

# **Strategy Planning Workshop of the Feminist Network on Gender, Development and Information Society Policies**

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## Stories of feminist collaborations

*".. in these collective constructions of feminist grounds, the need to practise and nurture politics of alliance between our different struggles – or the linking of “scattered resistances – should not be underestimated. Much lip-service has been paid to alliances, often skirting the hard work they demand in practice. Alliances are about engaging with others and therefore also about dealing with positions invested in power. ... Alliances are inevitably based on the involvement of our subjectivities; they are about working with differences and working through conflicts. Perhaps they are about love. In any case, we cannot render them into abstract models and can only try to share our pedagogies and methodologies."*

*Different worlds possible: feminist yearnings for shared futures, Sarah Bracke<sup>1</sup>*

In extracting lessons about feminist collaboration from APC's 15 years of experience in advocacy, I tried to find expressions and interpretations that resonate with other feminist collaborative narratives by reading what other feminists have to say about feminist dreams, visions and strategies for the future.

What I have found out is that feminists talk about recurrent themes which revolve around strengthening feminist leadership, institution building, involving younger women, looking after ourselves, addressing diversity and difference, coming to terms with power, making money, working alongside other social movements and working with men. All of these themes are relevant to our experience, some more obvious, others more opaque. I'd like to explore these themes by highlighting three stories of collaboration from APC.

### From margin to center

The first story is an internal APC one. A tale of how feminists collectively and painstrakingly transformed APC into a network that champions gender advocacy.

Gender advocacy has not always enjoyed complete support within APC. In June 1992, when several women based at various member organisations identified the need to serve the international women's environment and development movement during the Earth Summit, the obstacles to preventing women's appropriation of ICTs were many. Karen Banks, former coordinator of WNSP, recounts that even some colleagues failed to grasp the imperative of involving women and the difficulties in gaining permission from management to allocate time for this kind of work. The persistence of the founding members of the network and support from some male colleagues convinced APC to officially establish the Women's Networking Support Programme in 1993.

Since then, WNSP has always tried to find ways of creating autonomous and supportive spaces for its members and pursuing its own advocacy agenda. This independence has been key in our exploration of feminist perspectives in advocacy. Until 2000, our time was spent on reaching out to women and their organisations through a slow and solid<sup>1</sup> process of trust and relationship building.

As we became more involved in WSIS though, we found ourselves working more closely with our male colleagues and with APC members. The intense advocacy process leading up to 2003 and 2005 Summits brought WNSP and gender advocacy closer to APC members. By 2003, gender equality and women's

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<sup>1</sup> 'Different worlds possible: feminist yearnings for shared futures', The Future of Women's Rights, Global Visions and Strategies, Zed Books, 2004, pp 111-112.

empowerment was adopted as a crosscutting theme of our organisation's strategic priorities from 2004-2008. As a result of this policy commitment, it is not an exaggeration to claim that APC and its members have collectively embraced gender as a crosscut within the network. The inclusion of a gender equality and women's right perspective is no longer just the role of the APC Women's Networking Programme. The awareness, commitment and capacity of APC staff and its members in taking up gender and women's issues in its policy advocacy -- internationally, regionally and nationally -- has meant that gender issues are entering more policy spaces and being taken up by social movements in countries that APC members are part of.

APC is one of the very few international networks in our sector that visibly prioritises working in gender and women's rights issues. While the level of involvement of our members is still uneven, many are active in the WNSP network while others have initiated gender related projects of their own. This level of commitment and involvement has taken many years to reach and it has come from an openness of APC members on the one hand and the continuous outreach from WNSP to APC members. A key here is the active involvement of women from various members in WNSP activities and the will from the leadership of each member organisation.

### **Multiple Fronts**

*"The key to the future, then, is to maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses in all approaches to gender equality. Interdisciplinary, holistic and collaborative strategies that build on what has worked and are informed by potential risks will be more effective. History shows that when we have defined the problems of women in narrow ways and attempt to remedy them using a limited number of tools, change is rarely long-term or systemic. Inevitably, women's movements will have to stop working in thematic and institutional silos.*

*"From 'opposing' to 'proposing': finding proactive global strategies for feminist futures, Joanna Kerr<sup>2</sup>*

WNSP have been moving back and forth within two "constituencies" for many years, mostly separately and at times together. The first is the women's movement and the second is what I call the ICT for development community. It is a constant balancing act and we grapple with finding the intersections between these constituencies all the time. Part of the complexity and therefore the difficulty is that these two movements have very little shared experience and shared advocacy spaces. From Beijing until the WSIS process, the advocacy process remained largely contained within each constituency. Throughout most of these processes, it was the advocacy efforts of the network of feminist women's information and communications organisations that bridged these two separate streams. For the most part, it is this feminist core that have kept our advocacy going and pushed it towards the spaces where we now find ourselves in.

For example, for the World Conference on Women in Beijing, APC WNSP sought individual feminists and organisations in the advocacy for the inclusion of the 2 strategic objectives on media and communications in the Beijing Platform of Action. Five years later, APC was part of the formation of WomenAction - a global feminist women's communication network – that expanded the scope of the discourse and advocacy around these two strategic objectives to include broader information and communication society issues. WomenAction also served as the communication center of the overall five year review for the women's movement by hosting online discussions, B+5 review websites, training women's organisations in using ICTs for their advocacies, etc. The success of this feminist collaboration lay in its plurality and participation of the most active women's information and communication agencies/organisations in various

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Kerr, 'From 'opposing' to 'proposing': finding proactive global strategies for feminist futures", *The Future of Women's Rights, Global Visions and Strategies*, Zed Books, 2004, pp 25-26.

regions of the world. It covered women's community radio networks, women's media centers, women's information and resource centers, and women's activist organisations working in ICTs. It was an open network that drew on the expertise and activism of its members.

By the time the preparatory process for WSIS started, the same network was in a position to draw on its collaboration towards collective gender advocacy. What made this possible was the shared experience and relationship building in the past. WSIS opened the field to more gender advocates and all rallied around the WSIS Gender Caucus. A development that brought both strength and complexity in the global gender advocacy network in WSIS.

The WSIS Gender Caucus was a multi-stakeholder group of women and men from national governments, civil society and non-governmental organisations, the private sector and the United Nations system. It advocated for gender equality and women's rights as fundamental principles in the WSIS process. APC WNSP actively participated in the Caucus (along with other partners like Isis International Manila and IWTC) in the first phase of the summit. However, the relationship within the Caucus was wrought with issues of representation, transparency, accountability and participation. As a result, APC and a number of NGOs left the Caucus and expressed its collaboration through the NGO Strategies Working Group that focused on positions of civil society organisations. From APC's point of view, this rupture in the gender advocacy network, weakened the effectiveness of gender advocacy within the WSIS process. While the resulting Declaration and Plan of Action of WSIS included a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, gender advocates who painstakingly advocated for five years in WSIS were left without a stronger network and a continuing common agenda for WSIS follow-up. The failure of this collaboration from APC's experience emanated from the lack of openness in decision-making among network members and the limited and vague access to information and processes within the caucus. A culture of trust and support was not created within the Caucus. From a substantive point of view, there was very little attention and space provided for discussion and debate of political differences of the various stakeholders around the issues that the Caucus was advocating for.

This experience certainly demonstrated the difficulties in working with differences and conflicts and dealing with power among individuals and organisations even when they are drawn together through a shared commitment to gender justice and women's empowerment.

### **Moving forward**

Despite these challenges however, or perhaps because of them, I think what we've collectively achieved is the formation of a "women and communication" constituency that advocates around IST issues and also provides communications support for the women's movement. This network also occupies a growing influence in the ICT for development arena. I believe that the core of this network has been our feminist collaborations, in all of its tenacity, daring, inspiration and imperfections.

Because 'information society and technology issues are not in the mainstream of feminist and women's movement advocacy, feminists working in this field have had to plunge into the deep end, so to speak. Gender advocates found each other through advocacy in WSIS – in the regional processes in various regions, in the series of preparatory processes and the 2 summits. We also engaged in the process of formulation of national ICT policies. I think it is not taking too much credit to claim that we've firmly put gender within these processes. However, the challenge of feminist collaboration in intergovernmental spaces is to more sharply identify our policy interventions beyond the general call of asking governments and other multilateral agencies to ensure that policies are gender sensitive. We do need to zero in on specific issues that capture the conundrum of contradictions to create interest and debate that both our audiences

will care about. issues like content regulation and internet governance, women's rights to access to technological resources, women's right to information and knowledge and feminism and technology.

When I look back at the last 15 years, what I think we have going for us are:

- we now have a shared experience that we can learn from collectively
- we have widened the scope of our advocacies
- we are sharpening/deepening various aspects of this advocacy in
- we have caught the attention of the women's movement and there are signs that ICT/IST is becoming a feminist concern

What we need are challenging yet safe spaces (like this workshop) where we can reflect on our experiences and share agendas and strategies. I'd like to be able to come to an annual or regular refection that each of us commit to – an open space where we can bring our questions, our doubts and our learning. Each of our organisations can contribute resources into this feminist project. There are many opportunities in the coming year to do this. One of them is the coming AWID forum. WNSP has been talking to AWID about organising a feminist tech camp, to facilitate exchange and building of knowledge, strategies and skills on ICTs, and the articulation of its political and practical significance in relation to feminist and women's rights organising, movement building and advocacies. The planned event will be a 4-day gathering of 200-300 women from Asia Pacific, Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America. It will be held in Cape Town, South Africa in October 2008, preceeding the AWID Forum in 2008.

APC is also doing two evaluations of gender and ICT policy experience. One is focused on building capacity of gender advocates in national ICT policy processes and and the other is an evaluation of gender and women's rights advocacy from Beijing to WSIS in a series of impact assessments that we are doing with partners.

We'd like to offer these two activities as part of our feminist project. My belief is that the only way to truly test how far we can go with our collaborations is in practice. It is also a meaningful way to learn and contribute to the feminist movement.