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Global Justice movement

# Why is CADTM feminist?

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**In terms of its political charter (approved in January 2009 during the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil), CADTM, as an international organization, does not appear to focus on feminism or on specific work with women. However, all its work regarding debt cancellation implicitly aims for women's emancipation. For CADTM debt cancellation is merely a means to achieve a goal; the liberation of all human beings – women and men – from all forms of oppression.**

However, the political charter does clearly specify that equality between men and women we call for must extend to private life (including all personal relationships between women and their partners, women and their families, or women and their communities) as well as public life (labour relations, access to quality public services, integration into the economic sphere, action on all levels of political power).

In CADTM's view, women must free themselves; to do so they must build the organizations they see as best suited to achieve this end. CADTM works alongside women's movements with a similar political outlook, i.e. putting mobilization first, such as the World March of Women.

## Excerpts from the political charter

For CADTM, debt cancellation is not an end in itself. It is a necessary condition but not enough in order to guarantee the satisfaction of human rights. (...) Alongside the cancellation of debt, it is vital to implement other radical alternatives amongst which:

- Guarantee of equality between men and women in all spheres of life.

Other elements of the charter more or less explicitly deal with women's rights:

- Declaration of the superiority of human rights over commercial law and ensure that governments, international financial institutions and businesses respect the different international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948), the Convention on the political rights of women (1952), the International Covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (ICESCR, 1966), The International Covenant on civil and political rights (ICCPR, 1966), the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination towards women (CEDAW, 1981), the Declaration on the right to development (DRD, 1986), the Convention relating to rights of migrant workers and their families (1990), the Declaration on the defenders of human rights (1998) and the Declaration on the rights of native peoples (2007).

- Ensuring the sovereignty of people on their lives and on their future, which especially means making available to the public natural resources, the results from Research and Development, other common goods of humanity and strategic sectors of the economy.

- Leaving behind of the capitalist system based on the search for maximum private profit, growth and individualism,

with the aim of creating a society whereby social and environmental needs are at the heart of political choices.

In order to achieve these changes and achieve social emancipation, CADTM International believes that it is the people themselves who need to rise to the challenge of change. They must not be freed but must free themselves. (...) The strengthening of social movements is a priority for the CADTM. It is participating, on an international scale, towards the creation of a large popular movement which is aware, critical and mobilized. Convinced of the need to unite the struggles for emancipation, CADTM International supports all organizations and coalitions which work towards equality, social justice, the conservation of nature and peace.

In other words, following the argument that peoples must free themselves, women must also free themselves. Hence the importance of autonomous feminist organizations and movements to firmly uphold this demand on the agenda. This mustn't prevent them from joining forces with other social movements such as CADTM to achieve progress.

The technical charter includes more practical aspects of this equality between women and men sought within the network, but all of this can be improved during the CADTM's upcoming global assemblies.

11 - To practise within the heart of the organization, equality between women and men and to act within society so that this equality becomes a reality. The member organizations of the network consciously act within their organization to put an end to all forms of oppression against women.

15 - The exclusion of a member of the international network is decided by the global assembly in cases of violation of the political charter, in cases of racist or sexist behaviour or any other attitude or action which goes against the spirit of this charter.

CADTM considers itself feminist although as Jules Falquet puts it "these mixed movements in which many women and feminists, are involved, however progressive they claim to be, often reproduce a sexual division of labour, family models and 'cultural identities' that are quite traditional in terms of social gender relations (...) These movements have put forward scarcely any precise projects to transform social gender relations." [1]

If being feminist means becoming conscious that patriarchy oppresses us all, whichever sex we belong to, as a victim or as a sympathetic witness, and recognising that it is a system, wanting to destroy patriarchy to make the women's emancipation possible, then CADTM is feminist.

## **A feminist consciousness expressed in organizational texts, yes... but in practice?**

In the global justice milieu and thus in CADTM as in other movements, men are often better known outside their organizations; they write more often and are more often asked to represent their organization in part due to these writings. Thus they become better known in the media (interviews, etc.) and outside the organization in general, and the vicious circle goes on and on. The CADTM is fully aware of this spiral and determinedly tries to remedy it by encouraging women members of the network and the international secretariat staff to get a higher profile by publishing articles, taking the floor on important occasions and directly answering media questions without calling upon their male colleagues. CADTM encourages women's role as delegates to ordinary meetings with outside partners as well as at major international events such as World Social Forums.

At the international secretariat level, women on staff are in charge of major responsibilities: the general secretariat, publication of CADTM's journal, the website, coordination of internal working groups such as the "Law" group,

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responsibility for specific areas of intervention (work supporting undocumented people, anti-colonial memory, the World March of Women, etc.).

It is not easy to make progress in this field as quickly as we would like 1) due to external patriarchal pressure: for instance, journalists only want to talk to well-known men, people seeking to approach the person in charge and not accepting that women present themselves as the person in charge; 2) but also, and it is the hardest thing to change, due to feelings of inferiority and of incompetence experienced by far too many women.

On the other hand, the work that is beginning to be done more collectively on CADTM's feminist intervention means that internal discussions on this matter, work related on the curriculum, external trainings on feminist issues must be a responsibility for male colleagues on the different CADTM staffs throughout the world. We don't want "Ms. Feminism" to be the sole spokesperson on this essential topic.

Lastly, again in a voluntarist approach, we are trying to "pair up" women from the North and women from the South within the network to highlight the experience and knowledge of both groups. For instance, the experience of Emilie Atchaca from CADD Benin (member of CADTM network) in the field of women-managed microcredit to achieve women's empowerment.

At the level of CADTM network member organizations, the situation varies greatly from country to country. Some organizations were created on the general basis of the fight for the abolition of Third World debt (CADTM Belgium); others already existed as women's organizations (CADD in Benin, Colectivo Feminista in Ecuador) before they adhered to the international network for debt cancellation. This means that the gender or feminist perspective is taken into account very differently according to the member organizations.

But overall, we do have to qualify the feminist credentials claimed by CADTM international network members somewhat.

It certainly can be asserted that, at the international level, we incorporate the four aspects outlined by Belgian NGO *Le Monde selon les femmes* [\[2\]](#):

- 1) We deal with the gender approach when and if possible (the issue is marginalized);
- 2) we deal with it as a particular point that one "specialized" person or group is in charge of (the topic is dealt with but not by all staff members and not integrated into the overall work);
- 3) gender inequality is just one inequality among others (the issue is diluted);
- 4) and lastly, the gender issue is part of the NGO's policy fundamentals (with the risk that making the approach practice will be put off again and again, given the "scope of the task".

Be that as it may, raising consciousness of patriarchal oppression within an organization is the starting point for all progress it can make in that field, whether within the organization itself or in the actions it carries out outside.

In terms of the individuals in CADTM, things are just as complicated and mirror all the contradictory behaviour prevailing in our societies, North and South.

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Among women in the North, there is a strong emphasis on the feminist dimension although feminist struggles – as such – have no longer been on the agenda since the 1980s neo-liberal wave and although demands are more often made at the institutional level rather than in the streets. Even young women who did not take part in the specific feminist struggles in the streets (against layoffs of women, for abortion rights, etc.) are aware that feminism plays a very important part in their emancipation. They do see the successive crises as threats to the rights won through struggles.

As for women in the South, many CADTM international network members are feminist organizations or were launched at the behest of feminist organizations' or under their pressure. These organizations, beyond their specific actions aimed at women, thus have a solid and broad political vision of what women's emancipation must be... and of the means to achieve it.

A seminar held in Amsterdam in June 1998, "Synergies against violence towards women" has already shown where things stand. It stressed how great the challenge is for people taking action for women's emancipation. It was also an opportunity to develop awareness of the courage and determination of all women fighting for a radical change in society. [3]

Among men in the North and the South, stances are resolutely feminist but cracks can emerge, reflecting how difficult it is to break from the prevailing cultural and social model. One significant example: during an informal discussion among several CADTM network members, two women from the North made clear their opposition to genital mutilation. One man from the South and one man from the North united to challenge them, saying the women did not understand the situation of their sisters in the South, that they would lead them – with their unsuitable Western ideas – into hellish social isolation, exclusion etc. This example reveals that the task is a complex one and that alliances in such cases do not necessarily follow the North/South divide but the male/female divide.

In short, in CADTM as elsewhere, there is work to do. Refusing to hide this is already a step in moving forward. All social movements within the global justice movement should carry out the same introspective work in order to build and/or strengthen the feminist alternative.

*Translated by Stéphanie Jacquemont in collaboration with Marie Lagatta.*

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[1] Jules Falquet, « Une analyse du mouvement féministe latino-américain et caribéen dans la mondialisation », in *Le volcan latino américain ss la dir.* De Franck Gaudichaud, Les Editions Textuel, Paris, 2008, p. 151

[2] Claudine Drion and Poupette Choque, *Le genre dans les ONG (Gender in NGOs)*, Brussels, November 1999, pp 15-18

[3] *Femmes, enfants face à la violence. Résistances du Nord au Sud*, edited by Denise Comanne, Estela Retamoso and Eric Toussaint, CADTM, 1999, 216 pages