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## ABSTRACT

A recent international symposium on radicalizing feminism explored ways of developing a dialogic feminism that emphasizes working in different settings under the common goal of including women who have been invisible in the dominant feminist literature by furthering theories and practices based on the principles of dialogic feminism. The seminar included the following presentations: "Latinas in US Schools" (Antonia Darder); "Working Class Women's Learning Stories" (Barbara Merrill); "The Time Is Now: Education for Radical Democracy and Transgressive Action" (Eileen de los Reyes, Yamila Hussein); "Education as a Bridging Strategy between Feminist Organizations and Low-Income Women" (Nelly Stromquist); and "The Other Women: Social Transformation in Gender Relations" (Lidia Puigvert). The following actions for developing dialogic feminism emerged from the presentations: (1) open a space for dialogue and reflection about the need to radicalize feminism by including women with no academic experience and any other women who have been excluded from the mainstream feminist discourse; (2) strengthen the foundations of a universal feminism that includes all women and women's cultures as a tool for change; (3) promote ways of social participation of nonacademic women that recognize their cultural diversity and contribution to society; and (4) discuss the role of education in helping women overcome social barriers and exclusion. (Contains 15 references.) (MN)

## THE OTHER WOMEN: RADICALIZING FEMINISM

Symposium presented at AERA Annual Conference  
New Orleans, April 4th, 2002

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### Introduction

The 20th century has been qualified by some authors as the century of women's revolution (Beck, 1992, 1995; Castells, 1996-98; Touraine, 1997). Indeed, women have promoted and achieved many transformations in the gender relations and in the consecution of rights such as to vote or to access education. Although we recognize these steps, however, we see many more steps to be taken. Feminist literature has focused mostly on the problems and goals of women with academic background who are either in academia or in professional positions and they have not taken into account the "other women" in the elaboration of the feminist discourse or the inclusion of central themes for the feminist agenda.

By "Other Women" we understand women who never went to university (that is, the majority of women in the world), who have been and are still excluded from feminist discourse, from social debates in general, and from decision-making spaces (both in public and private spheres). These other women thus suffer from a double type of exclusion: on the one hand for their condition as women, and the other hand, due to their lack of academic background and degrees.

The feminism of the 21st century is one that includes *all* women, their daily struggles, claims, and transformations from their different contexts, on the basis of equal, dialogic relationships. The discussion presented in this symposium provides an international view from diverse academic women who are working in different settings

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under the common goal of including women who have been invisible in dominant feminist literature (women with no academic background) by furthering theories and practices based on the principles of the dialogic feminism. The following presentations contribute elements to the reflection and construction of the dialogic feminism, radicalizing our proposal of a democratic society through the women's struggle, as well as drawing implications of this social movement and theoretical stance for the field of education.

### **Scientific relevance**

This symposium is defined within a framework of critical theory, oriented to the construction of what we define as Dialogic Feminism, one that includes *all* women and that is grounded in the concept of equality of differences. Therefore, each individual presentation and the panel as a whole is contributing new elements that are key to the current feminist debate. The theorization and definition of the dialogic feminism is aligned with the dialogic turn of social and educational and political sciences towards the radicalization of democracy and social participation from below (Beck, 1992; Benhabib, 1996; Freire, 1997, 1998; Habermas, 1998; Elster, 1998).

Women of diverse origins and experiences can go forward together in the social transformation of gender relations; academic or instrumental reason is imposed on top other communicative reason and disqualifies discourses based on experience or the knowledge of women. The joint action of all women can take place through common spaces and processes of dialogue in which all voices are included, fostering egalitarian interactions, solidarity, and transformation of gender relations. This symposium will contribute to the promotion of such a joint action within the feminist debate.

Academic women can radicalize democracy together with women who have been traditionally silenced and forgotten by feminism. Our proposal is geared towards a feminism that collects the diversity of experiences and interests in the egalitarian dialogue. Today any feminism without the voices of "other women" cannot be legitimate.

## **Latinas in US schools**

(by Antonia Darder)

Growing up Latina in the US means having to face many obstacles to be “entitled” to participate of society. I will provide a historical and narrative analysis that unites my personal experience with the reality of being a Latina in the US and growing up in the margins of poverty, fighting the social, economic, and cultural barriers imposed to many Latinos and many women in this society. These barriers increase the educational and political struggles of low income girls within school contexts. The impact of dominant cultural forces on the lives of students from disenfranchised communities confronts the cultural values and practices that serve to marginalia Latinas and other bicultural women and girls. Critical pedagogy is key to problematize hegemonic indoctrination and provide educational possibilities. Through my journey of struggle in the US educational system I have been able to succeed in education and gain an academic position, which has provided me with social recognition and which now “entitles” me to be at a Conference narrating my own experience and denouncing the oppression of “other women”. Unfortunately, most Latinas in the US do not have academic positions, they are other women and girls whose voice does not count. We need a radical critical stance to allow cultural and social democracy to occur in our classrooms and provide Latinas with possibilities to learn and empower themselves.

## **Working class women’s learning stories**

(by Barbara Merrill)

Feminist academics had to struggle, and continue to do so, to establish feminist theory and gender studies as academic knowledge within universities. However, there is the danger that feminist discourse may become elite knowledge excluding working class women or ‘other women’. As Skeggs (1997) points out, working class women have been silenced through theoretical debate. However, ‘other women’ are expressing themselves through adult education and in communities. Historically adult education in the UK has developed through working class education based on ‘really useful knowledge’. The dominance of postmodernism in adult education in many countries has led to the absence of voices ‘from below’. As adult educators we need to seek ways of

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reasserting 'really useful knowledge' and recognizing the value of 'knowledge from below' within universities. As Harding (1992) argues learning to see from below, from the powerless, enables us to see things in a less distorted and false way than knowledge constructed from the standpoint of the powerful. By listening to the voices and biographies of working class women students in their experiences of learning and the interaction between the public and private spheres, a feminist discourse which conceptualizes working class women's' lives in communities can be realized. Their stories tell of struggles and transformations of gender relationships. To what extent is adult education a transformative and emancipatory experience for working class women?

### **The time is now: Education for radical democracy and transgressive action**

(by Eileen de los Reyes and Yamila Hussein)

Women growing up in colonized nations are subject to the experience of colonial education for submission. As a Puerto Rican, I am committed to the fight against colonial structures of domination and the claim for national sovereignty. However, as a Puerto Rican woman, I am also committed to women's collective struggle around the world. Understanding and addressing the universal patterns of oppression of women requires that women cross boundaries internationally and within nations where race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion further divide women. To address both the universality of oppression as well as its local manifestations it is necessary to think of a continuum that positions women around the world in the same horizontal plane. All along the continuum, to different degrees, women around the world have received and continue to receive an authoritarian education or an education for submission, docility, and passivity. Moving from docility to resistance and from passivity to action requires that we re-vision the process of education. Thus, creating an alternative path for women requires an education that is democratic and transgressive. Women need to reclaim and re-vision education as the space where girls and women gather to read the world and move to transform it.

## **Education as a bridging strategy between feminist organizations and low-income women**

(by Nelly Stromquist)

The majority of formal women's organizations are composed of women with relatively high levels of education and from middle-class origins. While the class composition of this leadership reflects a phenomenon widely observed in many societies, this poses a particular challenge to feminist organizations seeking to give voice to all women. Drawing on findings of a case study of a women-led organization in the Dominican Republic (CIPAF), this paper discusses how strategies of popular education have been crucial to developing a greater understanding of gender issues among women from poor communities, and how this education, in providing women with a critical understanding of their environment as well as the tools to become more assertive both in their private and public worlds, has contributed to the emergence of these "other" women as political actors at both community and national levels. Popular education, in the form of alternative instructional pedagogies, emancipatory curriculum content, and provision of "safe spaces" for women offers possibilities for examining aspects of their everyday life that give low-income women the opportunity to express their experience and reframe it. The study presents examples of women who underwent significant modification in their ability to function as effective social actors and concludes by offering a balance of the potential and limits of popular education in the area of transformation of gender ideologies and practices.

## **The Other Women: Social transformation in gender relations**

(by Lidia Puigvert)

Women without college or university education have had little voice in society, but they have also been invisible in the very feminist movements (in Spain, for instance, this is the case of Gypsy women associations and non academic women's organizations). While academic women struggled for more equal participation of men and women in the public sphere and denounced the salary differences of professionals based on gender, they rarely discussed the inequalities between themselves and other women who worked as janitors cleaning their homes and offices. Nevertheless, these

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“other women” are already organizing themselves in a network of women’s associations that are increasing their presence in social forums about women, claiming their right to participate of construction of current society and the transformation of gender relations. Participation of non academic women in processes of dialogic learning has had a great impact in these actions. Women transform their relations when they introduce the egalitarian dialogue in their lifeworlds, with their husbands, sons, relatives, and friends, and they do so when they get in contact with dialogic spaces --either a school, community organization or social movement. In these dialogic spaces, they can reflect, explain their personal situations, and relate in solidarity with other women like them. Academic women we should include in our proposals for current feminism should include the egalitarian transformation of daily life, in order to radicalize the concept of equality overcoming homogeneous interpretations and including the plurality of all women voices, taking into account the aspirations of women from different cultural and academic backgrounds.

## **Discussion**

The five presentations in this symposium contribute different elements for reflection and discussion --from international points of view and a common critical stance-- towards including “other women” in the feminist discourse. Our intention is that the ideas arisen in the symposium give way to a rich forum for a dialogue which we hope will further develop the challenges of radicalizing feminism. We believe that from our privileged academic positions we can fight demagogic theory and practice and contribute the development of a dialogic feminism, one which includes our commitment to the other women and their social movements. Our social commitment and engagement into dialogic feminism implies:

- To open a space for dialogue and reflection about the need to radicalize feminism through the inclusion of women with no academic experience and any other women who have been excluded from the mainstream feminist discourse.
- To strengthen the foundations of a universal feminism that includes all women and women’s cultures as a tool for change.



- To promote ways of social participation of non academic women, recognizing their cultural diversity and their contribution to society.
- To discuss about the role of education to provide possibilities for women to break free from social barriers and exclusion. To share examples of how learning spaces that follow a dialogic approach provide these possibilities as well as promote solidarity, creation of meaning, and the rise of organized social movements among these women-- not invisible any more.

The challenge that we have set for feminism is to collect and theorize the dynamic and proposals that the popular women's and cultural minority women's movements are formulating. These movements are suggesting feminist academics a number of questions and incoherence we have in our discourse which force us to progress on the orientation of the theoretical debate we have. From the egalitarian dialogue and exchange between "other women" and academic women, we can reorient democracy together through a feminism that encompasses the diversity of our experiences and interests.

The struggle and voices of "other women" de-legitimize the perspectives that consider women as lacking criteria to decide and to oppose the elements that limit their freedom from which only a few, already emancipated women can save them. Despite the obstacles that we (academic women) have placed to prevent these women from being heard, they have demonstrated in their daily lives the capacity for transformation. And that is even more important, they are already having a decisive impact in the future of a radical transformative feminism (Puigvert, 2001).

Dialogic feminism implies the inclusion of all voices as well as the egalitarian dialogue among all women in the feminist debate to move towards the development of a solid theoretical and social proposal. Dialogic feminism is characterized by 1) the radicalization of the principles of modernity, and 2) the confidence in the action of all women to change the course of history. On the one hand, radicalization of modernity implies the defense of democratic processes that take place in the elaboration of a theory that allows not only one homogeneous definition of femininity but one that is inclusive, dynamic and equal for all the voices. The feminism of differences brings up



the power of dialogue through egalitarian procedures based on reflection and argumentation of women from different backgrounds. On the other hand, the confidence in action of all women implies to open up a feminism that has been exclusive of university women. In opposition to the feminist who mistook equality with homogenization, pretending to extend Western women's emancipation to all women. Some feminist movements emerged rejecting this model and defending difference, but let to the problematization of egalitarian exchange and the legitimization of breaking existing solidarity links.

Women with no schooling are organizing themselves in social movements on the basis of dialogue and agreements rather and power differences can transform the lives of these women, in contrast to the hierarchical relationships they encounter at work, families, and public services.

All women, regardless of their educational background, can be part of the feminist movement. Social and educational sciences have overcome the concept of intelligence reduced to academic knowledge and skills to one based on competencies and that includes all the plurality of human experience. Social and educational sciences have also overcome the concept of expert knowledge as that possessed by researchers and scholars. Most feminist scholars still bound their work and build feminist theory within the walls of academia. However this is changing and the reflections we want to raise in this symposia are prove of this change within women studies. We need to go beyond a feminism where the voice is articulated by only academic women to a feminism where all women have voice and contribute their experience and capacity.

The other women demonstrate day after day that they are agents of transformation rather than adaptation. Traditional modernity, where feminist elite wanted to conscienciate the rest of women, have been rejected by popular women, who see their feminist teachers and professors as colleagues to work and learn together. Rejection of modernity have led either to postmodernism or to dialogic modernity. asserts that the second option promotes the struggle of other women's movements.

Other women's cultures are indeed a tool for change, an idea that overcomes false dichotomies within feminist and social theory. There is no gap between knowledge and feelings, there are no experts in women's issues according to Beck's idea of de-

monopolization of expert knowledge, an idea that is already taking place in many people's struggles in the barrios and communities. Women with no university degree have found spaces in which they change the meaning in their lives. Contrary to what academic women think, the other women are highly motivated to access public spaces and they want to claim their rights both in private and public lives. In the way popular women find meaning in their horizontal dialogues with friends, they can find it in feminist movements with a dialogic orientation. They have organized themselves in movements grounded in solidarity. They are taking to practice in their daily lives dialogic proposals that promote solidarity bonds among people. Current feminism needs to promote these solidarity bonds among academic and non-academic women.

Furthermore, the urgent necessity for the feminism to include the plurality of women's voices is not exclusively due to the growth of multicultural societies but to the fact that these societies require the voice of every women and not just that of academics. It is necessary to include in the feminist debate the presence of collectives and women from other cultures (Latinas, Asian, African, Gypsy, Arab, Native American women) and to do it from their won social, economic, and educational positions. Today, active participation is not just possible but desirable as a way of radicalizing democracy.

Our dialogues among ourselves and other women with whom we work and interact, lead us to state that "the time is now for all women to unite for social transformation and social justice". Women in solidarity, with the plurality of other women in the world, those women who live in the margins of society, who are excluded from schools or in within their workplaces, we can take a stance for radical democracy and transformation. Dialogue will have a key role in initiating what will be the feminist theory of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one that include the voices of academic and non-academic women. We claim for the radicalization of forums like this symposium, not only by including voices from excluded cultures

Feminist events with academic and non-academic women have taken place already in different parts of the world, advancing the agenda for feminism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Judith Butler in a conference on Women and Social Transformations that took place in Barcelona in October 2001 expressed that, "this was a very rare opportunity for me: to see how women could speak in various ways" (Beck, Butler & Puigvert, 2001).

She described how some women spoke about their experience, some spoke about the movements that they are involved in and others debated intellectual topics, but they spoke “to” one another, and they “addressed” one another, they did not just speak “about” one another. Sometimes the academics were in the audience, listening to the non-academic women, and sometimes the non-academic women were in the audience, but they were also being spoken to. Butler then highlighted this structure of the conference, and said, “I thought this was, perhaps, the most successful event of its kind.” In such a forum, academic and non academic women were able to establish a dialogue in which the plurality of voices is included, without forgetting the voices of other women who are in the margins. Dialogic feminism is a proposal that pretends to generate important links of solidarity that allow for the transformation of gender relations and the development of theoretical elements with the contribution of all women, especially those traditionally excluded from different societies across the world.

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