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Building a 21st Century Transnational Women's Movement: A Collective Statement of Shared Vision

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This statement reflects the discourse and thinking of a group of women activists from around the world who met for three days in early September 2005 at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. The gathering was catalyzed by the growing concerns voiced by women from outside the United States about the grave and detrimental impact of increasing militarism, globalization, religious and political fundamentalism, and U.S. foreign policy on their communities. Almost a year prior to the meeting, a planning group came together to conceive of a gathering that could share the voices of international activists with their potential allies within the United States, and take the first steps in building effective transnational alliances.

The 83 activists who came together represented a diverse group of local, regional, and national leaders in the U.S. women's movement, international women's rights activists from about 20 countries, policy makers, scholars, and a few progressive and feminist donors. Our meeting not only coincided with the anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, but also came on the heels of a more recent tragedy – the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast of the United States. Thanks to the efforts and networks of the Planning Committee, Black, Latina, Asian and Native women, immigrant women and young women were well represented among the 50 participants based in the United States. We engaged in spirited, sometimes painful dialogue informed by our different life experiences, identities, perspectives and core concerns.

Our charge over the course of our time together was to deepen our understanding of how the conditions facing women worldwide are directly related to the unequal and unjust exercise of power by a few over the many. In particular, we used feminism as a lens through which to analyze and critique structures of power, whether at home, in local institutions, or in global governance mechanisms. We also explored our shared experiences of discrimination, violence, and exploitation and debated how we might begin to exploit the potential of transnational organizing for women's rights.

In many international gatherings, the distance between those who live in the so-called "developed world" and those who come from the so-called "developing world" is so great that it requires much time and effort to overcome. But in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina – which was widely covered in the international media – the historic realities of race and class oppression in the United States were vividly highlighted, enabling many international participants to see for the first time how closely U.S. domestic policy mirrors its foreign policy. We were able to jointly critique the delayed and narrowly militaristic response to the crisis, ignoring local wisdom and networks, and the rapidly deteriorating conditions of life that face the world's women.

For many international participants the gathering offered a rare opportunity to listen to U.S. activists working with farm workers, prisoners, recent immigrants, and factory laborers in the United States. This proved pivotal to their ability to look beyond their most prevalent image of the United States as a wealthy, white, dominant superpower. We quickly arrived at a basic level of agreement about how women, even within the wealthiest nations, often lack sufficient access to the most basic conditions of life: food, water and shelter. They stagger under the burden of unending, undervalued and underpaid work. They experience devastating violence, inflicted upon them by intimate partners, by strangers, and by their communities, as well as by state actors, the military and occupation forces. Discrimination on the basis of sex and sexual orientation undermines women's right to self-determination and to full and free expression of their humanity. Women are unable to secure their own health and that of their families. Their decisions about whether, when, and in what circumstances to bear children are too often not their own. Despite decades of



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conferences, declarations, international conventions and determined organizing, human rights and human security remain distant goals for far too many of the world's women.

In our collective conversations, we came to unanimous agreement about the leading role the United States has played in undermining and distorting local and national economies, monopolizing access to resources, imposing its political will, and initiating devastating wars and invasions. We were clear that these are issues of critical importance and immediate concern to women in the current political climate, as the world's most powerful nation fuels a global descent into a state of permanent war. While international activists called on their U.S. sisters to identify and assume a leadership role in fashioning a more effective resistance movement to U.S. policy, we were reminded by U.S. activists that multiple challenges within the United States continue to subvert the emergence of a well-organized, dynamic transnational, transformational anti-racist and anti-imperialist women's movement.

Our reflections on the state of the world and our critique of the United States were grounded in workshops and sessions that provided a strong historical context for the current crisis. Our indigenous sisters from North, Central and South America reminded us that the global theft and exploitation of land and resources, and the destruction of peoples, dates back hundreds of years, having shaped the modern system of nation states. These processes have generally been interwoven with militarism and justifying religious ideologies. But the particular forms of economic, social, and cultural globalization of the past several decades has led to the aggressive privatization of social and environmental resources and resulted in the subjugation of peoples, objects, processes, and relationships to the demands of capital. Women around the globe are acutely aware of the massive power accumulated by transnational corporations and international finance institutions that erode the powers of both civil society and governments. These factors continue to undermine the gains women have made through decades of struggle.

A few core themes emerged from our conversations: the challenges facing indigenous peoples as they seek to protect the earth itself, defend their collective rights to self-determination and sovereignty over lands, resources and territories, and address violence both within communities and from external forces:

- the continued persistence of racial injustice and inequity at global, national and local levels, and their intimate interconnection with economic globalization and militarism
- gender-based violence, including rape by military and occupying forces, domestic violence, and the trafficking of women as a systemic and structural concern for women everywhere in the world
- the links among cultures of conquest, religious domination, heterosexism and women's subjugation
- the failure of current economic systems to achieve any semblance of equal opportunity or justice, while both absolute and relative poverty persist as the reality for most women
- issues of migration, national identity, language and culture, hierarchies of citizenship rights, criminalization, and the exploitation of especially vulnerable populations
- the experience of occupation and its impact on women and their families
- the emergence of various forms of religious extremism and fundamentalism, and their impact on women, our organizations and movements
- the growing influence of militarism as the only approach to conflict resolution, and its dangerous effects on the wellbeing of communities

The group emphasized that current U.S. administration rhetoric on militant Islam needs to be contextualized by the historical fact of U.S. support for militant Islamic factions in Afghanistan and other parts of the world during the Cold War, as part of the U.S. effort to counter the perceived threat of global communism. The current trend towards conflation of church and state in the United States exacerbates extremist trends in all religions in different regions of the world. The re-emergence of such extremism has the effect of reinforcing misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and aggression, while narrowing secular space. At the same time, some participants urged us not to forget the potential of faith and religious



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traditions to play a more progressive role in women's own liberation efforts and their resistance to multiple forms of oppression.

Our collective analysis of the post-9/11 world led us to a blistering critique of the current U.S. administration's decision to wage a permanent war around the world. We are deeply concerned by the ways in which militarism shapes the lives of women, our children and communities worldwide. Around the globe, armed actors, from supra-national forces to village and neighborhood thugs, forcibly impose their will on women's bodies, their families, and communities. Women both participate in militarism and are victims of its processes. They are forced to serve soldiers in occupation armies and become tragic victims of brutal sexual assault. The logic of militarism desensitizes and dehumanizes soldiers to the pain and suffering of others, whether armed combatants, or innocent civilians. Military violence both creates and fuels a culture of violence that is widely disseminated by corporate mass media. Militarism is hugely profitable for corporations based in the United States and Western Europe which are cornerstones of a permanent war economy.

Collective Call for Change:

The activists gathered in New York expressed unanimous resistance to the forces of violence, coercion, and inequality that mark current relations between the so-called developed and developing world, and that define women's continued status as second-class citizens in every society. Our vision is one of a shared world that is free of poverty and violence, in which everyone's rights are realized and where diverse cultures and creativities are cherished and nurtured, as is the environment that sustains us.

Towards this end we call for efforts to continue and sustain transnational dialogues between and among women. These forums enable us to share and learn and build alliances that can help us to take both immediate actions on specific concerns as well as to take the first steps towards crafting longer-term strategies to bring peace and justice to our world. We believe that women in the United States must continue to have opportunities to hear from and learn from their sisters in other parts of the world, so that they can better understand the impact of their government and the corporate actors based in this country. Similarly, women from other countries need to be able to count on U.S.-based groups and movements to actively resist the imperial policies and practices of the United States.

Our goal is to strengthen the connections between and among women activists, such as those represented at this meeting. Such expanded linkages would enable women to mobilize and transform their local or regional initiatives into broader and more visible platforms for social change, and to take the first steps towards organizing a vibrant and visible transnational women's resistance movement to current U.S. domestic and foreign policy. As this discourse deepens, it will yield more strategic interventions that truly transcend the barriers between women of the Global North and those of the Global South.

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