



Betty Williams, Ireland - 1976
Máiread Corrigan Maguire, Ireland - 1976
Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Guatemala - 1992
Prof. Jody Williams, USA - 1997
Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Iran - 2003
Prof. Wangari Maathai, Kenya - 2004

united for peace with justice and equality

As women Nobel Laureates, we express our firm solidarity with the women of Costa Rica who on many occasions have affirmed their collective commitment to democracy, gender equality and peace.

Sixty years ago, after an armed conflict that divided the country in two opposing factions, Costa Rica made the decision to dismantle the army, a decision that many believed would destroy the country. But those who supported the elimination of the military were smart enough to also create a social system dedicated to providing services for people and protecting human rights. In addition, Costa Rica safeguarded the “commons”, which includes the environment (of which 60 percent is protected), and the notion that electricity, telecommunications and water belong to the people, Costa Rica developed a constitution and a political process that established a democratic institutionality where people could work together to improve their nation. This is what has allowed the women's movement to achieve a social and economic status backed by this institutional framework that respects, protects and fulfills women's rights.

But women in Costa Rica are saying that this type of democracy is an “endangered species” that needs to be protected. Just like 60 years ago Costa Rica was the only country to abolish its army, today Costa Rica is the only Central American country that has not ratified the free trade agreement with the U.S. known as CAFTA, a treaty which, if ratified, would override the Constitution in most of the aspects which have made Costa Rica unique: this treaty encloses what is left of the commons, permits the production of weapons for export, treats human organs as merchandize and overrides the protection of the environment to name just a few of the women’s concerns.

But enormous pressure from the Costa Rican and US governments, is insisting on the ratification of CAFTA, suggesting scare tactics, which came to light in a Memorandum written by the Vice President and a congressman for the official campaign for CAFTA. And, even though the Government has denied putting any of the memorandum tactics in place, women in Costa Rica claim that there is enough evidence that the leaders of the campaign which supports the ratification of CAFTA, known as the Yes people, have been using their economic and political power to scare regular Costa Ricans into voting YES.

Because of a growing popular resistance to the Treaty, comprised in its majority by women, according to national polls, the first ever public referendum in the country was called to be held on October 7th. According to women in Costa Rica, although this Referendum could have been a sound democratic way to decide the issue, this process has eroded many of the egalitarian principles which underpinned electoral processes. One example provided by women is that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) has allowed high government officials, including the President and Vice Presidents, to campaign in favor of the ratification of the treaty while on the other hand, in an unprecedented case in Costa Rica's public university system, born with autonomy since its inception after the 1948 Revolution, the TSE prohibited scholarly and academic institutions from participating in Campaigns. Furthermore, the TSE has not put in place any system to balance the amount of money spent on publicity by both sides.

On this occasion we particularly want to highlight the work of the "Women Against CAFTA" (*Mujeres Contra el TLC*) in their commitment to gender equality without which democracy and peace are not possible. These women have created a coalition to mobilize public opinion about the threats to women's rights in CAFTA. These women join thousands of others in their

opposition to the ratification of CAFTA because of its impact in eroding the rights Costa Ricans have gained through their struggles. We know that the women of Costa Rica have struggled against the threats to human rights and the commons—actions largely absent from international and national media coverage. We know that the struggle to maintain Costa Rica’s democracy persists; as do the concerns about budget cuts to education and basic services and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

We are inspired by women’s courageous and powerful role in the growing citizen mobilization for democracy and wellbeing. We find these struggles particularly hopeful in a global context where violence and discrimination against women is growing. Reports from *Estado de la Nacion* (State of the Nation), and on Human Development from the UNDP (UN Development Program) show women’s growing impoverishment or the "feminization of poverty" as a result of neo-liberal policies, including those emphasized in CAFTA. The reasons for this are that women have always been the "poorest of the poor," but increased privatization has led to higher health and education costs, such that a growing number of families cannot afford proper medical care, nor to send their children to school. And it is the women who take on the extra tasks as substitute nurses, caretakers or teachers, often in addition to working at paid jobs.

These studies show that cuts in public spending have led to elimination of jobs in the public sector, particularly those held by women, many of them ending up in private sector service jobs with low pay, few benefits and no job security. Women are more likely to put themselves last, focusing more on their families when it comes to limited availability of food, education, and health care, and so are far more likely to be malnourished, illiterate, and have chronic health problems left untreated. In addition, declines in economic prosperity have contributed to a

deterioration of social conditions, with widespread increases in crime and also violence, particularly against women.

The Special Representatives on health and on food have both found that neo-liberal economic policies also have a devastating impact on the environment, with greater emphasis on agricultural export production which has provided jobs but has also led to greater pollution and environmental damage. Bananas, vegetables and flowers, and coffee production all require enormous amounts of fertilizer and pesticides, all of which may contribute to health and fertility problems among workers and nearby residents, particularly women.

We renounce violence—in particular violence that targets women *as* women. The everyday actions that women take to lead their lives with dignity and security encourage us, and we wish to help ensure that their rights and the rights of their communities are respected and upheld. We recognize and stand with the women activists who suffer threats and persecution for their work to build a more just and equitable society.

We are inspired by the extraordinary levels of organization and leadership among Costa Rican women who have come together to support the struggle against CAFTA. We also congratulate our sisters on the recent victories: These advances are the product of their collective commitment and courageous mobilization. Across the Americas we have seen severe setbacks for women's rights, yet their persistence and their achievements give us hope and inspiration to continue our own struggles.