



PART III

Looking to the Future, Taking Action in the Present



Challenges that Match our Challenges that Match our

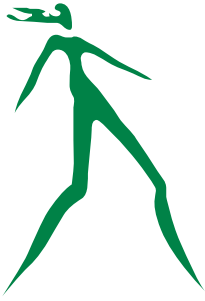


In the five years following the 2000 actions, the World March of Women worked to meet the challenge it had set itself of moving from being a one-time campaign to an ongoing worldwide movement. This dream materialized in the form of the international action of 2005.

Our efforts to understand each other, find common ground and consolidate our agreements and political identity culminated in 2005 with the Women's Global Charter for Humanity. The Relay of the Charter and solidarity quilt were designed to strengthen national coordinating bodies (NCBs) and common action and encourage the participation of local groups, while striving to take into account a myriad of organizational and logistical restrictions.

Today, the March enters a new phase of its history and it faces new challenges. It is a good moment to reaffirm our identity as a recognized social movement. As such, we face the following challenges:

- to consolidate a common political analysis that will guide the March's agenda, activist training and our capacity to respond to urgent situations;
- to strengthen the March's national and regional coordinating bodies, especially those that are weaker organizationally (Eastern Europe, Asia and parts of Africa) and those in strategic areas such as the G8 countries (the United States, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, Russia), in which the March is not active;
- to consolidate the March's message as an ongoing entity, rather than simply a movement that carries out actions at specific times.



Ambitions

Ambitions



At the same time, the international political context of the last years is not favourable to the work of the March. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the internal armed conflicts in the African Great Lakes region, the fighting in Colombia, the political instability in Haiti, to name just a few, strengthen security-based policies that stimulate the arms industry and restrict freedoms in the name of the “war on terror.” The religious right is gaining ground in many countries, censoring women’s struggles and depriving them of financial means. Worse still, women’s rights are sacrificed. In this context, yet again, women’s problems are shoved to the bottom of governments’ and leaders’ agendas.

The backdrop – neo-liberal globalization – has immediate and dramatic consequences on women’s lives, leading to increased poverty, migration, violence, and prostitution. A single event has multiple repercussions globally and locally. For example, a factory opens in a country. This can result in job transfers, causing job losses in the country the factory has left, precarious employment in the new country, where working conditions are usually inadequate, and environmental damage. We have seen how complex the situation has become in the past few years, and how this has complicated the work of social and political activists.

In the first place, it has become more difficult to understand and analyze the context in which we are living. Second, it is now harder for March participants to identify and take action against the responsible corporate and government players, because usually they are physically absent from the countries they are operating in. The educational role of the March is therefore of the utmost importance.

See the document
‘Understanding the
Increasingly Complex
World’, page 28



Issues Still Being Debated

In terms of procedure, political positions of the March are discussed within the International Committee, which is composed of two women from Africa, two from Asia, two from the Americas, two from Europe, one from the Arab world, and the International Coordinator of the March. Their decisions are submitted for approval to participants in the International Meeting that takes place at least every two years. Generally, consensus is the rule. If the need arises to hold a vote at an international meeting, each NCB has the right to one vote. For a proposal to be approved, it has to have the support of at least two-thirds of the NCBs present. In the case of a draw, or if there is significant regional disparity in the vote outcome, the committee in charge of organizing the meeting is asked to propose one or more solutions.

The text of the 17 world demands (the March platform) and the Women's Global Charter for Humanity was approved by a large majority of participants. However, some issues have always generated a lot of debate within the March. They are homosexuality and abortion, issues that concern women's bodies, sexuality, and women's control over their reproductive functions, and prostitution.

The platform of world demands, adopted in 1998 and reviewed in 2001, includes two demands concerning lesbians. They were not supported by all the participants in the 1998 meeting, and some national coordinating bodies never discussed them again. They are nevertheless an integral part of the world platform.

For most representatives from the Americas, Europe, and Asia, the predominant view was that the recognition of heterosexuality as a norm imposed by patriarchy is integral to feminism. But, for most of the delegates from the Middle East and Africa, who work in totally different cultural, legal, and religious contexts, this is not so clear. It should be kept in mind that in eight countries, homosexuality is punished with the death penalty or very harsh punishment; in 10 countries, it results in jail sentences of over 10 years; and in over a dozen African and Asian countries, jail sentences vary between one and two years. This legal situation reflects the supremacy of a reactionary ideology to which even progressive activists are not immune. We are people liv-



ing in societies that deeply influence how we think and feel. What happens when we seem to be facing a deadlock? Do we expel an entire region from the March because they are not sufficiently feminist? Or – as often happens in the Left – do we sacrifice needs deemed to be secondary in favour of higher-priority needs?

In the March, neither option is acceptable. Our usual response is to agree on a set of actions, in which we commit to continue discussing the issue. Motivated by respect and the profound desire to learn from women’s actual experiences, we create a process of dialogue. For example, in one meeting women set up an informal discussion on sexuality and shared their life stories that included life as a lesbian in a country where homosexuality is severely repressed, dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, and wanting real information about love between women.

The March’s Declaration of Values, adopted on March 22, 2003, at the 4th International Meeting of the World March of Women in New Delhi, India, states: “We consider it urgent to affirm and defend our sexual and reproductive rights, including the right to informed choice, principally ensuring free access to all health services and to safe methods of contraception and abortion.” Given the resistance of women from certain countries, where they must bear the weight of religious forces and the weight, just as heavy, of the image of women as producers and reproducers of life, the Women’s Global Charter, simply reaffirms that “women should be free to make decisions concerning their bodies, their sexuality and their fertility. They should be able to choose whether to have children or not.”

In more recent meetings, different views on prostitution sparked debate. Most March organizers see connections between the traffic in human beings, sex tourism, and prostitution. The prostitution industry is growing, in part, because women from the South, Eastern Europe, and other areas of the world are viewed as saleable commodities by men from all over the world. Furthermore, the expansion trade and worldwide dominance of the “buyer-seller” model minimize the harmful nature of prostitution. There are women in the March who believe that the legalization of prostitution will lead to the elimination of the traffic in women. Others believe that, on the contrary, it will lead to the growth of this violent practice.



Freedom,
Affirmation 4:
See the Charter
document,
page 61



A Permanent Process, Not Without Difficulties

As an international movement rooted at the local level, the March is based on action and mobilizing. This sometimes leads women to question the appropriateness of their actions and the best use of their energy. They may be torn between two levels of action: international and local-regional-national. At the local level, this may involve extensive work to explain and clearly demonstrate the connections between the roles of international institutions and the causes of poverty and violence within the daily lives of ordinary women both at home and worldwide. This work is part of the challenge the March faces as an ongoing movement.

Organizers must produce material that can be understood by women the world over, or which can be easily adapted. Women on the front lines must have the time – so often, sorely lacking – to do this work. Added to the lack of time is the lack of financial resources, especially for transportation. Communications tools and policies must be developed, including policy on communications with the grass-roots base and the public; decisions about the use of mass and alternative media; building on existing communication tools (e-mail lists, newsletters and the web-site) and translation into languages other than the March's three working languages (English, French and Spanish).

Like all other community organizations, the international bodies of the March (the International Secretariat and the International Committee) and its members are always faced with the precariousness of financial resources and insufficient staff. Generally speaking, the same women do the field work, are members of the NCBs, and maintain the connection with the March's International Secretariat. Sometimes, when even one woman leaves a local group it becomes difficult to carry out the local actions – women have sometimes had to begin again practically from scratch. At other times, women unite around a very precise goal. When that goal is achieved, the group dissolves and does not come together again. Some women must also overcome social and cultural barriers just to join a group and participate in actions.

There is still a very long way to go before we reach our goal of consolidating the March as an irreversible force to be reckoned with. The March has significant advantages, especially its extremely flexible structure, the dynamism and creativity of its members and its ability to construct analysis and actions that touch women across the planet. This strength comes from our ability to establish dialogue and shared positions based on similar experiences, and from our common desire to change the world and to change women's lives for the better.

