

Where change is needed - The World March of Women and the debate about WSF's future

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Contents

- [Situation - elements to \(...\)](#)
- [The World March of Women \(...\)](#)
- [Gaining strength in the \(...\)](#)
- [Contributions of the WSF \(...\)](#)
- [Challenges for the continuity](#)
- [Challenges facing the WSF](#)

We welcome this opportunity to address the issue of the World Social Forum as a strategy to build this other world we are aiming for. We want to contribute to this debate with a feminist analysis of the present geopolitics as well as an analysis of the present moment the movements and organizations are in and how the WSF has contributed and could continue to contribute to effect change.

Situation - elements to build a common analysis

For millions of women around the world, daily life means struggling to survive economically, to eat, not to be raped or beaten, not to bear children we don't want, to have the ones we want and ensure that they have all that they need, to study, to be healthy, to stay alive, to resist and strategize to keep our lives, our bodies and our communities from crumbling even further.

From our perspective, the commodification of life has expanded within neoliberalism, and the oppression of women is at the heart of this process. In this way, capitalism, racism and patriarchy nurture and reinforce each other, obliging women to live, be at the service of, and construct their relationships according to the rules of the market. Commodification reduces women to mere objects, either in the prostitution and pornography industry, or in the use of women's bodies in advertising, or in the way our desires and dreams are manipulated in order to increase consumption. Neoliberalism has entered a new phase in the sense that it has succeeded in "capitalizing" on the existing oppressions: to market them (we think of the issue of sexual servitude of women, for example) and make millions out of them, as well as to bring back with strength the idea that you can escape your reality if you work hard at it and pay the right amount, of course.

For us, the individualism that is at the heart of neoliberalism combined with post-modernism has created a backlash that is felt in different shapes and forms around the world. It has meant regressive or repressive policies for women and any group or class that doesn't buy the pro-white / male rights and pro-rich agenda. It has also meant that movement building and organizing became a threat and is being vilified, and ever more criminalized. At the same time, we witness a neo-conservatism that is taking its toll by bringing traditionalism and moralism to the forefront of

organizations be they religious, political or economical. We are loosing ground on the collective rights front.

At the same time, it is not as easy as it used to be for neoliberalism and US imperialism to impose their agenda. It is for this reason that the model has been trying to co-opt our agenda and, on the other hand, has become more aggressive.

We are living under conditions of extreme income concentration and increased violence in general: armed conflicts; military occupations; the imposition of political/economic blockades; local conflicts; hidden, urban violence and feminicide. The increase of militarization has resulted in the use of women's bodies as war booty, and rape as a weapon of war. We also denounce the criminalisation of protests and of social organisations, repression against leaders carried out by governmental institutions or private militias.

To the above repression is added a resistance towards feminism that manifests itself in extreme ways. Examples include the intolerance and police repression towards women that have an abortion, or the organized actions of men's groups ("masculinity" movements, father's rights, etc) that harass or judicially persecute feminist organizations. The resistance towards feminism in society in general also manifests itself in progressive circles when social movements don't challenge patriarchy or comrades refuse to examine their own behavior or question the privileges they enjoy because of their gender.

The sexual division of labor between productive, "men's" work and reproductive "women's" work articulates itself with the international division of labor. Women work in factories, in flower and fruit plantations; in every agro-exportation sector that uses intensive labor force, i.e. all sectors in which precarious work, low salaries, non existant labour rights (such as unionization) are the norm. The restrictive paid employment possibilities open to the majority of women determines, and are determined by, their gender identity, an example of which is determined by Jules Falquet . More and more women are working in the service sector (domestic work, private services, prostitution), tasks related to 'care work' which demand patience and emotional availability. While on the other hand there are more and more men with guns in the army, security services, paramilitary groups, guarding prisons, tasks related to the masculine gender identities of aggressiveness or "protection".

This has become the feminine and masculine identities within a process of homogenization that come together with a discourse of diversity. We've never heard so much talk about diversity in such homogeneous a world: mono-culture fields, transgender people trying to have a body icon of man (macho) and woman (hot/slim), etc.

Everything is now turned into a commodity: nature (water, seeds, biodiversity, bio-industries) and women bodies (beauty and plastic surgery industries), all the control of the regenerative capacity expressed in a seed and in women's womb. And also personal experiences and subjectivity; the issue is no longer ownership, but the access to controlled and homogeneous experiences, like "exotic" tourism: nature and women are made objects and sold as part of the experience. This logic of fragmentation and private appropriation guides the new capital frontiers related to the "information society", and is strenghtend in favour of transnational companies, who have ever more operational power as a result of the weakening of regulations and the control of national States and in virtue of their alliances with local oligarchies.

The World March of Women and the World Social Forum

The World March of Women has been an actor in the World Social Forum since the beginning of the

process. We participate in it because it is a privileged space to carry through our wish to change the world and to establish alliances with other social movements in order to achieve that goal. We are an anti-globalization, anti-patriarchy movement and we make public our resistance and alternatives through street mobilizations, popular education and the collective construction of new forms of expression.

We want to connect grass roots feminists from different parts of the world who believe in the necessity to organize locally and act together to confront global realities whether they are patriarchy, imperialism, racism, neoliberalism or neo-conservatism.

Our history is intertwined with the World Social Forum (WSF). The First International Meeting of the WMW, which established its platform of demands and proposals for action took place in 1998. Our force came from the merging of many past years of resistance and feminist organization in local communities and many countries. At that moment, movements of resistance to neoliberalism were gaining international recognition and coming out of their isolation. In the years that followed, demonstrations against free trade agreements (WTO and FTAA) brought together organizations from many different countries and sectors in massive rallies in the places where meetings of presidents and ministers were being held and also in simultaneous acts around the world. The WSF was established as one of the expressions of the anti-globalization movement; and it is one of its strongest expressions due to its permanence over the years, its comprehensive content and call.

Gaining strength in the WSF process

The WMW, through its national coordination bodies or the International Secretariat, has arranged workshops, seminars and actions on different issues, according to the different editions of the forum, such as the women's assemblies, etc. The WMW played an active role in the youth camp and in the assemblies of social movements (declaration, organization, coordination, etc.) and even more so in the creation and maintenance of the Social Movements' Assembly. The March was present in every edition of the World Social Forum and in many regional and national forums.

In the WSF process, the WMW gained visibility, strengthened its presence in many countries and regions of the world, built alliances with social movements and with other feminist organizations. The Forum is also a privileged political training space for WMW's militants.

The relationship built with social movements reaches beyond the WSF process. The organizations that participated in the Assembly have been as points of reference and agglutination in crucial moments of the anti-globalization movement. We have developed organizational processes, such as in the struggle for food sovereignty with the Via Campesina, Friends of the Earth and others; in the debate about the integration in the Continental Social Alliance, and even in political training activities with the CADTM - Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt.

We started or intensified our work with women from other organizations. In the Forum process, we acted jointly with the Latin-American Network of Women Changing the Economy (REMTE), Alai-mujeres, Diálogo Sur-Sur LGBT and women from the Via Campesina. They contributed to the WMW's internal debate on feminist economic alternatives, agrarian and environmental issues, and also to the questioning of the imposition of heterosexuality as the norm. This collective was a reference to spark off the feminist debate in Nyéleni - Food Sovereignty Forum and other alliance-forming processes that have helped to expand the anti-liberal alliance towards an egalitarian agenda.

Contributions of the WSF process

The strengthening of the movements that find their peers in other parts of the world and the articulation around common agendas, as was the case in the opposition to the war and to imperialism, are frequently named as positive results of the WSF. Beyond that, one of the main contributions of the WSF has been to change the environment where political action and debate take place. In times of neoliberal hegemony, result-oriented pragmatism has weakened political debate and atrophied critical analysis. Any idea of social transformation has to be palatably packaged in the human rights discourse. While some sectors of the movements eventually incorporated that discourse, operating on the boundaries of institutions (norms, public policies, international agreements), others radicalized their actions, for instance, against free trade and transnational corporations. The WSF promoted the re-approximation of those fields, representing a middle ground. This new territory prevented (or may have prevented) the isolation of some of those movements and broadened the political agenda of others.

That effect becomes more visible when the WSF process reaches a new region of the world and creates a common working dynamic. In other regions, or in some movements' sectors, those dynamics have already developed into the production of joint agendas. In other cases they have proven insufficient to provide the necessary connection among daily resistance actions, both organized and not organized. It has to be noted that in some places a certain form of institutionalization of the WSF itself has meant that recent struggles or forms of actions have been developing clearly outside the process. For example, some more recent social movements linked to their local concerns (on commons, labour rights, environment, etc.) were unable to find a place or we can mention some themes that remain "marginal" in WSF like gay and lesbians rights. That is why, increasingly more often, the question of whether the WSF process has run its course is asked.

To contribute to this debate we put forward our concerns regarding the dynamics of the WSF and the feminist presence in those dynamics.

We, feminists

We want all the movements to inscribe the analysis of patriarchy in the heart of the questioning of neoliberalism and imperialism – today symbolized mainly (but not exclusively) by the WSF. That is an ambitious goal, and possibly difficult to evaluate globally. We know that our presence in the WSF gave visibility to women's struggles and resistance. We have created political and strategic alliances with certain social movements. But the achievements are still insufficient to overcome the sexism blatantly present in the WSF.

We believe that the political independence of our movement is crucial; the alliance with the mixed movements cannot merely be our adoption of pre-determined strategies and policies, but rather the result of collective construction. We have to combine our own construction, based on the strength of feminists grassroots movements, with our work on alliances and on global processes that we chose to be an active part of, such as the WSF.

The task often seems colossal. We have to act to prevent feminist analysis from remaining restricted to where it is expected to be – health, reproductive rights, political participation – and so that it contaminates hard centers in the debate on alternatives such as economy, war or violence and so that our approach is not peripheral or isolated. We also have to act to create conditions, particularly for young women in the camps during the Forum, that make women feel safe, without fear of violence or harassment. Our challenge is to build the WSF as a territory free of sexism, where we can experience autonomy, egalitarian relationships, and trust.

We have also constructed new ways to “be” in the struggle. We used our creativity and dynamism to bring colour and music to the debates and actions that have taken place during the WSF.

As well as the challenges we face within the WSF process, we WMW feminists are contributing to the reestablishment of a political agenda of global criticism of the system that gives visibility to social mobilizations and struggles, and this has strengthened the questioning of the institutionalization of social movements. From the point of view of the women’s movement, the WMW - in partnership with our allies - has contributed to the legitimization of women and feminism as active political subjects.

Challenges for the continuity of the WSF

The WSF needs to be capable of strengthening the resistance to the neoliberal model. Initially, the simple fact of meeting at the same time, and therefore giving visibility to, a large number of activists for a better world was enough to oppose neoliberal hegemony. Currently conditions are different, the imperialism of the United States is showing signs of defeat, up to a certain point popular sectors are advancing with the proposition of alternatives, and at the same time we feel the huge urgency to react against repression, the manipulation of ethnic conflicts or military occupations, as well as the irreversible destruction of the planet. Our challenge is to strengthen the WSF as a process, which favors the synergy between political agendas and different organizational cultures, in order to construct and drive forward a platform of struggles.

In this way the WSF can make advances in the fulfillment of the expectations that it creates wherever it is being organized. The following observations are the result of the discussion about the FSM carried out during the meeting of our International Committee in Granja do Ulmeiro, Portugal in October 2007.

1. The WSF’s Charter of principles is so broad that it allows the adhesion of groups that have opposing ideological view points, such as around the issue of abortion. We cannot hope to build a better world and at the same time allow space for lesbo or homophobia and misogyny in the WSF. We believe that we should open the Charter to add this principle that should guide the organizing as well as the political comprehension of the WSF.
2. The size of the Forum became its worst enemy. We have watched an increase in the participation of the WSF, from a few thousands to tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands.... The success of the WSF must be evaluated in terms of its capacity for mobilization and adaptation to the realities and the struggles of the movements of the country where it takes place not on it’s perpetual growth. The Global Day of Action represents a good way to give space to local actions and organizing.
3. The WSF must be seen as a tool and not as an end in itself. It does not replace grassroots movements, but in strengthening their capacity for networking, should reinforce them. That should be a way to evaluate the effectiveness of the WSF. Its capacity to create links and constructive exchanges and actions between groups that are being silenced by oppression and neoliberalism.
4. The methodology must be at service of the WSF and not the other way around. The methodology should also be evaluated and revised in terms of the desired objectives. The idea that there is “a single method” to hold a WSF is contradictory to the necessity of reflecting on the particularities and the resistance of local peoples at which place where the WSF is organized. The only “method” that we should have is a commitment to the transversality of the voices arising from excluded groups (women, poor, indigenous, people of color, gay and lesbians, etc.) in the process of the WSF. The example of the US Social Forum in that sense is quite interesting. They have chosen to let these

organized voices be at the forefront of the organizing as well as the agenda. The difference was visible both in its quality and its coherence.

5. The frequency of the WSF contributes to the diminishment of the impact of the mobilizations and requires so many human (activist) and financial resources that the Forum could actually begin to be a handicap in changing the world. The WSF only makes sense where there are local or national struggles, sites of construction of grounded alternatives. The participants of these struggles can better recognize and encourage each other if the pace of the Forum does not hinder action itself. The experience of the Global Day of Action was eloquent and bring us to propose clearly the alternance between local, thematic/regional and international WSF as a way to reinforce the process and making it a reality in more countries.

6. Convergence needs to be at the heart of the WSF, and not a 'supermarket' of ideas and egos. We need more interaction between movements to live out our alternatives, to discuss them, to integrate them into our praxis. Change is based in the capacity of individuals to be confronted and willingness to act. Change also comes from movements who can learn from their successes and mistakes.

7. The challenge of real inclusion of feminist analysis, demands and the representation of women as subjects of the struggle against globalization in this context is immense. There is no recognition, inside the International Council or in the methodology of WSF, of the present power relationships and a commitment to change them. Alongside REMTE (Red Latinoamericana Mujeres Transformando la Economía), we proposed an equality policy for the WSF that never got off the ground. The proposal was discussed at the WSF International Council meeting, and later used as a reference for the organization of the Polycentric Social Forum in Caracas in 2006. It suggests mechanisms for WSF demands, contents for the WSF process's political debate, and initiatives aimed at bringing the time and the space of the WSF event "closer to the world we want, establishing different social relationships." Its realization and expansion are dependent on our capacity to strengthen it. A large assembly of women, expressing feminist contents and forms of action, organized inside the WSF, and possibly articulating an agenda beyond the WSF, would contribute to that.

8. There is a blatant lack of coherence between the organization of the WSF and our social transformation objectives. The commercialization of the event, the presence of anti-choice groups, etc, are impediments to building alternatives and must be tackled. The proposed organizational guidelines must be adopted and distributed widely to organizing committees of diverse social forums.

Challenges facing the WSF process

We celebrate the fact that single neoliberal thinking was defeated in many ways in the field of ideas. We have contributed to that. At the same time, we have observed that "some of the issues raised by altermondialism have been appropriated by the discourse of the capital and presented again in new forms of market to serve that capital ." We know that the World Social Forum has contributed to creating this space where new forms of "being, living and acting together" can be experienced but we also believe that in order to continue to be a synergy creating process; the WSF has to accept to change itself, advancing in the construction of a unitary force that is able to overcome neoliberalism, provoking the defeat of capitalism, racism and patriarchy.

We, of the World March of Women, are committed to building processes for the convergence of struggles and alternatives. Our reference is the Women's Global Charter for Humanity, based on equality, freedom, justice, solidarity, and peace, and we currently focus on the decommodification

and demilitarization of the world.

We use to say that in order to change the lives of women, the world needs to be changed, but also, in order to change the world, the lives of women need to be changed. Both at the same time and right now!

NOTES:

1. Jules Falquet: Hommes en armes et femmes “de service”: tendances néolibérales dans l’évolution de la division sexuelle et internationale du travail. In Cahiers du Genre 40/2006.
2. Women from South Africa, Brazil, Galicia, Italy, Mali, Mexico, Quebec, Pakistan, Peru and Portugal participated in this meeting.
3. REMTE, MMM: Elementos para la política de igualdad del FSM, mimeo, 2005.
4. Document written by the strategy committee of the WSF IC to promote and to organize the discussion on strategy in the IC, November 2007.