

Editorial: Women's Global Organizing: Celebrations and cautions

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Recent Forums of the Association of Women's Rights and Development (AWID) are marked by an energy that you cannot forget. The Forum on the 'Power of Movements' held in South Africa, November 2008 was no exception. From the giant screens of the plenaries, the hundreds of women marching through the streets of Cape Town, the jiving and theatre in the evenings and the staggering number of workshops and interactive events, it was simply exhilarating to see all that women are achieving. As ever, the Forum was highly professional, filled to the brim and driven by numerous agendas. Attending an AWID Forum no one could say there is no global women's movement. Nor could one say there is a homogeneous women's movement. Nor that it does not attract the young. More than 30 per cent of the participants, including many plenary speakers, were under 30 years of age. The minority of the 2,000 + participants were white Europeans or North Americans. Many more people applied than who could attend, in short it was the place to be, among a positively pulsating number of women, some men and transgenders.

The journal captures at least something of the range of issues covered: women's organizing in rights and social movements from grassroot to UN level, multiple and various histories of women struggles in all regions, intergenerational dialogue, disability, fundamentalism, communication strategies, minority rights, sexual health and reproductive rights, union organizing, gender-based violence, and HIV and AIDS. The earlier *Development* issue on sexuality and development in this volume featured one of the outstanding plenary talks on sexualities by Nadine. As the second in a volume on culture and identity this issue has gladly picked up on the strong theme throughout the Forum of identity and cultural politics and the politics of difference. There is much to learn and celebrate here interestingly largely from women's movements in the South. The collage of pictures presented in this issue's 'Last Word' is a vivid illustration of the flavour of the meeting, vibrant, young and not so young, outspoken women from the South. 'Window on the World' gives just a sample of the many movements and organizations represented and we invite you to visit their websites as well as the AWID website (www.awid.org) where there are more images, videos, and audio of the Forum. This journal is designed to add to this rich set of resource materials. It was a privilege for me as an Editor of

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Development to be asked to put together this issue as the Forum Report. So all that being said, let me take some editorial privilege and share what I felt were some of the questions, even absences, I felt at the Forum.

Obviously, my view is determined by my own positioning as an Australian writer and editor living in Europe working on European issues and networking transnationally around issues of social and economic justice. At the Forum I was decidedly in the minority of people speaking about economic development, the financial crisis, climate change, and how to bring feminist perspectives into social and economic justice movements. In some of the smaller rooms a few of us found ourselves attending each others' workshops to talk about hunger, famine, natural disasters, migration, the global financial crisis, and other political and economic issues. As Casal de Vela and Ofreneo suggest in their article it seemed at times that the Forum was more interested in women's sexuality issues than gender and poverty concerns. Given the timing of the meeting in November 2008 I experienced an overwhelming silence about the impact of Obama's Presidency for women and for the world. Instead it was whispered about in the corridors. Even more difficult was the fact that the Forum did not have the space for local South African women to attend and there were apparently protests outside the Forum at the fee charged, an issue conscientiously raised in the plenary. Later I spoke with newcomers to AWID Forums who had attended thinking the whole Forum would be about small grassroots movement organizing. They were somewhat bewildered at the scene they found there of highly professional speakers, high-tech presentations, and a whole set of those in the know about the world of New York UN policy debates.

Inevitably there are insiders and outsiders. But it is not so inevitable that identity, difference, and sexuality issues should be seen as the primary issues of AWID.

The feminist analysis of intersectionality asks that women take up and act on all the complex factors that determine gender injustice and subjugation: heteronormativity, identity, economic inequality, unequal resource base, disability,

differential gender impacts of health and environment, colonialism, geopolitical power struggles, conflict, gendered culture and social oppression. In such an important Forum all of these factors need to be discussed as a way to understand, support, and further struggles for multiple freedoms.

I sincerely applaud that the AWID Forum reversed heteronormative privilege so that so many women from around the world could celebrate lesbianism as the norm (whatever their own sexual inclinations). As Srilatha Batliwala stated 'The whole conference is a lesbian caucus.' But that privileging of difference needs to be contextualized together with huge global economic and political injustice.

The concern with economic and social justice seemed strangely muted. Casal de Vela and Ofreneo in their article reflecting on southern feminism underline that issues of gender identity and sexual orientation are directly linked to economic livelihood issues. They rightly link homophobia and poverty within macro structures of discrimination and exclusion. This also rings true in Europe where I engage in women's organizing with Women in Development Europe and the European Feminist Forum. European based feminists, whatever their origin, are also dealing with the problems of exclusion, poverty, racism, and sexism wrapped together in the current steep challenges to women's political and social rights as well as economic well-being. It is important to ensure that issues of culture identity and women's visibility go hand in hand with the issues of economic rights, justice, and livelihoods.

I write this editorial some four months after the Forum and wonder even more deeply at the lack of discussion about the financial and economic crises. International Women's Day last weekend in Rome (where I live) beyond the puzzling phenomena of sprigs of yellow mimosa flowers sold on the corners to Italian women by Asian men, featured marches and public debates about deepening precarity, the care crisis, gendered and racialized economic inequalities. Gender-based violence was also on the agenda but along with warnings about how this feminist agenda is in danger of being instrumentalized in a more and more xenophobic Europe. In Rome, we are treated to

almost daily reports on 'migrant' men violating women, to the point where there are now to be vigilanti on public buses. The disturbing spectre of fascism where the non-citizen is named, stigmatized, and brutalized is not far away.

That is not to say that I think gender-based violence is not a major and important issue, far from it, I have just written a book about 'Body Politics in Development' (Zed Books, 2009) which takes sexual and gender-based violence as a major theme. The point is that we need to ensure that those issues are carefully linked to other economic and social justice struggles. I did not attend the World Social Forum (WSF) in Belem in January 2009. From all reports it seems that women activists were visibly part of the WSF in the prevailing discussions on financial crises, climate change, alternatives to capitalism and indigenous rights. Out of the 133,000 registered 50,000 were youth and many of them young women. It is good again to see that young women are visible and engaged in social movements. But from the messages I received it seems that the feminist issues of sexuality, patriarchy, militarism, and religious extremism are much less visible. The feminist gatherings that did speak about them were poorly attended, in a kind of mirror image of the AWID Forum where economic and social justice issues were sidelined. I do not think I would jump to the conclusion as one report from South Asia did that this reflected the fact that Latin American women did not experience gender inequality, male domination, or curbs on their freedom. What I would say is that particular silence suggests that

strategically the agenda of the AWID Forum and WSF need to come together so that the connections are clear about the links among sexuality, racism, gender-based violence, and social and economic justice.

In making those connections I cannot resist but go back to the image of migrant men mostly from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka selling sprigs of mimosa flowers on International Women's Day on the streets of Rome. I have no idea how that particular custom started, but it is somewhat ironic that International Women's Day which is about women's labour rights has destitute migrant men who left their home and family in far off lands standing on street corners to sell (native Latin American) flowers in the eternal city. There is a lot of mixed cultural symbolism here, but undergirding it is deep-seated poverty of the men, the undermining of the strong message of women's rights of international women's day, and a less than ecological or fair trade going on. The flowers arrive in packing cases no doubt part of the organized business by the same people who provide the migrant men with the very, very cheap goods that daily appear and disappear on pavements and make-shift stalls along my street. But this year there was a difference. First I saw very few women bought the flowers, some of them I noted tersely brushed away the shabby and thin men who tried to ply their trade. By the end of the day there were straggles of mimosa discarded on top of the packing cases. There were unsold and unwanted. This year there was not so much good will, nor money, nor so much to celebrate on women's day.