

# **The AWID International Forum - 'Feminist Futures': activists from across the globe gather in Brazil**

Tuesday 13 September 2016, by [GUPTA Rahila](#) (Date first published: 8 September 2016).

**The AWID International Forum in Bahia has started. We meet some of the 2,000 women brought together under the 'Feminist Futures' banner, including a lesson from Tanzania in how to employ a holistic approach.**

Conferences, those melting pots of ideas, where participants with broadly similar goals but working in very different contexts, come together to share their experiences and strategies, are a huge opportunity to refresh one's thinking and give renewed energy to activists struggling with apparently intractable issues back home. With so many sessions to choose from at AWID and so many women to meet (nearly 2000), you feel like a child in a sweetshop.

I got started straight away – first up, in the minibus from the airport, were three women from Armenia, two of whom run the Women's Support Centre (WSC) for women escaping violence. It was their first time at AWID and they were hugely excited. Their organisation was set up only five years ago but has already served 650 women and children. It offers all the usual services of counselling and advocacy to women, including the running of two refuges, the provision of training in business and entrepreneurship skills but it also works at community level to raise awareness of the issues and at government level to lobby for a new law on domestic violence. Sixty per cent of their funding comes from private donations from the Armenian diaspora in the US (and none from their government) which means that they do not have to rely on grantmaking bodies. According to Mary Matosian, Director of WSC, these bodies are no longer funding shelters and direct services but focussing on training which she feels is bad news for the women's sector. She argues that it is service provision that gives 'us real data about real people which influences policy the most. Advocacy has to be evidence based.'

The particular brand of patriarchy that makes life difficult for them was a legacy of the Soviet Union with its gender discrimination and cultural violence. Interestingly, attitudes to violence against women seem to be directly impacted by Armenia's international relations. Since Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014, an EU equivalent for the ex-states of the Soviet Union, 'we have observed conservative trends spilling over into Armenia', says Matosian, 'while religion had not been much of a problem before, these conservative elements have used religion to attack women's rights using all the usual labels such as homebreakers and are also very active in attacking LGBT rights.' At the same time, the recent opening up of dialogue with the European Union has helped the situation. A gender equality law was passed last year. The EU is also pressurising the government to speed up the introduction of the Domestic Violence law and will be funding the setting up of crisis centres for children, for homeless people and for trafficked women. Matosian hopes that they will be next in line.

Pressure from the conservative lobby led the government to drop the word 'gender' from the law because gender has become synonymous with 'deviant' LGBT groups and replace it with inequality between men and women, explains Ani Jilozian, a research data specialist with WSC. While feminists in Armenia fight for the reinstatement of the word 'gender', UK feminists fight a losing battle to retain terms like Violence against Women because 'gender' opens the door to violence suffered by both sexes and neutralises feminist arguments around male violence to women which is hugely disproportionate to men's experience of violence. In this conservative context, feminists have to walk a tightrope between supporting LGBT groups at the same time as putting some distance between them in order not to damage their chances. Matosian worries that the current trend among grant making bodies of supporting LGBT organisations has diverted funds from the women's sector which still faces serious issues. She hopes to raise it at AWID.

When we arrive at the venue, a whole day session on imagining a feminist internet is in progress. If the Armenian women were dealing with violence in the offline world, the Tactical Technology Collective who were running the feminist internet session were talking about how their Gender and Tech Institute (GTI) works towards creating a safe online world for women activists - defending the essential freedoms of those who are defending the essential freedoms of others. I talk to Maya Ganesh, Director of Applied research who introduces me to the idea of a liquid data society in which we live, where there are no infrastructural silos, so that whether we are booking a hotel room or posting photos of our pets, our online presence is so seamless that 'there is no separate space where politics or activism or your life is lived.' The individual is exposed, visible, transparent. Is it possible to turn that on its head and expose the abuse of power by corporations and governments which accounts for the second strand of their work - exposing the invisible, using tech tools from remote sensing and satellite to instagram to look back at power.

When the tension between visibility and anonymity becomes insurmountable many women activists withdraw from social media. In a study conducted by GTI in South Africa, they found that women active in a land and housing rights movement had created separate online spaces and would not even participate in the whatsapp group of large NGOs because they had become male dominated. The women were being sexually harassed by their male colleagues. GTI provides tech support to activists like them so that they can feel safe online. It provides a platform for activists from different parts of the world to share skills, understand how to encrypt their communications, what strategies work in dealing with trolls, collecting evidence of the abuse they have faced on twitter, analysing whether it has helped to publicise the abuse or made things worse, whether it is better to withdraw or to retaliate and if they retaliate, they need to understand that there is a price to be paid and without support mechanisms in place, it can hit them hard.

While recognising that women get harassed and trolled in a way that men don't is simply our society being reflected back at us through the internet, Maya believes that educating people in how to behave online is important. GTI is trying to articulate a set of norms guiding online behaviour which is supposedly the province of the tech companies except it seems they can regularly make a hash of it. She points to their delight in taking credit for starting revolutions (mobilisation of the Green revolution in Iran took place on Facebook) yet when it comes to guarding freedom of speech, Instagram will ban an artist from posting pictures about periods because it contravenes their community standards but posts that are patently abusive of women are allowed to stand because it's a freedom of speech issue. 'It's bullshit', says Maya. So they are back at AWID to get women activists to engage with the internet and to make 'smart, safe and creative use' of technology.

In counterpoint to Tactical Tech which arguably works on a single issue on a global scale, Catherine Jerome from Tanzania works on a large number of issues through Envirocare, whose main areas are environmental conservation, governance, human rights and gender. Catherine explains how her work, primarily with poor farmers on how to conserve the environment, revealed human rights

abuses. She also talks about the importance of alleviating poverty in ensuring the success of other strands of their work.

One of Envirocare's early campaigns in 2000 was against the use of the pesticide, DDT. Although it had been banned by the government, the women who were using it in the cultivation of coffee were not aware of the dangers and were facing higher levels of cancer. In the process of encouraging organic alternatives, they discovered that the cutting down of trees for firewood and the burning of forests to clear land for agriculture was creating drought. They reduced demand for firewood by introducing the women to a new kind of stove which utilises less wood. They lobbied the government to introduce byelaws to prevent the clearing of forests. When the forest grew back, Catherine says her organisation was given a special mention in the rain songs that the women sang about the role of Envirocare in getting rid of the drought. Through that work they also noticed that some of the women were not putting as much effort into their lands because they faced violence from their husbands and the ever-present danger of talakh (the Muslim divorce) without any financial settlement. So Envirocare trained paralegals to support the women. It's very difficult to find a lawyer in rural areas because they earn a better living in the cities. And so it went, issue after issue, uncovered like a series of Chinese boxes.

It is Catherine's first time at AWID. She is hoping to learn what others are doing on human right issues and to share her knowledge with others. She is sure that new ideas will 'pop into her head' in the presence of so many wise and experienced women.

**Rahila Gupta**, 8 September 2016

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## P.S.

\* Open Democracy. 9.11.15:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/rahila-gupta/pick-n-mix-unprecedented-diversity-of-women-activists-meet>

This article is part of 50.50's in-depth coverage of the 2016 AWID Forum being held on 8<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> September in Bahia, Brazil. Rahila Gupta will be reporting daily for 50.50 from the AWID Forum.

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\* Rahila Gupta is a freelance journalist and writer. Her work has appeared in *The Guardian* and *New Humanist* among other papers and magazines. Her books include, *Enslaved: The New British Slavery*; *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters*; *Provoked*; and *'Don't Wake Me: The Ballad of Nihal Armstrong* (Playdead Press, 2013). She is co-authoring a book with Beatrix Campbell with the title *Why Doesn't Patriarchy Die?* Follow her on twitter @ RahilaG