

At the Crossroads: Rethinking the Critical Advocacies of the Women's Movements

a forum report by Necta Montes-Rocas and Malen Ibañez

There have been many long strides and turning points for the women's movement since the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), marked at each point by binding frameworks and policies enacted at international, regional and national levels to provide human security to women.¹ The global campaign for women's human rights was aimed to move the advocacy to address centuries of suffering, injustices and discrimination that society has continued to inflict on women to another stage that seeks social transformation. In these times and confronted still by many contradictions and compounding issues of political-religious fundamentalisms, war and militarism, and an intensification of neo-liberal imperialist agenda, the women's movement(s) face new challenges (in the midst of an acknowledged backlash) and impetus to examine the different facets of feminist organising.

Isis International-Manila actively participated in a collaborative effort of several global and regional women's networks (e.g., Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ)) to organise the international Feminist Dialogues, held on 14-15 January 2004 in Mumbai, India, in conjunction with the World Social Forum 2004. The Feminist Dialogues meeting was an opportunity for feminists to meet and discuss four the-

matic areas: reproductive rights, sexuality, human rights and local and global movements. This meeting provided space for the articulation and exchange of views on, and insights into, the different political projects of the women's movements over the years. The women invited to the forum came from a broad spectrum of political platforms and advocacy positions, even if some commonality on issues such as globalisation, increased militarism, and fundamentalisms were implicit. The two days proved much too short, and many wished for more time to formulate more conclusive thoughts from such a process.

Even so, the Feminist Dialogue clearly showed that the women's movement is at a crossroads. The diversity and subjectivity of perspectives amongst feminist and women activists around advocacy platforms that had been core to the women's movements make it essential for us, as feminists and women activists, to persist in critiquing, debating and more strongly articulating their points of commonality, while recognising our political and ideological differences.

To continue this process of open feminist debate on issues of critical concern to the women's movements, Isis International-Manila and Women and Gender Institute (WAGI) of Miriam College, Philippines held a one-day forum in April 2004. Entitled "At the Crossroads: Rethinking the Critical Advocacies of the Women's Movements," the forum aimed to provide a space for the examination of two more advocacy agendas of central importance to the women's movement: violence against women (VAW) and gender mainstreaming. This forum was also put together as part of Isis International's reflection on how it has moved on after three decades as a feminist information and communications organisation working within the

women's movements. Specifically, Isis is striving to find new ways of responding to the diverse and changing needs of the women's movements, cognizant that women's advocacy and issues are now located not only in the women's movements but also in many social justice movements working within sectoral and issue-based campaigns such as the environment, health, education, and peace.

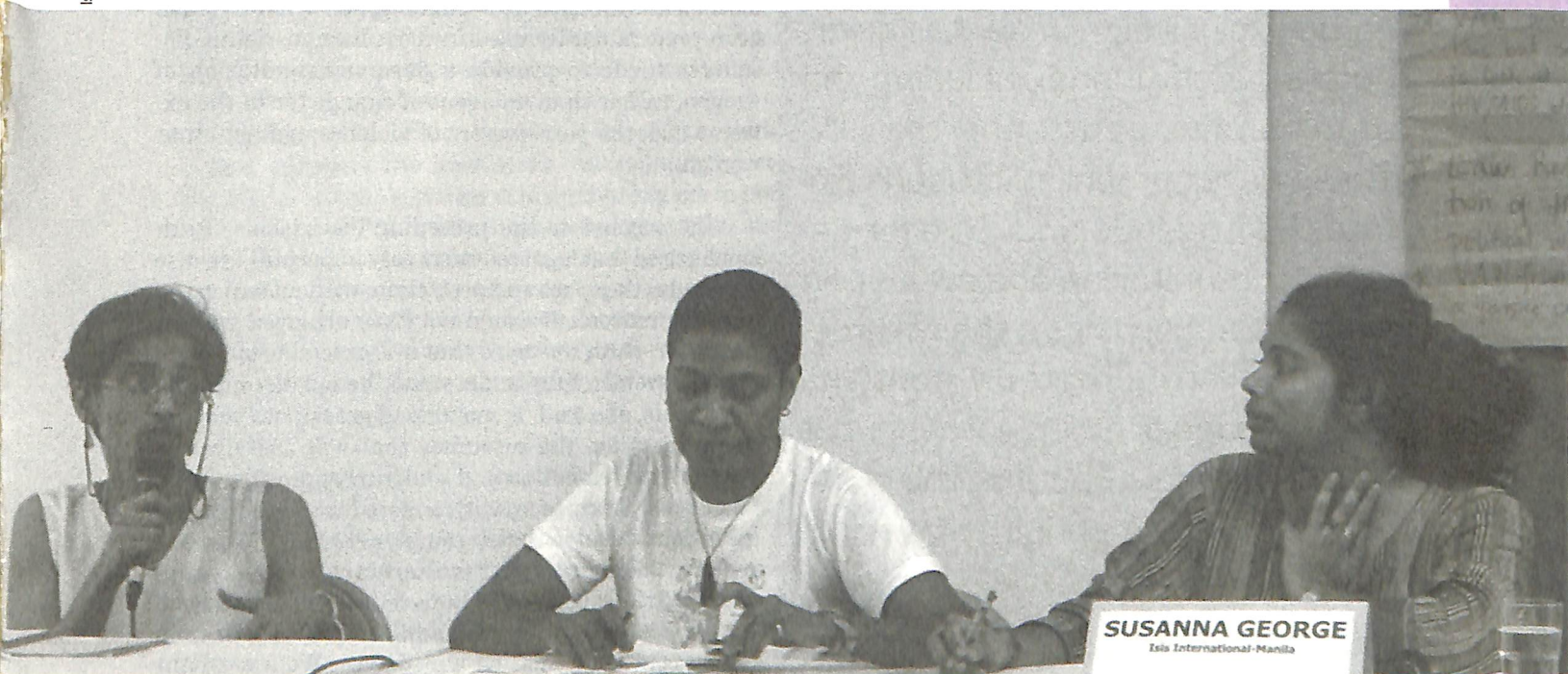
Violence against women (VAW) and gender mainstreaming were chosen as topics for the day-long forum because these are pivotal strategies of the women's movement, yet these two areas have generated some of the most heated debates, most diverse interpretations and even acrimonious points of departure within and outside the women's movement. One could argue that VAW and gender mainstreaming as conceptual categories are so "mainstreamed."

VAW as an agenda is seen by many as the core identity of a large part of autonomous and non-partisan sections of the women's movement. Some might argue that gender mainstreaming has become so "mainstreamed" within development circles and some

parts of society, but more as a way of upholding the status quo rather than fundamentally undoing it.

In the Philippines, as in other parts of the Asia-Pacific region, the debates on gender mainstreaming as underlying policies and laws already reverberate in scholarly fashion. However, in inviting the forum speakers and participants, we took account of the different segments of the social movements, including the women's movement, media and students that would substantiate the dialogues within and across movements of social activists. True enough, the forum participants first sought to ask who is referred to when we speak of the women's movement(s) that are heterogeneous, plural and diverse, and reflect an entire spectrum of feminist frameworks. In the Philippine setting, these might include grassroots women, political activists, social development workers, professionals, etc.² At the international level, the setting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2005 offers a strategic space for feminists to come together in their diversity to explore the current feminist movements, their differences and common grounds, and their role in larger social movements (Feminist Dialogues 2005).

Isis Photobank



The panel on Gender Mainstreaming with presentors Bina Srinivasan (left) of INFORM and Susanna George (right) of International-Manila facilitated by current Isis Executive Director Raijeli Nicole (middle).

Violence Against Women: Fighting for Our Space

For the forum, the resource speakers and panelists were chosen on the basis of how they would contribute to the aim of making the connection between local and international/global women's advocacies. Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng of Isis WICCE (Uganda, Africa) reflected on whether the global women's advocacy on VAW has done enough. Ruth noted that from a cursory look at women's advocacy effort against VAW at the local and international levels, one could say the women's movement has been successful in using all possible venues to expose the numerous crimes against women. However, she asks, with the problem of VAW still permeating women in society, now compounded by militarism, the culture of war and heightened expressions of patriarchy, "has the women done enough?"

Lawyer Carol Austria of WomenLead (Philippines), on the other hand, shared a feminist critique of human rights and of engaging law reform related to

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VAW. Feminists already knew when they ventured into human rights advocacy or into legal advocacy the built-in limitations of such an arena, she noted. She added that it is imperative for feminists, however, to "level off" or to try to arrive at a consensus of what they think the law can and cannot do for us in the women's movements, while being aware of the range of the macho and patriarchal framework of the law. She cited as an example the process of lobbying for a law on violence against women in intimate relationships by women's groups in the Philippines. Carol supported the participants' observation that there are several strategic interventions by women within the patriarchal system to advance the revolution for women. At the same time, she cautioned, we should take into account the context of these strategies while developing and operationalising our critiques of the broader social justice movements.

During the sharing of workshop outputs, participants highlighted some issues and challenges related to women's human rights: concerns related to inherent limitations of using the law and legal system as a strategy, resistance to human rights frameworks and parameters, and issues within the women's (feminist) movement(s) in consensus-building, etc.³ VAW as it has been predominantly used in most human rights discourses tends to provide a passive connotation of women, rather than an agent of change (or in the extreme end, the perpetrators of violence against other women).

In response to the preceding discussions, Ruth emphasised that legal reform is very important because it provides the space and protection, without which the women's movement would not have achieved what it has so far. Ruth conveyed that it is crucial to our work to make women fully understand the old discourse on VAW (this, she said, is mobilising grassroots women) and strengthen the resources that will sustain this political movement to end violence against women. "Women must come up with a more integrated strategic vision to deal with this complex scenario. We must seek that democracy that is alternative to poverty, ignorance, violence, lack of knowledge and self esteem that has for a very long time prevented women from taking control of their circumstances. We must fight for our space because we cannot continue seeing this space of power dominated by one sex," she said.

Feminist Analysis Within Gender Mainstreaming

Susanna George (see her presentation on page 72) from Isis International-Manila presented a critique of mainstreaming gender as a strategy of the women's movement. The other resource speaker, Bina Srinivasan of INFORM (Sri Lanka) talked about locating feminist analysis within gender mainstreaming.

Two questions were raised as points for small group discussions and dialogues during the forum. First, has gender mainstreaming tamed or sanitised the radical project of ending patriarchy? And second, how do we re-infuse the concept of gender with meaning that brings back the political edge and what it means to feminist organising? The responses to both questions dealt with concepts and actual implementation of gender mainstreaming within a development framework.

A key issue emanating from the workshops and dialogues was the finding that the ways in which gender has been incorporated into development agenda neutralise the centrality of the women's issue because of the disappearance of the entire discourse on power relations and patriarchy. The common understanding of gender mainstreaming now has effectively diminished the radical and transformative elements of the feminist agenda, rendering women and women's rights invisible in the process, and subverting the project of ending patriarchy. Within the development framework, gender advocacy has become an "assimilating" process, where women's groups attempt to engage in and expand spaces for intervention have been slow, and the returns, low. For example, women's organising in the communities is not seen as an important strategy from the perspective of the donor agencies. However, from the perspective of the women's movement, community organising is a core strategy for women's empowerment.

Another significant point surfaced by the discussions is that gender mainstreaming as it is currently framed and implemented, i.e., feminist discourse without feminist intent, has turned donor-driven. Development agencies have extensive influence on the agenda and implementing mechanisms and guidelines of gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming has become a technocratic tool wielded by an increasingly exclusive set of gender experts, some whom are not

grounded in the feminist agenda but have learned the language and go through the motions.

With gender mainstreaming left to the technocrats, it is in their interest to turn everything that is political in the feminist agenda into a technical statistical exercise. When the women's movement submit to this development frame, it is actually submitting to the frame of creating statistics and numbers to prove to the world that women are indeed victims of violence. But the women's movement has no need for such expensive research to confirm that women are seriously affected by aggravated forms of violence. In the last decade and a half, numerous groups and agencies have undertaken such research for information that the women know very well. With increased reliance on donor support that squeezes processes of social change into output and outcome-shaped projects, women's groups are running around trying to numerically prove women's oppression. The participants agreed that the women's movements should instead hold their ground and fight on the ideological basis.

In summarising the discussion on gender mainstreaming, Susanna noted that since World War II, the development agenda, instead of being in the hands of the state and the people in the South, continues to be defined in fact by the North and imposed on the South. As soon as nations of the South were "granted their independence," development was already framed in the context of our continued relationship with our colonial masters. In short, from the very beginning, the development project has not belonged to the people. Gender as a political analyses offered by the feminist activist as a strategic intervention, she added, has become exclusively a project of development institutions, including the development banks and the UN. These development institutions dictate their agenda and tools for designing, monitoring and evaluating projects according to their framework, which admittedly contains the language of empowerment, but not its political intention. The women's movement should be wary of how in the process, the core intention has shifted and is no longer that of the women's movement, she added.

Another important question that emerged from the discussion is the question of what exactly we want to mainstream gender into, and in which arenas femi-

nists are successfully making interventions to integrate feminist perspective. The points raised included:

- There should be a careful study of the stakeholders in each case. The women's movement should approach the negotiating table with a tacit understanding that advocacy does not take place in a "level playing field."
- Even before entering into any debate, we should have clear strategies. It is important to define the bottomline demands and the parameters of the discussion.
- Once the negotiations have shifted beyond our position, we should be prepared to exit this space, and not validate a document that goes against the fundamental interests of women.
- We should start being much firmer when our interventions are argued to the lowest common denominator.

The last point raised was the feminist movements' relationship to governments and states, the main agents of gender mainstreaming. What is the women's movements' desired relationship with the state? If we don't re-examine the changing nature of the state, particularly in relation to the private sector and corporate interests, gender mainstreaming ceases to be a meaningful engagement for the women's movement. Feminists in the 1970s raised the clarion call that personal is political because it was an important way of moving VAW onto the public space. However, instead of this strategy prompting men, governments and states to become more self-reflective of their patriarchal instincts, what happened instead was the government's re-assertion of the patriarch's role, i.e., as father protectors of women who are victimised. We need to critically re-examine the notion espoused by some feminists that the government's role is to protect women. Note, for example, the differences in the services and mode of management of government-run shelters from those operated by NGOs, which are more empowering.

In summary, the main points raised during the forum were:

1. VAW and Gender Mainstreaming are no longer the exclusive concepts, practices and strategies of the women's movement. They have become publicly accessible and contested terms. Apparently, women's groups have been sidelined or have chosen to disengage themselves from questions, debates, critiques or

forums that would redirect efforts toward the feminist agenda of ending patriarchy.

2. There remain unresolved dilemmas in relation to engaging with the State, which women's groups are putting to task to accommodate/respond to women's issues. These tensions can perhaps be addressed also by re-imagining the State vis-à-vis the feminist agenda and rising pertinent questions such as: How do women's movements see the State when it comes to feminist agenda? We once said the "personal is political," but this seems to have backfired, and it has become easy for the State to reinforce its positioning as the protector "father" of women in a framework that reduces women to victims.

In addition, in dealing with VAW and gender mainstreaming, the heterosexist norm remains uncontested. ♪

Malen Ibañez-Tarrobago <malen@isiswomen.org> works as technical associate with the office of the director (OED) of Isis International-Manila.

Necta Montes-Rocas <necta@isiswomen.org> is Isis-Manila's resource development officer.

Footnotes

¹The Women's Convention (CEDAW) that evolved from the decade for women impels a profound change in the dominant principle of human rights from the State's duty to prohibit the violation of women's rights to a duty to undertake the removal of the institutions, customs and practices that perpetuate discrimination against women and their rights. Isis International Media Pack on Women and Human Rights.

²At the Activist School sessions organised by a local Philippine NGO in October 2004, Mari Luz Quesada Tiongson (Board member and former deputy director at Isis) discussed the question "Why a feminist movement within a broader women's movements," explaining that the women's movement allows for diversity and has no apparent political center that dictates or prescribes an agenda.

³A similar observation was made in the lecture-presentation given by Eleanor Conda ("Making the Case for Women's Human Rights") for the WAGI summer course on International Women's Human Rights in April 2003. The training course was attended by the writer of this report.