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Engaging with the State in Defense of Women’s Rights: Comments on Andrea Cornwall’s Paper ‘Strategies and pathways to make states more accountable for women’s rights’

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There seems to be no doubt any longer that women’s activism, particularly feminist activism, is the major, if not the fundamental, ‘pathway to positive change for women’ all over the world. Andrea Cornwall’s contribution to our Group Meeting builds a strong case in support of this statement, bringing together pertinent examples from Brazil, Ghana, Bangladesh and Egypt, among others countries where our ‘Pathways of women’s empowerment’ research consortium was developed.

In all the examples discussed in her paper - namely, confronting domestic violence, organizing women in marginal occupations, and empowering women through CCT programs—Brazil stands out as the country where women’s organizing registered major advancements on gender justice. As Andrea Cornwall well points out, these advancements have taken place precisely during the Workers’ Party (PT) government, well known for its progressive stand. Nevertheless, despite the real gains accrued to women during PT’s government, successful feminist activism in conservative Egypt and in other similar contexts indicate that it is not only a matter of progressive versus conservative political contexts that make the difference.

Indeed, it is not necessarily easier for feminists to engage with a ‘progressive’ or more friendly government in trying to bring about changes for women, as ‘progressive’ state machineries may be just as slippery or difficult to bend as conservative ones on issues of gender justice. Besides, feminist activists may find themselves in a real double bind in certain circumstances, having to draw the line between pushing further or refraining from doing so in

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

their demands to the State, so as to ensure the continuity of a more friendly government, as seen in the recent presidential elections in Brazil.

In her paper, Andrea Cornwall reminds us that given “the patriarchal character and the history of brutal authoritarian repression in the country”, feminist engagement with the state in Brazil has been marked by “ambivalence”. From the perspective of my own experience as an activist, such a situation has not disappeared with the rising into power of a more progressive government. I bring here two examples to think this issue further.

As Andrea’s paper indicates, I served as National Coordinator of OBSERVE, a feminist consortium articulated to monitor the implementation of the Maria da Penha Law, which aims to confront domestic violence. Created in response to a tender put out by the Secretariat of Public Police (SPM) for women during President Lula’s government, and funded mostly by it, OBSERVE was often in an ambivalent situation. Organized as a consortium of feminist NGOs and university research centers, OBSERVE had to strike a balance between abiding by the Secretariat’s objectives, as spelled out in the tender, while at the same time responding to the demands of the feminist movement, as well as to those of academic research standards—demands which, in great part, did not coincide. Furthermore, in claiming autonomy, OBSERVE could incur the risk of mining its relations with all stakeholders. Needless to say, most of our initial discussions in organizing the consortium and defining our identity and ‘mission’ focused on understanding our ‘ambivalence’, a matter which was never settled to everybody’s satisfaction—perhaps precisely because we represented, in fact, different groups.

A similarly ambivalent stance was confronted by feminist activists in Brazil during the last two presidential elections in regards to the legalization of abortion on demand. Although this issue has been on feminist agendas for over three decades, still, it remains highly controversial in Brazilian society at large and thus is used by conservative parties as a tool against more progressive ones—PT in particular. In these circumstances, where should feminist activists draw the line (or not at all)? Continue to pressure the government to take a more positive stand towards legalization at the risk of feeding into the opposition’s game, or become silent about it, but let such an important demand slip by at a moment when commitments are made?

The point I wish to bring here to our discussion is that perhaps the engagement of feminist activism with the State, regardless of its ideological leanings, will always be implicated in a certain kind of ‘ambivalence’ that needs to be better understood and dealt with so that we may better advance our causes. For instance, at the same time that we must maintain our stand on our major issues, it may be that, in order to gain a better chance of advancing our causes, we must also “frame issues in such a way as to align and gain resonance with the concerns of those with power and access to political resources”, as pointed out by Andrea. As noted, this may even mean that, in certain instances, we must actually go mute insofar as touchy issues are concerned, so as to avoid political throwback.

This shows us that the political process towards the advancement of gender justice flows as a two-way street. That is to say, in promoting positive changes for women, not only must we engage with the State, finding doors opened to place our demands, but also support those in power who can see those demands and changes go through.