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Water is where everything intersects

Beverly Bell | Dec. 16, 2009

Marcela Olivera is in the center front. Photo courtesy of Marcela Olivera.

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 4 of 12

Around the world, water is being turned into a commodity for sale and for profit. But out of necessity and driven by a different vision, a global counter-trend is growing to assure water as a human right and a precious part of nature. The Bolivian organizer Marcela Olivera is part of this movement, and played a key role in the massive protests in 2000 when residents of the city of Cochabamba forced the Bechtel Corporation to give up control of the municipal water system. This would later be repeated in another city in Bolivia and in other cities around the world. Today Marcela helps coordinate a Latin America-wide coalition of citizen's organizations and women's groups who are winning inventive guarantees that household water be free or cheap, accessible, and safe; and that the earth's water be kept pure and flowing.

By Marcela Olivera

COCHABAMBA, Bolivia -- There have been a series of policies implemented in Bolivia intended to privatize our natural resources. One of these directly impacts people's everyday lives; it's the move to privatize water by giving multinational corporations contracts on municipal and on all sources of water supply. In Bolivia there was a huge public outcry against this in 2000 and 2005, and in the end we were able to reverse the policy. Now that's the official, romanticized version of what happened, but nobody sees what's happened since then.

Water issues are related to other, urgent things that are happening now in Bolivia. Water is the one issue where everything intersects; it crosses over into political and economic issues in every region and in every country. People's struggles over water are also about having their voices heard, having better living conditions. I think it's really important that we get that. Even the fact that Evo Morales is president of Bolivia now is really a result of the water war that broke out in 2000.

The struggle over who controls water is ongoing. What we're fighting for in Bolivia and Latin America now is to put together effective, participatory control by the people over our social resources of water, health and education as an alternative to private control.

But we're not searching for a single model for how to do things all over Latin America. I don't believe there is one solution to our problems; there are a lot of possibilities out there. Our realities are all so different, so diverse, that it would be impossible to say, "This will work for everybody."

In the midst of our fights to control our own resources, a really important development is that we're starting to connect with each other. That's one of the things that we're taking away from globalization: it's not just about the economic policies that are being imposed on us, it's also about bringing us into contact with one another. We're building alliances among ourselves that respect the differences and the diversity of experiences. That's the great thing about it.

What's going to be really important now is to try to connect with people on a human level. I think that's where we have to start, with the human side of things, and then from there to move on to bigger things, bridging the distances between us - not just the physical ones, but gaps in technology, communication, and sometimes even language. I think this is something that'll come later.

One of the connections that's happening is between women. The group I work with, Red VIDA [LIFE Network, or Interamerican Vigilance for the Defense of Rights and Water Network], is a Latin America-wide water rights network that's run by women. If you look at the outreach committee, it's all women; we're from El Salvador, Uruguay, Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, and the United States. The name says it all; the word "network" is feminine in Spanish. It's a network where there's a diversity of organizations, everything from unions to non-governmental organizations to grass-roots groups, but women are the driving force.

Women are still marginalized; there's a kind of invisibility around the work that women do on water issues. For example, I noticed that when the organizing work of a conference, say, is mainly done by women, what always happens is that the one standing up in front of the meeting to explain how everything was organized is a man.

I believe women are organizers by nature, because we're very sensitive and because we have the ability to show what we're feeling. I think it's fantastic that women have stepped up and are leading the way in the fight over water rights. In our continent, at least, the face of the movement is the face of a woman.

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women?s movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR *by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of* ***Other Worlds****[1]. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order. [2]

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

1. Emem Okon: First hand account of organizing women in Nigeria [3]
2. Coumba Touré: The Link to Humanity, Giving as a Way of Life [4]
3. Helia Lajeunesse: A former slave fights slavery [5]
4. Marcela Olivera: Water is where everything intersects [6]
5. Melody Gonzalez: People of the sun [7]
6. Ilda Martins de Souza: With every new day, you struggle for a better tomorrow [8]
7. S. Ushakumari: Not wasting the waste [9]
8. Shilpa Jain: We have everything we need: Reclaiming control of education [10]
9. Nayeli Guzman: This land is my teacher: Preserving Native agriculture and traditions [11]

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[3] http://ncronline.org/node/15899
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/16037
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/16104
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/16256
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/16352
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/16419
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[11] http://ncronline.org/node/16673