

Building Global Solidarity through Feminist Dialogues

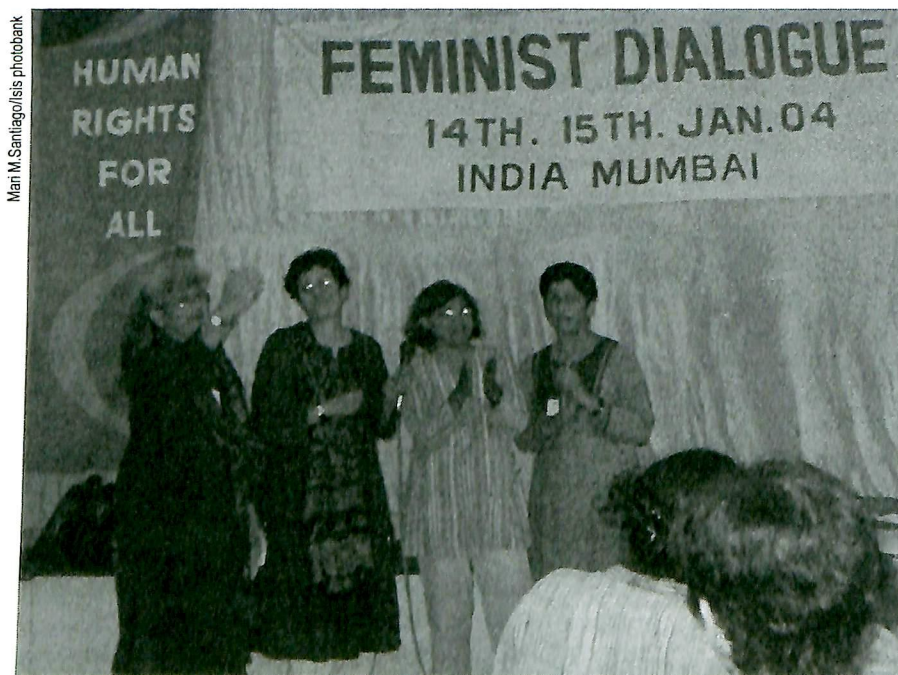
By Mari M. Santiago

With the current geopolitical context of neoliberal globalisation, resurgent fundamentalisms and escalating war and militarisation as impetus, alter-globalisation forces through the World Social Forum are consolidating their ranks. Around the world, regional and international women's movements are organising and putting forward intersectional analyses and cutting-edge strategies through the Feminist Dialogues.

It was a visual and aural feast, a dazzling demonstration of the diversity of the world's protest

movements—the strength of numbers of a heterogeneous mix gathered in one place: militant Dalits, political exiles from Tibet, African delegates in their flowing robes, adivasi (indigenous peoples from India), digicam-toting Canadian media activists, sashaying trannies (transgendered people), and anti-fundamentalist Latina feminists in scarves and carton lip masks, all forming an overwhelming display of solidarity that challenges U.S.-led globalisation's hegemony. These are the images embedded in my consciousness long after the 4th World Social Forum (WSF) last 21-25 January 2004 in Goregaon, Mumbai, India. Amid such diversity, how can one's voice be heard above the babble of voices representing multiple advocacies and perspectives?

Our five-woman team from Isis International-Manila was at the WSF to ensure that our information-communication rights advocacy in this day of globalised and corporatised media and ICTs is advanced through a panel discussion, just one of the 1,200 conferences, panels, seminars, workshops and cultural and political activities of the WSF. But we had another agenda at heart. As feminists, we were taking part in an autonomous, pre-WSF event, interacting with other women's international and regional non-government organisations (NGOs) on key concerns confronting women's movements. Isis Manila was co-organising, transnationally, a momentous meeting called "Building Solidarities: Feminist Dialogues."



Indian feminists from the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (NNWAG) led by Nandita Gandhi and Kamla Bhasin share a moment of song with the Feminist Dialogue participants,

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"We are here, because we were capable of co-ordinating work and ideas, and many dreams—those dreams are the ones that enable those of us here, and those who are not here, to build the movement, and a new world."

- Lucy Garrido, Articulacion Feminista Marcosur (AFM)⁷

Impetus to Transnational Feminist Organising

While the WSF itself is a progressive undertaking, it still is, unfortunately, a male-dominated space, with the women's movements initially inhabiting the margins. Candido Grzybowski, member of the WSF organising committee and Director of the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses (IBASE), lamented the Forum's limitation. "Women were just 43 percent of WSF delegates, although they make up over 50 percent of the world's population!... Women are a 'minority' created by ourselves within civil society. With respect to that, there is no point in blaming capitalism, neoliberalism, globalisation, exclusionary states, etc. This is a major problem that is engendered, developed, and maintained in the culture of civil society itself."⁵

On top of this marginalisation, the feminist movements—with their diverse perspectives, locations and experiences—are already faced with multiple challenges of globalisation, fundamentalism, war and militarisation. In the current geo-political context, there was a need to understand these phenomena that pose threats to women's rights and to discuss the many dimensions of our identities and struggles as women, as well as to engage much more with other global social justice movements.⁶ The WSF 2004 in Mumbai was within sight, and a group of feminists believed that the time was ripe to move forward with transnational feminist organising⁷, not around specific campaigns, but to carve out a space for political discussions and sharing of analyses and common actions among feminist organisations. Transcending national boundaries, the FD is an effort towards strengthening the feminist movements' abilities to organise and resist, to soften or even reverse the blows of globalisation. Thus was the Feminist Dialogues born.

While Feminist Dialogues agrees with the WSF principle of opposing neo-liberalism and domination of the world by capitalism, all forms of imperialism and cultural hegemony, it is an autonomous event that also stands against oppression and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, class, caste, nationality and sexual orientation.⁹ Historically, the Feminist Dialogues is an offshoot of a 2003 Women's Strategy Meeting that was held under a tree because of, ironically, lack of available space during the 3rd WSF in Porto Alegre. This meeting, which gathered over 50 women, came after the invisibility of feminist perspectives and concerns within the WSF was first articulated.¹⁰ Gigi Francisco of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) traces the Feminist Dialogues further back to the second WSF in 2002 where women in attendance held a "lightning rally" to draw attention to the implications of the Global Gag Rule¹¹ on women's reproductive rights. This demonstration brought the issue of abortion to the forefront of the WSF, which many of the (mostly male) members of the organising committee did not consider as a priority.¹²

The organising efforts of colleagues from the Articulacion Feminista Marcosur (AFM), who organised a women's caucus within the WSF International Coordinating Council, and the intense lobbying of Indian women's organisations gathered under the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (NNAWG), enabled the core group to gain more visibility and inclusion of feminist concerns in 4th WSF. Slowly, these gains are being consolidated.

The Feminist Dialogues Experience

The Feminist Dialogues was organised by a core planning team from seven organisations, namely, DAWN, WICEJ, AFM, NNWAG, African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), INFORM-Sri Lanka and Isis International-Manila, over months of formal and informal meetings, e-mail exchanges and marathon on-line conferencing. Feminist Dialogues represented an attempt to focus on a variety of concerns, from questions about state and non-state actors in shaping feminist agendas to experiences in feminist organizing and collective functioning, to the diversity of feminist perspectives of a range of issues—all toward a consolidation of a feminist politics of resistance.

Held from 14-15 January, days before the Mumbai WSF, the first Feminist Dialogues sessions gathered some 140 women from Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Europe. The participants represented diverse feminist perspectives. During the planning process, the objectives articulated broadened to include those beyond the WSF, including the strengthening of transnational feminist organising for which WSF was only one space. Envisioned as a process and a space for political discussions and debates among feminists, Feminist Dialogues aims to contribute to movement building within feminist networks, the women's movements and with other social movements.

Part of the meeting's ambitious agenda is to deepen feminist theorising, surfacing new strategies "to avoid backlashes on women's human rights" and "to make a dent in the isolation that women's movements have been experiencing over the last few years." The challenge of this task is that it can expose the fractures of women's regional campaigns on issues like abortion and sex selection, war and fundamentalisms, where more and more women are being recruited by conservative or right-wing forces.¹³

The FD seeks to emphasise the multiplicity of strategies that women's movements have employed in their everyday political practice. As AFM put it, "acknowledgment of the political differences and of the strategies in the feminist area is part of a process of

growth of the movement that, undoubtedly, enriches the political plurality we defend for the whole society. Hiding those differences within a feminist sisterhood is de-politising and returns the conflicts and differences to a private and domestic area."¹⁴

As such, even during the planning stage, the Coordinating Group consciously tried to ensure that the process would be an "an ethical dialogue" that would "highlight the diversity of feminist approaches and strategies."

Part of the challenge of the process was trying to analyse oppression from an intersectoral positioning. The group identified four focus themes: (i) Women's Human Rights (tensions at the intersection of globalisation and fundamentalism); (ii) Reclaiming Women's Bodies (the struggle for reproductive rights); (iii) Challenging Sexual Borders and Frontiers (affirming sexual rights); and (iv) Beyond the Local-Global Divide (resistances in current geopolitics).¹⁵

Papers on these themes were drafted and circulated to the networks. At the four plenary presentations, panelists highlighted the focal points of the theme papers and why it was necessary to discuss them. Smaller group discussions questioned, clarified and expounded on some of the key questions raised (see sidebar on pages 14-15). The group discussions also saw intense debates, including those on the interconnectedness of feminist struggles, regardless of re-

"The Feminist Dialogues is an effort to bring a small group of women together to say, 'can we listen to each other better and go deeper on some of the sticky points in global feminist organizing?' These issues include: North-South dynamics; differences in the hierarchy of issues such as reproductive rights, violence, or economic justice; work at the local or global levels and the choice of work venues; sexual identities and rigid definitions of sexuality; the use of a human rights perspective; co-optation; and religious fundamentalisms and how people engage with religion—whether they seek to re-interpret it in feminist ways and gain space within a religious tradition, or whether they seek to challenge religious traditions outright. We seek to explore how neo-liberalism, fundamentalisms, neo-conservatism, communalism and militarism are linked at the current juncture, what that means for women's rights, and how we get more strategic about our organizing."

- Carol Burton, Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ)

gional locations. Instead of a report back, the main points of the small group discussions were summarized and discussed at the plenary.

While concluding the event with more questions than answers—along with typical logistical snafus—the organisers view “the process leading up to [Feminist Dialogues] and conversations it sets in motion (are) perhaps the most valuable part of the experience.”¹⁷ One of the long-term goals of Feminist Dialogues, says WICEJ’s Carol Burton, is “how feminists can go into larger social movement arenas like the WSF with a more coherent feminist voice.”

Cross-fertilisation with the Broader Social Justice Movements

From the Mumbai WSF programme and the way it was conducted, it was obvious the women’s voices rang loud and strong. The WSF planners accepted the principle that all official panels should have gender

parity. A major mass event for 25,000 people addressed patriarchy and war. Over 140 feminist events, including big inter-movement panels for Fundamentalisms and Sexual Rights were held. It was observed that one of WSF’s weaknesses is the unexploited opportunity to dialogue across movements, reinforcing the ingrained sectoralism of many groups. “It is supposed to be a big tent to bring together a lot of different social movements, (but) everybody tends to talk to people within their own track... There hasn’t been a lot of dialogue about how to build an integrated social movement that can have a greater impact and how are we moving beyond our own niches,” Burton said.¹⁸

A major idea that surfaced during the WSF was the desire of women’s networks to locate themselves in relation to other social movements (and other women’s movements) because that “cross-fertilisation” of analyses and alliance across these movements limited. In the current geopolitical context, women’s bodies



Maria M. Santiago/isis photobank

With cardboard lip masks, helium balloons and scarves with red lips, women join the “Your Voice Against Fundamentalisms!” march, a major mobilisation event at the World Social Forum in Mumbai.

become a battlefield and a scapegoat in multiple ways, which actually feeds and helps justify the resurgence of religious fundamentalisms, legitimise wars and terrorism and consolidates the “Empire.” Feminist perspectives have a contribution to make to other social perspectives and can add value to other analyses. “We will explore how groups join in the broader movements for social change while keeping the issues on their own agendas and bringing those into the larger struggles,” Burton added.¹⁹

Indian feminists from NNWAG, for instance, organised, in collaboration with other feminist networks such as WICEJ, an inter-sectoral dialogue that brought together four groups: identity-based groups working around racial justice; unions; feminists; and gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender organisations. They also sponsored a major event on globalisation. Several regional and international networks also held did a session within the framework of the Campaign against Fundamentalisms called “Political bodies, the new emancipatory struggle to feed a radical democracy.”²⁰

A long-term goal of Feminist Dialogues is to bring this feminist intersectional understanding to the social movements that are trying to challenge the current system. During the planning sessions for Mumbai, it became clear to the core group that Feminist Dialogues would remain an autonomous event but locate itself more firmly in spaces where global social movements come together as transnational feminist organising. All other alterglobalisation spaces that offer venues for an articulation of a feminist politics of resistance are equally important. Here, feminists can “make the bold case that you can not really understand the current dynamics in the world, in terms of the global economy, militarism, and the rise of the religious right in many countries and the impact these issues... on people’s lives, without a feminist analysis of patriarchy,” Burton said.

Consolidating the Feminist Networks

With a consolidated feminist strategy during the WSF, the common observation during an assessment of the WSF chaired by INFORM-Sri Lanka’s Sunila Abeysekera and attended by some 50 women that the visibility of women at the panels changed the conference outcome in a positive way, compared with the previous WSF in Brazil. The assessment also noted Isis International-Manila’s efforts to disseminate in-

formation on the WSF and the Feminist Dialogues, specifically the Feminist Dialogues listserv, which was, initially, instrumental in spreading word about the women’s events in Mumbai and coordinating the participation of the invited feminist networks in the Feminist Dialogues.²¹ The assessment participants unified on the need to continue with the Dialogues as these were a demonstration of the possibility of bringing together diverse groups with their diverse experiences and perspectives toward building up stronger and cohesive networking. They also affirmed the potential of the Feminist Dialogues as a strategising space to bring feminist agendas to other movements and spaces beyond the WSF.

“We seek to draw out areas of tensions and disagreement not to further polarize, but to acknowledge and understand differences in order to find common ground and enhance the power of our global movements. We do not seek consensus or unanimity.”

- DAWN on Feminist Dialogues
www.dawn.org.fj

Despite the participants’ differences in language and consequent translation difficulties as well as the varied contexts, analyses and responses among the participants, who came from as far wide as Brazil, Tanzania, Bulgaria, Fiji, Iran and Thailand, the Dialogues both struggled and revelled in their diversity. As the organisers said: “We believe we can get hold of this moment for transnational women’s movements to generate new dialogues across our differences and to explore the possibilities for common projects and larger coalitions—both among ourselves and with other progressive movements. With feminists from many perspectives working together and listening to one another, we believe a better world is possible.”²²

Various shortcomings aside, particularly in methodology, that complicated attempts to explore convergences and divergences, many groups showed keen interest in continuing with this process after the Mumbai Feminist Dialogues. In a three-day evalua-

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tion of the Feminist Dialogues in Bangkok, Thailand in May 2004, the core group critiqued and reflected upon the event, agreed to improve on its methodology and political impact, and re-committed to the Feminist Dialogue process up to 2007. A core group member noted that outside of the women's movement, feminists are not perceived to be allied with the poor and that one of the "inspiring factors about the Feminist Dialogues is that not only can it potentially radically transform the political space but also change people's perceptions of feminists and revitalize the women's movement."²³ The process is also seen as a space for articulation among feminist networks to move forward on the construction of global agreements.

Still, "we have a long way to go in terms of understanding each other's realities and this was evidenced in the way we used certain terms and concepts, the priorities of our struggles in different regions," said Lydia Alpizar, a participant from the Association of Women in Development (AWID). The Dialogues could also be improved in the following areas: regional bal-

ances in terms of representation, provision for translations, and more involvement and participation of the various networks in preparing and drafting the thematic papers.

The Bangkok evaluation also reinforced the premise that women are not a homogenous group but have multiple and layered identities and experience multiple oppressions, which are derived from varied locations within patriarchal and unequal societies. This insight surfaced along with two important paradoxes: (1) While diverse feminisms and feminist perspectives, including some that may not describe themselves as 'feminist,' are recognised and respected, and while diversity of experiences is key to such a meeting, the Feminist Dialogues should ensure that this variety of locations does not create unevenness in terms of representation, discussions as well as leadership. The core group resolved to make planning and implementation of the Feminist Dialogues process more inclusive so that more groups and networks begin to see these as an significant site of collective strategising; and

Postscript: Porto Alegre-Bound

In 2005, the WSF will return for its fifth year in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Planning and preparation for the second Feminist Dialogues to be held from 24-25 January are ongoing. The Porto Alegre Feminist Dialogues round will focus on neo-liberal globalisation, fundamentalisms, and war and militarization.

Each of these themes will be analysed from a lens of patriarchy, intersectionality and agency. In particular, the next Dialogues will focus on women's bodies as the markers of discourse and political projects according to these themes. Here, sexual and reproductive rights are central to feminist analyses, as all three phenomena as political projects literally play themselves out on women's bodies. Sexual and reproductive rights are seen as the link between neo-liberal globalisation, fundamentalisms, and war and militarisation and thus are key to the formulation of feminist strategies. The cross-cutting nature of sexual and reproductive rights manifested at the policy, advocacy and agency levels make it imperative to examine these and link it to transnational feminist strategising as well as collaboration with other social movements. The Porto Alegre Feminist Dialogues will have a two-pronged focus: How transnational feminist strategising can be strengthened in the light of the three themes, and how transnational feminist alliances can be built and sustained across other social movements. Feminist strategies will be examined in relation to state and global governance; society/community, and social movements.

So much interest was generated by the last Dialogues that the core group decided to expand the meeting to allow more women to participate — from 150 to 300. An intensive application and democratic selection process is underway.²⁶ A committee has formulated a set of basic criteria to guide the selection of participants—in terms of both individual and collective participation — to guarantee diversity and balance.

(2) The hesitation on the part of each of the members of the coordination group to take collective leadership affected the participation and the quality of discussions. Issues of power, control and democracy within organizations and networks were identified as matters to be dealt with. The core group affirmed willingness to wrestle with power dynamics in honest and constructive ways.²⁴

The Feminist Dialogues will hold on to its initially agreed upon principles of commitment to collective, collaborative, diverse, disperse and inter-generational processes; of seeking to create a participatory space of mutual exchange and learning rather than reliance on “experts” or well-known leaders; of structuring the dialogues in a way that allows everyone’s voices to be heard through group discussions and other inclusive formats; of working through differences in a spirit of respect, honesty and openness, and of recognizing the diversity of experiences and perspectives.

And therein lies the challenge and the paradox of the FD and other transnational organising efforts and spaces like the WSF: that amid great diversity, we seek to have tighter linkages; amid multiple advocacies we seek to focus our energies against a common adversary.

Along with its political objectives, the Feminist Dialogues experience will hopefully evolve a feminist ethic that includes respect, honesty, transparency, mutual accountability, flexibility, a spirit of collaboration and good humour—values with which we could take on, anytime, any neoliberal globalisation foes and with which to build another possible world.²⁵ ☺

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(Footnotes)

- ¹ For more details on the Mumbai process and the 5th WSF, visit <<http://www.wsfindia.org>> and <<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>>.
- ² Mario Osava, “World Social Forum: 1968’s Heirs Seek to Pull Together,” Inter-Press Service.
- ³ Norman Solomon, “A Different World Is Possible: Porto Alegre vs. the Corporate Media,” <http://sunsite.utk.edu/FINS/Periodicals_and_Newspapers/Fins-PaN-46.htm>.
- ⁴ “The New Global Resistance and the Emergence of the WSF,” <<http://www.transform.it/newsletter/8920047189.php>>

- ⁵ See <<http://www.dawn.org.fj/publications/docs/cardosawsf.doc>>.
- ⁶ Feminist Dialogues Global Proposal, 2004.
- ⁷ For more discussion on the possibilities and pitfalls of transnational social justice organizing, see Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink’s widely-read *Activists Beyond Borders* (Cornell University Press, 1998).
- ⁸ Quoted from a Network Women in Development Europe/WIDE report on the WSF by Martha Salazar, February 2004, www.eurosur.org/wide/Globalisation/WSF04.htm.
- ⁹ “Women’s Movements Get A Boost,” by the author, http://www.isismen.org/onsite/_wsf/fd-report.html.
- ¹⁰ FD Core Group, “Feminist Dialogues – Mumbai Evaluation Report,” Bangkok, Thailand, 2004.
- ¹¹ The Global Gag rule, also known as the Mexico City policy, are restrictions imposed by the U.S. Government in January 2001 on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) overseas receiving international family planning assistance.
- ¹² Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, “Beyond the Local-Global Divide: Resistances, Feminist Groups Examine Organising Strategies,” Isis International-Manila.
- ¹³ Martha Salazar, “Feminist Dialogue: Building Solidarities: Feminist Spinning of Social Movement Networks,” Network Women in Development Europe/WIDE.
- ¹⁴ AFM evaluation of the Mumbai Feminist Dialogues (Unpublished paper)
- ¹⁵ To review the 2004 documents including the Feminist Dialogues concept paper and critique on neo-liberalism, fundamentalisms and anti-democratic practices, visit www.isismen.org/fdpm.html.
- ¹⁶ Culled from the Feminist Dialogues evaluation in Mumbai, WIDE report and Mavic Cabrera-Balleza’s onsite report for Isis International-Manila.
- ¹⁷ AFM evaluation, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Carol Barton, Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), <<http://www.awid.org/article.pl?sid=04/03/17/1852201&mode=thread>>
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ For a complete listing of feminist and women’s events during the WSF 2004, see <<http://www.isismen.org/onsite/wsf/womenevents.html>>
- ²¹ See <<http://www.feministdialogue.isismen.org/>>.
- ²² Mari M. Santiago, “Women’s Movements Get A Boost,” <http://www.isismen.org/onsite/_wsf/fd-report.html>.
- ²³ Coordinating Group, Feminist Dialogues, “Mumbai Evaluation Report,” Bangkok, Thailand, 2004.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Visit <http://www.isismen.org/fd/FD_application_Nov_4_2004_final_rtf> to download the application form. Questions regarding the process may be addressed to Bina Srinivasan <binasr@eth.net> or Susanna George <susanna@isismen.org>.