

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

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# Global Feminist Collaborations for Gender Advocacy – Some Critical Reflections

## Introduction

In the process of negotiating standing room for feminist agendas with/within the state, the UN, and other governance institutions, I am sure that many a weary feminist has pondered the words of Audre Lorde, a renowned black lesbian feminist poet and thinker, once famously said in the 1970's: "You cannot dismantle the master's house, using the master's tools." This becomes a relevant reflection for us as we talk about feminist collaborations for advocacy in spaces that could be defined very much as "the master's."

Feminist scholar Valerie Moghadam refers to the period of engagement with the UN processes as the period in which the women's movement (and indeed other social movements) metamorphosed into NGOs:

"During the 1990's, feminist organizing reached feverish intensity at the otherwise banal venues associated with the UN and multilateral agencies, above all at the 1995 Beijing conference. To participate in these spaces, feminist activism took the institutional form of the non-governmental organisation, or NGO, drawing on established domestic and regional political trajectories. Through work at the transnational scale, advocates learned politicking, lobbying, and UN prose style, honed their eye for power structures and advanced their fluency in the language of funders and agencies"<sup>1</sup>

We don't have too much time to consider the changing face of the women's movement today, but enough to say that I have come away from my own engagements in these spaces thinking that our interactions with the UN have shaped us as much as, if not more than, we have changed those institutions and their patriarchal hardwiring. I think it is important to think of how our movements are shaped by the very institutions as spaces that we try to influence, how our priorities and programmes, and even our advocacies seem to be shaped by what there is funding for.

Having said that, I recognize that feminists have made important gains in these different spaces, and I affirm the vital importance of having a strong feminist presence where international policies and legislation are being negotiated. Groups such as the Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) have certainly had a deliberate and critical engagement with the UN, very strongly critiquing structural adjustment and neoliberal policies passed off as sustainable human development. Numerous other groups that actively monitor and lobby the CEDAW Committee and the UN Human Rights Commission, and of course there are those of us who have attempted negotiating space and visibility within debates and policy making around the Information Society.

Having been involved in different levels of advocacy in the rarefied environment of the UN since the mid-90's, I do think quite often about the master's house and the master's tools. Certainly, Isis International Manila's engagement with the Feminist Dialogues process and its attempts to network with other feminist groups as the South-South Initiative have much to do with frustration and disillusionment, not just with the spaces we were engaged in, but somewhat more deeply with the inner workings of civil society entities, including those formed in the name of Gender.

There are many things that we could speak about today, but I thought I would confine my reflection here to two themes.

- Reassertion of Feminist Political Agendas

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<sup>1</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, *Transnational Feminist Networks: Collective Action in an Era of Globalisation*, in *International Sociology*, March 2000, Vol. 15(1): 57-85

- Transnational Feminist Networking in the Present Conjuncture

## 1. Reassertion of Feminist Political Agendas

The global women's movement has had over three decades of engagements in UN spaces and the development terrain. Our approaches have never been homogenous or singular, and it could be said that the most active lobbying and negotiations (or disputes) are those that have taken place within the context of the women's movement.<sup>2</sup> Even so, given the diversity of actors working on gender advocacy, our interventions have been for the most part, we have resorted to agreements on the lowest common denominator amongst those in these advocacy spaces. Given the deeply depoliticized ways in which gender is being mainstreamed inside of UN spaces, it seems to me that we need to rethink the way that we proceed with our advocacy in global spaces.

Following are some of my observations in relation to this:

1. Historically, society and progressive social movements alike have viewed feminism and feminists with some suspicion particularly in Africa and the Asia Pacific region. As such, gender advocacy, although drawing from profoundly feminist analysis of gender inequality and the systemic nature of gender based discrimination, has for the most part be de-linked from its links to the movement that gave meaning to these concepts and to the women who fought for and continue to fight for visibility of these concerns. I believe it is time to reassert feminist political agendas and continuously draw our advocacy positions from explicitly feminist analyses, and organize us using feminist praxis and principles. As Sally Burch proffered at the start of this meeting: "Feminism is a political proposal for the whole of humanity."
2. It is inevitable that women will have different entry points, priorities, perspectives and advantages in gender advocacy in different spaces. We all know that it is crucial that commonalities are not assumed, but rather pieced together through a careful process of sharing analytical insights and political perspectives and standpoints. However, we need to desist firmly demands by donors, UN agencies, and our governments to keep it simple and present simplified statements about "women's needs."
3. Participating in UN spaces has meant for many of us learning a trained canter instead of trotting at our natural spaces, or galloping wildly when the occasion requires it. I believe need to cut through the histrionics and high theatre of the UN, and call a spade a spade on notions such as multistakeholderism, and have astute analysis that present our positions. I think that we do already do this, as evident in the written works of some people in this room, but perhaps it is the nature of our engagement in these spaces that needs far more thought and monitoring.
4. In different moments, the best mode of advocacy may not be furious scribbling of different texts to be inserted into the main document. It may be a peaceful protest rally, or a staged walk out when we recognize that we are effectively being taken on a verbose ride, and our presence there will add legitimacy to a process that disadvantages those whose interests we seek to upload. Several others in this meeting have already spoken about the ways in corporatisation of development and the continuum between neoliberal market-led globalization and development processes. I think that feminists have always had creative, wildly different ways of getting their point across, and we need to start thinking about ways to continue to engage while resisting the push to canter to the beat of the master's drum.

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<sup>2</sup> I speak of the women's movement in the singular from its very broadest sense, to suggest that diversity acknowledged, feminists generally occupy the same range/spectrum of social movements spaces.

## 2. Transnational Feminist Networking in the Present Conjuncture

By the present conjuncture, I refer to the moment in social movements processes in era of globalization both facilitated by new ICTs and the attendant revolution in our understanding, use, access and practice of communications. After the decade of the paper chase of the UN conferences, and when the dust was starting to settle in the early 2000's, there was an explosion of anti-globalisation protests led by a confluence of social movements that have previously not connected in the same way. And this process continues in the World Social Forums that have been held since 2001.

There isn't time to describe the history of women's networking prior to the era of new ICTs. I think however, its important in this space to note that networking as a strategy is a very old movement building strategy of feminists. The desire to connect, share, learn from, strategise as feminists was a very deep one, and in the late sixties and early 1970's, feminists would scratch together lists of women from all over the world to send their information to. Isis' first and very precious database of women had a figure under 300 names in it – and it took a year and a half to put it together. Needless to say the world we live in is a vastly different one, and a thousand names could be pulled together in a quick intensive research in a few hours or days, depending on your capacity.

Much of my own experience in feminist networking was matured during my years in Isis, so many of the observations I make below are those linked with Isis' experience of feminist networking:

1. The notion of transnational feminist networking is something that we are exploring through the Feminist Dialogues Coordinating Group (FD CG). It is an attempt to organize transnational divides, to go beyond our groupings based on nationality, citizenship, ethnicity and regions, but rather coming together on the basis of our political ideological and cultural positions. The reason for doing this is that if your struggle is with the entities and phenomena that are transnational in nature, then we need to be able to network in ways that can surface and refine our perspectives on social transformation for different vantage points. Also this modality shifts away from a UN-ised viewing of representation and recognizes that there are contestations and multiple "national" identities within state borders.
2. Power relations are inherent in all relationships, and certainly this is true of feminist networks as well. Exclusivity, inner circles, hegemony of certain modes of thought, language hegemony, lack of transparency in processes, poor accountability and decision making processes etc. – power dynamics reveal contradictions in feminist practices and is one of the reasons why many a young feminist become disillusioned in the context of our stated commitment to democratic, non-hierarchical and transparent ways of working. The only way I see around these things is to first carefully work through the network's core principles of working, its shared ethics and values. Time needs to be given to build trust, and create mechanisms for honest and timely feedback to each other on these challenges.
3. Alliance building is a vital part of work as feminist networks for global advocacy. Even as we look for allies in our struggles, it is vital that we have very clear bottom lines of who we will and will not align with, how, in what moments and for what finite time period. Given the surge of social movement collaborations in the past five years, many feminists in the WSF space speak about the vital importance of allowing ourselves to be influenced by other movement agendas even as we seek to influence other movements.

Finally, I believe the strength of feminists and our movements is that we make conscious attempts to subvert hierarchies and hegemonies – or at the very least, if we find

ourselves creating hegemonies of thought, then it is possible within our philosophical framework for someone to bravely point it out, and find resonance with others who also think the same. One could argue that our lives littered with the master's tools, and we have no choice but to use them...returning to Audre Lorde's words, I think she was speaking of tools in a deeper metaphorical sense than actual physical ones. I think our tools of revolution are our transgressive, radical thought, our courage to live and act differently, and our power as collectives.

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