest in legitimizing any agency where criteria for participation are not based on democratic parameters or where the negotiation for material, financial, and human resources is not transparent. Furthermore, we refuse to act within a state apparatus whenever the government is not an ally for feminist causes, and we refuse to take part in "power for power's sake" or in "power without power", even if some ill-advised soldiers of fortune among us may occasionally succumb to the appeals of power.

We therefore need no alibi. What we do need is to deal properly with our victories and to reflect carefully on the new areas

we want to occupy both inside and outside the state apparatus.

Thinking ahead...

The long-feared institutionalization of the women's movement, which as we see it "seemed to have been digested" by the movement itself from the perspective of the relationship between civil society and the state, is now being raised again due to new forms of institutionalization, like the emergence and strengthening of feminist NGOs. This is a phenomenon that deserves attention by all of us as feminists.

The emergence and growth of feminist NGOs in Latin America and around the world has occurred simultaneously with the collapse of systems for formal representation and the confirmation of the state's inefficiency.

Until the 1970s, governments were almost the exclusive beneficiaries of the major multilateral agencies (like the United Nations and World Bank) which detained large amounts of funds for investing in the Third World. However, changes in the assessment of performance of government agencies ended up reorienting the flow of such resources. A recent example is the Report by the United Nations Population Fund, presented at the 2nd Preparatory Conference on Population in May 1993, recommending the allocation of 20 percent of its funds to NGOs. The wasting of resources, misappropriation of funds, and turnover of governments' professional staffs are behind this reorientation. Organizations from civil society have thus become an attractive alternative. By presenting a clearer profile in their activity and greater willingness to establish well-defined partnerships, the NGOs have emerged as an efficient means for implementing social policies, whether they are progressive or not. In Brazil, the NGOs appeared as new actors in the national scenario beginning in the 1980s. They were made up of professionals from the social field, generally former political militants, former exiles who were returning to Brazil and wanted to act in an autonomous, independent fashion *vis-à-vis* the

state. Their experience as political activists led them to establish a new kind of relationship with grassroots movements. However, they have sometimes mistakenly interpreted this new relationship to mean the representation of the grassroots movements. And the women's NGOs are no exception to the rule.

While the relationship between feminism and the state became involved in the issue of legitimacy and representation of the social movement, the issue has obviously not been resolved through what is seen as the replacement of the state by NGOs, the more so because - to each her own - they are institutions with very different attributes and proposals. Problems of a similar nature are raised concerning the criteria for representation assumed by members of such institutions in relation to the women's movement. Complex issues such as the professionalization of militancy and the fragmented nature of actions by the NGOs are as sticky as those of plurality and democracy.

In her article *The Growth of Women's NGOs* (1993), Sônia Corrêa comments on the confusion between political representation by NGOs and their role of intermediating with international agencies: "It is essential in the context of this analysis to differentiate between systems for social and political mediation and the instrumental role of intermediation which is frequently proposed as part of the nature of NGOs, particularly by the multilateral cooperative system." She goes on to say, "The permeability and tension between the NGOs per se and this broader, more diffuse field deserve a more systematic analytical effort, particularly with regard to the issue of representativeness and legitimacy."

Angela Borba follows a similar line of thinking as her article *The Feminist Movement, Autonomy, and Nongovernmental Organizations*, in the July 1993, number 141 issue of *Fempres*, states, "It has become common to refer to the NGOs as if they were a feminist movement per se. Members of NGOs also frequently refer to themselves as 'representatives' of the feminist

movement. Suddenly all our reflection on the need to express plurality and difference has been forgotten. A new power relationship has been established within the movement. We have become part of a picture where some people detain information and have access to sources of financing and decision-making, and these are the ones who actually decide on issues...".

Still, it is important to acknowledge that women's NGOs are a dynamic response to the socio-political institutional crisis in Brazil. We must seek a balance in women's healthy diversity in the spaces we have conquered and those that remain to be occupied in our society.

This picture deserves reflection. For this very reason, the discussion has not run its course yet. We need to reflect on how women's representation is occurring today and on the plurality of concepts and modes of action in this complex scenario. In addition, we must assess the efficacy and structural models of existing governmental agencies working with women's issues.

It is conceivable that the current National Council for Women's Rights has the

objective of proposing public policies, but that it is incompetent to implement them. Who knows but what it needs to be replaced by another kind of structure? An example might be a consultancy board linked to the President's Cabinet, with Ministerial powers and attributes, but whose professional/feminist members would be spread out amongst the various executive policy-implementing agencies in the form of equal-opportunity commissions. As part of this dream (or vision) of the future, it would be a policy-making agency with due backing from a board representing the women's movement, devoted to formulating directives for action by the centers created in the various Ministries. This proposal aims at integrating the feminist perspective into the body of the state as a whole, not just in an isolated agency. Thus, the professional/feminist members of government would intervene in a concrete, direct way in state policies, programs, and actions. Since it is not forbidden to dream, this is what we suggest.

This article has been an invitation to debate.