

The South Touching Base

Distances were broken—in more ways than one—when women leaders from different parts of the globe came together—in real time—via a Net “chat” to discuss who are the women from the South, how they are doing, and what ought to change in their lives.

As an information and communications organisation, Isis International-Manila has observed how electronic mailing lists or discussion groups are fast becoming a popular and accessible choice for “coming together.” These allow women to get informed and engage each other. But these electronic conferences are carried out over a period of days or weeks, and many women are unable to join such discussions regularly and promptly. Isis then invited several women who live in different time zones to a three-hour meeting via an online chat. No easy task, as the Isis staff who coordinated the event and its systems administrator will attest. On 30 October 2001, at 9:00 p.m., Manila time, these women connected to Isis to “chat” on the formation of the South-South Initiative (SSI) that took place at the 45th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) meeting in New York, one of the preparatory meetings to the World Conference on Racism and Xenophobia (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa. SSI was formed as a venue for the exchange of women’s groups on various issues of relevance to women in the South, including the substance of their participation in international fora and global women’s events. One activity of the SSI in preparation for the WCAR was an electronic mailing list to discuss the question of the universality and diversity of Southern women living in the South. An issue that surfaced while setting up the list was the criteria of participation. The decision to make this electronic conference a space for Southern women living or working in the South gave way to debates on whether claiming such a “tag” or identity would have adverse impact on the women’s movement as a whole.

The following are excerpts of the online chat of women as they took up the challenge and responded to the contentious question of whether there is a need for an SSI, and who qualifies to join it. What is the value of such formation (and identity) as SSI? What are the pitfalls?

As you read the transcript below, keep in mind that the chat was a first time for most of the women who participated, as well as for Isis International-Manila itself. In about four instances, Women in Action had to slightly adjust the sequencing of discussants’ contributions or responses for a smoother flow.

Participants:

<susanna1911> Susanna George, Director of Isis International-Manila

<nicola_joseph> Nicola Joseph, communications expert working with refugee and migrant communities in Australia

<Yvonneus2001> Yvonne Underhill-Sem, a member of the Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) who is now based in Hamburg, Germany

<anaelena_obando> Ana Elena Obando, a Costa Rica-based women’s/human rights advocate and lawyer

<lynnem_muthoni> Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki, Director of FEMNET, which is based in Nairobi, Kenya, and is active in the African women’s movement

<roxanna_carillo> Roxanna Carillo, researcher and activist in the women’s movement working with the New York office of UNIFEM

<wamboi_muchina> Pauline Muchina, a graduate student from New York involved in the ecumenical movement through the World Council of Churches based in New York, USA

<luz_martinez64> Luz Maria Martinez, a staff of Isis International-Manila who served as moderator of the chat
Teresita Elegado (Conference Coordinator, Isis International-Manila)

Precy Obja-an (Systems Administrator, Isis International-Manila)

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To:



<luz_martinez64>

Luz: Hello, everyone. How are all of you doing?

Muthoni: Fine. And yourself?

Ana Elena: Doing pretty good, just waking up... thanks. (7:00 a.m. in Costa Rica)

Muthoni: Yes, it's a bit difficult coordinating people all over the world for this.

Yvonne: All is good here—and good to be in 'touch.'

Nicola: Wish I was there... It is already midnight here in Sydney.

Susanna: Greetings, everyone!!! I am so excited that this is happening... There is a whole team of us here in Isis.

Luz: We just got word that Roxanna will be a little late. In the meantime, can we please begin introductions. I am your moderator for the night (or morning). I am a Mexican with a Puerto Rican stepfather, who migrated to the U.S., was raised there, and is now married to a Filipino and residing in Manila. Been with Isis for 8 years.

Susanna: All right, me next... I am Susanna George, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. George Verghese, immigrants from Kerala, India to Malaysia. So my identity is that of an immigrant's child. I feel like a Malaysian mostly, but also like a fringe dweller that belongs nowhere. I have been in Isis for the past three years, and am now learning how to speak English with a Filipino accent!!

Nicola: I am Nicola Joseph... Arab born in Australia, WAS married to a South African/Namibian... one daughter... I work in radio, mostly community, grassroots stuff. I am sitting in Sydney in a suburb where you would have a hard time finding a white person... although this is changing. Most of my work is in the local area with migrants, refugees, etc.

Yvonne: Me... born in Cook Islands to mother from [the] same and Nuie—another island country, and father from New Zealand (NZ). Migrated with family to NZ when [it was] time for school. Also schooled in Hawaii where I first met Asian folk. Lived in Papua New Guinea where my partner is from. Since then, lived in Samoa and now in Germany as a 'tied' migrant with three kids. Been actively involved with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) for last the few years... new job with the General Secretariat of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP) shortly.

Muthoni: I'm Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki, a mixed-race Kenyan with a Scottish Canadian mother and Gikuyu father... Was born and brought up in Nairobi, Kenya, spent seven years in Canada also doing community media/radio work with immigrant and refugee women, came back here six years ago. Work in communications, gender and human rights. Also write political analyses and attempt to write creatively. Now working with the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), a regional women's umbrella organisation based in Nairobi.

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Ana Elena: I am Ana Elena Obando, a Latin American from Costa Rica, living here, a country with no army—pretty weird these days. I work as an independent consultant and part of the movement here. I work in Latin America and other regions doing human rights (work).

Luz: Thank you. We will now begin with a brief background on SSI.

The SSI was created at the 45th CSW Session in 2001. Women from the three Southern regions of Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean came together to define their agenda for the CSW and the WCAR process. It was clear at the time among those women present that they wanted to take the lead in putting their own issues forward, and they agreed to start by looking at their commonalities as Southern women. Some of these commonalities include: colonial histories, impact of economic globalisation, cultural and social homogenisation, the situations of migrants, trafficked women and indigenous peoples. Muthoni, you were at the 45th CSW. Can you recall other points [on] the formation of SSI? Note: when you are done with your statement, please put an E at the end to let us know you are finished.



<lynne_muthoni>

Muthoni: Well, I think it was clear that we shared some frustrations with the overall process of women's organising for the WCAR. I, for one, and some of my colleagues were excited to begin discussions with other women from the South... because we have our own histories of encounters/migrations to address among ourselves. So, there was a proactive side to it, too. The decision was to see what we could do collectively to prepare for the WCAR as a stepping stone to better and more effective Southern women's engagement with the CSW and other UN processes. It was a bit of an experiment really. E

Susanna: I agree with Muthoni, there was excitement in the conversations that the group of women from the South had in New York. [But] I recall two critiques being raised about the formation of SSI. First, that black women in the North had in fact been discussing the issue of race, class and gender for a long time. And second, that women from the South in the North should be included in the discussion of women in the South (the geographic and political) because there were many commonalities between us. E

Muthoni: I'll just add that my network and the other regional women's networks have spent probably the last two years trying to improve the coordination of African women's participation in the CSW, trying to make sure we play leadership roles that are recognised, trying to demonstrate the incredible competencies we do have. For us, the idea of an SSI was a natural extension of this work. [About] the two criticisms of the SSI that Susanna's just reminded us of, I'd say that yes, of course women of colour in the North have been discussing identity politics for a long time and they've made impact domestically. But women of colour in the South haven't really discussed identity in the same way and we're concerned about impact internationally. Obviously, there are linkages to be made between women of colour in the North and in the South. But I strongly feel that the discussion needs to begin among ourselves first. E

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Yvonne: Was there any discussion in those early conversations about why the special space needed? I recall how our discussion [in Geneva at the 2nd Preparatory Committee (Prep Com) Meeting for the WCAR] about everyday events such as "showering" (as in bathing where the water source makes the experience of showering different for women in the South and in the North). This led to many more expressions of commonality that centered on our bodies. This was another dimension to the long-standing tensions between women in the North and South. ... sorry, I forgot to put the E.

Luz: There have been counterarguments to the SSI Initiative. For instance, some of our colleagues in the women's movement are saying that the SSI is taking away the global nature of the women's movement. What do you think of this?

Susanna: I agree with Luz that the other point of tension in relation to the SSI's meeting separately from the Women's Caucus at the 2nd Prep Com was that it was drawing away from the collective strength of a united women's voice. There was concern over the definition of the SSI as a space for women from the South located in the South, rather than a space that include women from the South located in the North. E

Ana Elena: It is a fact that the North-South division within our movement determines the access to power and resources and, as women from the South, we are still fighting for basic rights within countries that often depend economically and politically on the hegemonic countries. The global nature of the (women's) movement [is] not in question [when] we create spaces for discussing our issues as women from the South. However, criteria should be discussed. It should be based on our political action and we should discuss how we deal with diversity and very real power differences. Can we agree on a basis for political action? Can we make alliances within which we can negotiate power disparities? E

Yvonne: I think we need to recognise that the political terrain is really ever changing and political action also needs to change. In effect, this means dealing with differences with respect by [recognising] that there are many ways to participate in 'global movements' - and the SSI is one. E

Nicola: I agree that women in the North have discussed race, class and gender at length..., and continue to do so on a daily basis... in a very different manner to the discussions I have encountered in the South. At the same time, I find it astonishing that women in the North would suggest that the SSI was taking away the global nature of the women's movement... after years of doing exactly that to the South. I need to clarify my position here because as a woman from the South living in the North, I regard myself as being entirely positioned in the North, although I am engaged in a daily battle to resist this. I can understand why women in my position might feel the need to connect with women from the South. But we cannot deny the reality of our position in the North. The lines between North and South, of course, are blurred. With refugees in particular, I think the position is quite different, especially in Australia! But if we are talking about power structures, I am clearly placed in the North. Down under. Sorry I forgot the E.

Susanna: I recall a point made by Catherine Albisa, a Latina based in New York, about how the representation of the North in the women's movement in itself was one that excluded the voices of the smaller grassroots organisations. Meaning, those who accessed the global women's movement in the North were those with resources and power within the North. I think that this

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resonates with the point that Ana Elena is making about power differences. The same might also be said for those in the South able to access the global women's space. E

Muthoni: For me it's the old question of content and process. The content is usually fine. But the process of its articulation and the strategising to ensure that we move beyond articulation is exclusionary. Not necessarily by intent. But definitely in result. E

Ana Elena: Can you [further] explain that, Muthoni?

Muthoni: Well, coming back to the document that the SSI put together, the content, like Susanna mentioned, was also articulated in some of the 'global' women's documents. But not necessarily by us in a collective sense (beyond the tokenistic one African, one Asian, one Latin American and so on). Which is really not necessary or acceptable anymore. We do have structures of representation (as imperfect as they are, and I'm the first to admit that they are imperfect...but no more than anybody else's is). And, I think it is incumbent on us to improve them, but also for women in the North to respect them. It's not necessarily that our 'issues' get left out. It's that we don't feel we share in articulating them and/or strategising around them. E

Yvonne: I agree with Muthoni and this was very apparent in Geneva, for me, over the ownership of the concept of 'intersectionality.'
E

Luz: Yvonne, for the sake of others in the group, can you please expound on the concept of "intersectionality"?

Yvonne: Gee, that's a little hard but will try—other contributions are most welcome... Off the top of my head, the concept of intersectionality tries to articulate the idea that there are some key axes of oppression that have a compounding effect on other oppressions. Gender and race are two of them. Am sorry to rush here but I have to sign off to pick up my son from school. Will be back in about an hour... E

Muthoni: I think I would add that there's a generational dimension to this. We all have tendencies to build up and work with our own 'networks' of women that we trust. And yes, on Yvonne's comment on ownership of the notion of 'intersectionality,' I must admit I was a bit shocked, too. The concept clearly arises from and builds on the work of many women of colour in the North and in the South who have very clearly expressed how class, race, sexuality compound discrimination. Treating this huge legacy of work as though it didn't exist, as though the concept is new just because it's now placed in a human rights context was rather incredible.

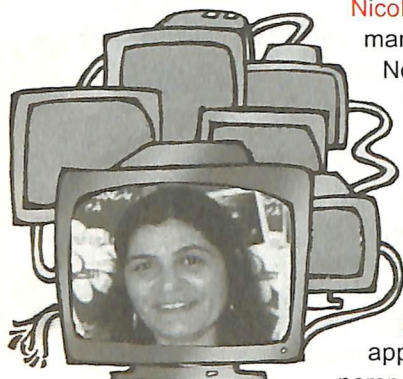
Ana Elena: So, I think we should look at those obstacles to articulation or strategising that [Muthoni] mentioned, and discuss amongst us what will be our own strategies and how can we strategise together. E

Muthoni: I think Susanna raises something that's fundamental to why we need to work together as women from the South. Women from the North can represent the objective global reality because they have access to information and knowledge from all our subjective regional realities (I'm being a bit ironic). We have so much to do just dealing with our own stuff that we don't have time (or resources) to sit and learn about women in Brazil or China or whatever. And, we don't have the same kind of current migration patterns—meaning that we can learn from the women around us that we work with. Our old migration patterns have left deep resentments that we need to address (for example, between Asian and African Kenyans). But we have to start making the

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effort. And that is why the SSI is so important. E



<nicola_joseph>

Nicola: It is true that women in my position are marginalised. That's why the Australian reps to many conferences are white (with one Asian, one black, etc. [thrown] in). This is our problem in the North which probably requires our own initiative. At the same time, a strong and collaborative voice from the South will help us in our daily battles in the North... I can't keep up with you girls. E

Luz: Has the SSI shown any distinct elements? How are the SSI issues of race and gender different from the Southern women who are based in the North and dealing with these same issues?

Ana Elena: It is true that "intersectionality" is not a new concept but power differences make it appear as if it belongs to some region. Our negotiations can draw on the "intersectionality" perspective as a methodology for identifying all our multiple identities and how our identities simultaneously interact and become oppressive or empowering. As well as the basis for exclusions or inclusions... Sorry, I was writing this... I will get focused on the last question now. E

Susanna: Ana Elena, I don't think it's merely a question of power differences. It is really a reflection of our colonial heritage. If you look at it with the most cynical eye, subjects, objects have for centuries been transported from the South to the North as artifacts to be examined. This still goes on, where people from the South are invited to the North to bear witness to their Southern realities... E

Susanna: As Muthoni so rightly notes, people of the South rarely presume to be able to represent any reality other than their own. But you will find China, India, Middle East "experts" in the North. And they have lived in these countries for some years. And speak the language perhaps. But I, for one, would never presume to be able to speak as an expert of the USA, even if I have spoken their language since the age of four and have lived in their midst for six years. E

Ana Elena: Susanna, when I talk about power differences or—better said—disparities, I am also considering former and new colonialism as part of it. Sorry if it was not understood...Can I add [that] I think your last point is only a reflection of the macro politics North-South. In the South, we are so busy surviving that we do not have time to own issues. Plus, we do not have the resources to be experts on the world, as some in the North are. E

Messenger: Pauline has joined the conference.

Susanna: I remember attending a meeting in January organised by the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women in Law and Development (APWLD) to prepare women to do lobbying on race and gender issues at the WCAR. There were several women who said that there was no racism in their own countries, but they wanted to do advocacy work in the WCAR process because there was racism out there. Their women were facing [racism] in other countries. It was only through the WCAR process that we, as women of the South, started to actually get to [see] where racism is located in our own societies. And a BIG HELLO TO PAULINE!!!

To:

Pauline: I am sorry I am having difficulties joining in. I am in New York and I am doing great.

Luz: Pauline, we have been discussing the formation of the SSI and issues that have led to such an initiative, and some of the counter arguments such as the SSI is taking away the global nature of the women's movement.

Pauline: Women in the South have never been a priority in many discussions happening in the world.

Muthoni: I just want to say that the argument (that the SSI is taking away the global nature of the women's movement) is a very old and tired argument. It's what [was] used in the North on women of colour... and I really don't think we should waste our time re-visiting it. E

Ana Elena: I agree with [Muthoni]. E

Pauline: I think that the creation of the SSI is the same as the creation of the women's movement. It was argued that there was no need for creating a separate movement because it would divide the society. The same thing seems to be said of the SSI.

Nicola: Well, in many ways we (Southern women based in the North) do face some of the same problems that you have mentioned. For one, there is a cultural fundamentalism which women face and which I have encountered in my battles—especially with men of colour, a clinging to the roots as they face white supremacy. Working with young girls from these communities has really shown me the importance of strong feminist perspectives, which come from women living in the South. It is a much more effective tool than using only examples of women of colour living in the North. E

Muthoni: That's so true. We've received several requests from different African countries about how to deal with the incorporation of Sharia into statutory law, for example. The only examples that are useful are from Arab feminists. Which is another reason why we need to talk more to one another. E

Luz: Going back to Ana Elena's point... How do we get our share of the resources that are available to Northern women?

Messenger: Roxanna Carillo has joined the conference.

Pauline: Hi, Roxanna! Lynne, what problem do we have to address?

Ana Elena: Hi Roxanna, you're just in time. We are talking about access to resources. We should probably negotiate with the Northern organisations that they should not compete by taking resources that will be more useful for work in the South. The North should work harder within their countries against the foreign policy of their governments killing the rest of the world. That will be a good help to the South. E

Roxanna: Hi friends, this is so new to me that I don't know where to write my reply! Let's see how it goes.



<roxanna_carillo>

To:

Nicola: That's a good question. I am in the North and I haven't worked out how to ensure that resources are spread amongst people of colour in the North. They hold on tightly to them. So, I agree with Pauline and Muthoni. Claiming the space, even in the form of SSI, is an important step. And exclusion is an essential strategy, unfortunately, to send a wake up call to women of the North. Those of us who don't need waking up should understand why you are leaving us out. Hi Roxanna! E

Muthoni: I agree with Ana Elena that work on Northern foreign policy is critical. Especially given the current situation. E

Roxanna: Regarding the question of resources, how do you think this should be put on the feminist agenda?

Ana Elena: We should start discussing how the North-South division determines access to power and resources. And the feminist agenda should address how then do we deal with diversity and very real power differences. And if we can make alliances within which we can negotiate North-South power disparities and power differences in our own regional, national and local contexts. The need for space for women of the South to further discuss and share their issues with other women of the South is already clear, I think. E

Pauline: I think it is about time that we women in the South put forth what kind of partnership we expect from the women in the North. For us to do this, as Susanna has reminded us, we must strengthen our own coalition. That is why I think that what we are doing now—talking to one another—is important. Roxanna, the resource question should be addressed to our partners in the North, but also across regions in the South. I agree with Ana Elena, too, that the issues of power distribution must be addressed before we can move forward. E

Muthoni: Again, I would say the onus is partly on us. We have to be clear what our priorities are, collectively, within and amongst our respective regions. And we have to facilitate reaching that clarity ourselves. Then, we can make the kind of demands that Pauline's mentioning. The onus necessarily shifts to Northern women to respond in good faith. E

Pauline: For example, who decides what should be in an agenda of an international meeting to address the women's movement? Shouldn't we as women from the South be given the opportunity to state what are our priorities, without someone else telling us what should be our concerns?



<wamboi_muchina>

Ana Elena: More than demands, we should think about what are the spaces for common political action among women from the South and the North and what are the South-South spaces for political action, etc. E

Muthoni: To come back to Ana Elena's and Roxanna's questions, we all work on different things and on different international processes. So, the point isn't just to determine which spaces we will organise in what ways. I think the point is to try—no matter where we are or what we're engaging—to plan ahead for these dynamics.

Roxanna: I agree with Ana Elena completely. If we want to be politically effective, we need to understand what are the spaces to discuss North-South relations, and when the political situation demands that we have a South-South understanding before we engage in a global conversation. I still



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have a problem about the vagueness of our understanding of the South and North identities. E

Luz: When will the contributions of Northern women, other than resources, be useful to the development of a feminist South-South analysis?

Muthoni: In response to Luz's question.., I think, for example, the need for Northern women to work... on their foreign policies. That's not about resources. That's about taking responsibility for our respective positioning. And that's always useful. E

Susanna: Yes, I agree with Ana Elena. It is more than what we demand from women in the North. It is about deciding which are the points of collaboration and joint political action, and which might be the points of departure. I mean, if women from the South genuinely had time to speak to each other, we may decide that what we need to do is more intra-regional dialogue before we can reach out inter-regionally. We may also decide that we need to simultaneously do more intra-regional leveling off, or within regions, then break down into further sub-regions and clusters... E

Nicola: I am sorry I am having difficulty here... because the messages are not coming, and then they all bounce in at once. I think setting the agenda for conferences is an extremely good point. I would like to add that new models for the delivery of aid from the North need to be mapped out, with emphasis on practical and useful infrastructure. I believe that this change will come from women of the South. E

Pauline: Speaking of political space, I think we have had those in international [and] regional meetings. I do agree that we have to be intentional. For example, during the CSW, how do we work together? Are we proposing to have an SSI caucus?

Muthoni: Yes. And hopefully, we'll do it better this year. E

Pauline: I also think that politically, we can begin to lobby international and regional organisations to put aside resources to facilitate SSI. Roxanna, I am not sure I understand the strict identities of the North and South. I believe that there are people who live and work in the countries of the North that [are from the countries of the South or are treated as such]. We must not leave them out.

Ana Elena: The experience of the WCAR suggests that identity politics can undermine the possibilities for political action and take the focus off the power relations that structure oppression in all its forms. It is also true that we can use the "intersectionality" perspective as a methodology for identifying our multiple identities, but not for it to be the basis of our political action... Because it will collapse at some point. Perhaps if we begin rethinking how we see our identities, we can avoid this trap. SSI can coexist with many other actions and spaces. E

Ana Elena: The SSI will exist as long as it is able to really discuss core issues related to power differences. Let's include more voices and let's establish a permanent virtual connection for discussing issues in depth.

Pauline: I am assuming that we are also talking about staying in other networks that we belong to, e.g., the Women's Caucus. We must make our voices heard in these forums. Sometimes, people get away with stuff because we let them. E

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Luz: We seem to be in agreement that an SSI is needed but the suggestion that the points to be discussed should be concrete. Any suggestions on this?

Muthoni: There are two strands to our working together. One is deconstructing our history as southern women and what it means (more ideological), and the other is practical engagement on issues of common concern. Doha's coming up, for example (The WTO Ministerial Meeting in Doha, Qatar.) This so-called 'war against terrorism,' which is profoundly affecting our region is [another] example, and I think it's extremely important that we find a way to act collectively on it.

Susanna: Ana Elena is suggesting that we look at the question of power differences, and Muthoni is suggesting that we look at practical engagement on common concerns as well as an ideological effort to understand the historical questions underlying the South. E

Muthoni: I think we could have three points to discuss. The first is ideological (power differences and what they mean, and how to address them better); the second, practical urgent actions (like the implications of September 11); and the third, practical ongoing engagement in specific international processes (like the CSW). E

Roxanna: One of the issues to be discussed at the next CSW is poverty. What are the plans to [ensure] a meaningful discussion that involves both North and South perspectives of the various issues that are connected to poverty? I like the suggestion to focus on practical issues and from there explore issues such as power differences, rather than have an entirely ideological discussion. E

Luz: Thank you all for being so diligent in following this conversation for the past three hours. We will be taking excerpts from this discussion which we will publish in the next issue of Women in Action, which is on South-South movements.

Ana Elena: Thanks to Isis. Nice chatting to all of you. Hugs. E.

Susanna: Thank you all for this. It was very interesting and take care. E

Roxanna: Thanks to all of you. It was great, this instant communication. We should explore it again.

Muthoni: Thank you all for making me think about things again. Special thanks to all the Isis women, especially the silent Teresita for getting us all online. Going home. Take care and bye.

Susanna: Okay, I'll be clicking out now. Thank you... [names of all the participants and Isis staff involved].

Luz: Pauline and Nicola, are you still there?

Nicola: I appear to have lost contact, although I am still connected. Good night all! ☺

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